
GwE JOINT COMMITTEE - 24/05/2023

Present:

Councillors: Julie Fallon (Chairperson) (Conwy County Borough Council)
Gill German (Vice-chair) (Denbighshire County Council)

Beca Brown (Cyngor Gwynedd), Mared Eastwood (Flintshire County Council), Ieuan Williams (Anglesey Council) and Phil Wynn (Wrexham County Borough Council).

Co-opted non-voting Members: Justine Baldwin (Church in Wales) (Attending on behalf of Jennie Downes), Dylan Davies (Secondary Schools' Representative), Delyth Roberts (Primary Schools' Representative)

Non-voting Officers: Dr Lowri Brown (Conwy County Borough Council), Neil Cockerton (Flintshire County Council) (attending on behalf of Graham Boase), Claire Homard (Flintshire County Council), Dafydd Ifans (Wrexham County Borough Council), Marc Berw Hughes (Anglesey County Council), Garem Jackson (Cyngor Gwynedd) and Geraint Davies (Denbighshire County Council).

Officers present:

GwE - Arwyn Thomas (Managing Director), Alwyn Jones (Assistant Director), Bethan Roberts (Performance Management Manager).

Cyngor Gwynedd, the Host Authority - Dewi Morgan (Head of Finance Department), Siôn Huws (Propriety and Elections Manager), Gwion Jones (Senior Accountant), Lowri H Evans and Einir Rh Davies (Democracy Services Officer) and Translator.

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Graham Boase (Denbighshire County Council) and Karen Evans (Wrexham County Borough Council).

Councillor Mared Eastwood was welcomed to her first meeting of the GwE Joint Committee.

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declaration of personal interest was received by any member present.

3. URGENT ITEMS

No urgent matters were raised.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

It was confirmed that the record presented of the meeting on 15 February 2023 was accurate.

5. GwE ACCOUNTS 2022-2023 - REVENUE OUT-TURN

The report was presented by the Head of Finance Department, noting that these were not Final Accounts but rather a clearer picture of GwE's financial history. He noted that the Joint Committee was being asked to make three decisions:

To note and accept the Joint Committee Revenue Income and Expenditure Account for 2022/23.

To approve a transfer from GwE reserves to finance the 2022/23 overspend of £138,871, after considering the main variances between the budget and actual expenditure.

To approve the final financial position for 2022/23 which is the basis of the GwE statutory financial statements for the year which have already been produced, certified and published by the host authority's Finance Department before the statutory date of 31 May.

Reference was made to the report that explains in detail the financial variances, noting GwE's overspend position under some headings, underspend position under others and some headings being quite close to the budget.

It was noted there was a slight underspend against employee costs. On the other hand, there was an overspend against the Building heading, mainly due to less income for the use of buildings than that noted in the budget, as building rental had not picked up as expected. An underspend against Transport was also noted. There was some overspend on some specific projects; however, this actually arose from using a build-up of balances.

The Joint Committee asked, noted and questioned as follows:

It was confirmed that grants had been shared with schools which will ultimately lead to results.

It was confirmed that professional learning money had intentionally been given back to schools due to the implications of the new curriculum, and that the money will provide an initial foundation for schools.

IT WAS RESVOLVED

To accept the update on the financial review of GwE's final budget for the 2022/23 financial year, noting the significant financial variances.

6. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN

The Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) was presented by the Head of Finance Department, with a request for approval by the Joint Committee. The MTFP attempts to look ahead in a period of instability, outlining the financial matters affecting GwE over the next three years.

Table 4.11 notes the Cumulative Effects and sets the scenario. As seen, during 23/24 the best scenario is identified, with a financial saving of £102,000. The Joint Committee was reminded that the Soulbury Agreement is currently unknown, and that the salary increase may need to be backdated to September 2022.

At the other end, it was noted that it was very difficult to look at 24/25 without knowing what the future holds and that the best scenario for 24/25 would be no further cuts.

As regards value for money, evaluating and capturing impact, it was confirmed that a balanced budget must be set, looking at value for money and forward planning, and it was felt that the paper acknowledged the situation and offered a solution.

The Joint Committee asked, noted and questioned as follows:

It was noted that it was a very useful document and that it would be useful to look at the historical cuts for GwE (mentioned in The Financial Challenge part of the report). One challenge is to consider a meaningful scenario whilst attempting to ensure value for money and impact, and work is ongoing in this respect. It was felt that GwE had the strength of working in partnership, and that they did not want to be restricted by cuts. The key is clear and robust leadership, and this mutual solution was welcomed.

Concern was noted that the document refers to serious challenges. It was felt that the figures speak for themselves, with budgets collated and it was questioned whether the Joint Committee needed to talk with the Government? In light of this, one Member referred to the pension contribution reimbursement Wrexham County Borough Council had received as a one-off credit, and it was questioned when the pension fund would be re-evaluated?

The Host Authority's Head of Finance confirmed that there was a difference between the Gwynedd Pension Scheme and the Clwyd Pension Scheme. It was confirmed that the contribution had been decreased, rather than a reimbursement made in GwE's instance.

The report was appreciated, and one Member noted that the situation was concerning, especially in light of the fact that the area had already been subjected to 'Austerity 1'. He reinforced the comment that every possible opportunity must be taken to urge the Government, otherwise no progress can be made without investment. It was confirmed that education needs more funding, and it was noted that it would be useful to put forward a case to the Government that Welsh Government is dependent on the UK Government, as Welsh Government decides on how the money is put to use. The need was noted for a mature discussion of some ideas, therefore challenging Welsh Government expenditure.

Reference was made to a recent meeting with Welsh Government regarding the financial pressures on Local Authorities, and consequently on schools. It was reported that Members had to make difficult decisions, and it was confirmed that ADEW had also shared concerns with Welsh Government.

IT WAS RESVOLVED

To accept the revised Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP).

7. GwE ANNUAL REPORT 2022-23

The Assistant Director presented the Annual Report on the performance of the service in terms of undertaking the duties and key aims of the Service. GwE's Performance Management Manager was thanked for the work of coordinating the information. In brief, it was reported that there were several exciting things in the pipeline and that progress had been made against five areas - Improving Leadership, Improving Teaching and Learning, Learner Progress and Standards and Support and Challenge for Schools Causing Concern.

It was agreed that the document was very comprehensive. The Support Plan was questioned as regards how it would work in GwE and it was asked whether it could be a future agenda item? It was confirmed that it could either be discussed at a future meeting of the Joint Committee, or alternatively in a workshop to look at several matters including transformation, understanding roles, partnership work, better use of time etc.

IT WAS RESVOLVED

To accept the 2022-2023 GwE Annual Report and consider running a workshop in future to discuss specific matters in more detail.

8. GwE BUSINESS PLAN FOR 2023-2026

GwE's Business Plan for 2023-2026 was presented by GwE's Managing Director and Lead Director/Chair of Management Board. It was noted that the Plan addressed schools' priorities and needs, the direction and priorities of the six Authorities in North Wales, and the direction and priorities of Welsh Government national documents including the eight contributing factors and successful realisation of the curriculum and the six steps outlined in Our National Mission: high standards and aspirations for all.

Reference was made to the seven strategic objectives in the Plan: School Improvement, Curriculum and Assessment, Developing high quality teaching and learning, Leadership, a positive education experience for everyone, Cymraeg belongs to us all and Business, confirming that the language of the objectives aligns closely with that of the Government and local and regional priorities. In addition, it was confirmed that every Local Authority had a bespoke Business Plan covering specific matters of relevance to their own Authority.

The Joint Committee asked, noted and questioned as follows:

It was noted that the plan is very informative, a document for moving forwards which is clearly set out using Welsh Government language and a peer review process being evident throughout.

Specific reference was made to Objective 5 - A positive education experience for everyone - noting that it is a welcomed positive objective. It was confirmed that there are detailed business plans to accompany all objectives, on which a progress report will be presented to the Joint Committee on a quarterly basis. It was noted that any matters Members wish to discuss further could also be covered in the workshop.

The Performance Management Manager was thanked for the clarity of the report.

IT WAS RESVOLVED

To approve the Regional Business Plan for 2023-2026

9. REVIEW OF RISK REGISTER

GwE's Managing Director presented the report. The Joint Committee was reminded that the purpose of the risk register is to formalise the process of identifying risks and taking subsequent mitigating actions, and that it is a live document which is updated on a timely basis. It was confirmed that all risks had been reviewed and updated, with revisions noted in red namely GwE operating arrangements and staffing structure, recruitment and succession planning, school improvement and current union climate. It was confirmed that no risk had been removed.

The Joint Committee was satisfied with the four additions, which were very apt for the current climate, and willing for the rest to remain.

IT WAS RESVOLVED

To accept the latest amendments to the Risk Register.

10. REVIEW CURRENT OPERATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS AND STAFFING STRUCTURE

It was noted that a decision had been made to defer a discussion on this item as it will be discussed at the North Wales Chief Executives' meeting on 7 June.

IT WAS RESVOLVED

To postpone the item.

11. CONSULTATIONS

GwE's Managing Director presented the report, for information, noting the pertinent consultations, namely 'Welsh Government - Review of roles and responsibilities of education partners in Wales and delivery of school improvement arrangements', 'Estyn - Local government education services inspections 2024' and 'Welsh Government - Welsh Language Education Bill: White Paper'. The Joint Committee was asked to note the above and it was confirmed that GwE officers would prepare responses.

The Joint Committee noted that Estyn's Consultation - 'Local government education services inspections 2024' was a big change and that it is very important to be part of this consultation.

IT WAS RESVOLVED

To accept the information shared with Joint Committee members regarding very pertinent consultations that are underway.

GwE and Local Authority officers to prepare a response to the consultations.

12. REFORM JOURNEY CELEBRATION EVENT - 22/06/2023

The report was presented by GwE's Managing Director regarding the intention to host a 'Curriculum for Wales Marketplace' for regional school leaders on 22 June 2023 at Venue Cymru, Llandudno to celebrate the reform journey thus far. Reference was made to the intention to hold workshops, stalls and an opportunity to choose subjects of interest, such as assessment, areas of learning and experience, transition and transformation. It was confirmed that there was an invitation for all those in the room.

IT WAS RESVOLVED

To welcome the intention to host a 'Curriculum for Wales Marketplace' for regional school leaders on 22 June 2023 at Venue Cymru, Llandudno to celebrate the reform journey thus far.

The meeting started at 10:35am and concluded at 12:05pm.

CHAIR