

GWE JOINT COMMITTEE - 24/02/2021

Present:

Councillors: Phil Wynn - (Chair - Wrexham County Borough Council), Julie Fallon (Conwy County Borough Council), Meirion Jones (Anglesey County Council), Huw Hilditch-Roberts (Denbighshire County Council), Ian Roberts (Flintshire County Council).

Co-opted non-voting Members: Claire Armitstead (Secondary Schools' Representative), Jonathan Morgan (Special Schools' Representative).

Non-voting Officers: Garem Jackson (Gwynedd Council), Rhys Howard Hughes (Anglesey County Council), Dafydd Ifans (Wrexham County Borough Council), Claire Homard (Flintshire County Council), Geraint Davies (Denbighshire County Council) and Lowri Brown (Conwy County Borough Council).

Officers present: Arwyn Thomas (Managing Director, GwE), Dafydd Edwards (Gwynedd Council Head of Finance, Host Authority), Sion Huws (Senior Lawyer - Corporate, Gwynedd Council, Host Authority), Susan Owen Jones (Business Manager, GwE), Alwyn Jones (Assistant Director, GwE), Gwawr Meirion (Estyn), Elfyn Jones (GwE), Marc Hughes (GwE), Gareth Williams (Chair of GwE Advisory Board), Hywyn Jones (Group Accountant, Gwynedd Council, Host Authority), Gwion Jones (Senior Accountant, Gwynedd Council - Host Authority), Bethan Roberts (Performance Management Manager, GwE), Annes Sion (Democracy Team Leader, Gwynedd Council) and Natalie Lloyd Jones (Democracy Services Officer, Gwynedd Council, Host Authority).

Prior to starting the meeting formally, GwE's Managing Director extended the Joint Committee's condolences to Geraint Davies in his recent bereavement. He was offered any support he may need upon his return to work.

An update was also provided on the annual 'Challenge and Review' meeting with the Education Minister, at the end of January. Issues such as supporting schools, challenges, and support for pupils were discussed. It was noted that the Minister's feedback had been positive, particularly her reference to North Wales' approach and exemplar good practice.

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies received from Councillor. Cemlyn Williams (Gwynedd Council) and Annwen Morgan (Chief Executive, Anglesey County Council).

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declaration of personal interest was received.

3. URGENT MATTERS

There were no urgent matters.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

It was confirmed that the record presented appropriately reflected the meeting on 11 November 2020.

Reference was made to Item 4 in the minutes. It was noted that this had been discussed at the Management Board. An update on national policy will be presented to the Joint Committee as required.

5. GWE BUDGET 2020-21 - 3RD QUARTER REVIEW

DECISION:

To accept the 3rd Quarter Review of GwE's budget for the 2020/21 financial year.

DISCUSSION:

The Head of Finance, Gwynedd Council Host Authority, noting that the 3rd quarter review estimates a net overspend of £40,000, presented the report.

The budget was not examined in detail, however the reasons for underspend were outlined namely travelling expenses savings during COVID-19 and a member of staff on secondment. It was expected that travelling would recommence once educational visits would be resumed.

It was noted that 2021/22 could pose financially challenging due to uncertainty with specific grants. It was therefore proposed and agreed that the underspend fund should be ring-fenced for the time being, before considering the possible financial challenges of 2021/22.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Joint-Committee, appreciated the comprehensive report.

6. GWE BUDGET 2021-2022

DECISION

- a)To adopt the baseline budget for 2021/22 as set out in Appendix 1.
- b)To ask the Managing Director, in consultation with the Management Board, to submit a paper in the autumn reviewing GwE's work model.

DISCUSSION:

The report was presented, noting that the contribution of Local Authorities is central to the baseline budget. GwE's accountants, GwE's Managing Director and GwE's Business Manager were thanked for their work.

An overview was provided of the content of the report as this is only discussed once a year. It was noted that the impact of inflation had been estimated and included in the baseline budget, and that the Authorities' financial contributions had been amended as per usual as seen in Appendix 2.

Comments arising from the discussion:

- It was asked whether there were plans to review GwE's work model, for example, regarding the future of offices and a new way of working.
- It was noted that other organisations have already declared that they will not be returning to travelling for every meeting when this can be done virtually - it was anticipated that this would save money for GwE too.
- GwE's Managing Director responded accepting that there was room to review the work model, however that alongside this, there is a need to consider staff well-being and the social and professional element.
- It was added that GwE's Offices in Mold and Colwyn Bay draw income through the hiring-out of rooms for training purposes. It was added that usage would need to be analysed.
- In light of this, it was agreed that GwE's work model would need to be reviewed and that a report would follow in the autumn.

7. ESTYN THEMATIC REVIEW

DECISION:

Joint Committee to note and accept the content of the report.

DISCUSSION:

GwE's Managing Director presented the report and noted that the item was for information purposes only. Schools were thanked for their cooperation to which it was added that a strong relationship exists between schools and GwE.

Gwynedd Council's Head of Education added that the Education Minister acknowledged the effective collaboration in North Wales.

Comments arising from the discussion:

- Estyn was thanked for the piece of work that links the work of schools, Local Authorities and GwE.
- It was asked whether schools would be inspection-free as they gradually reopened and settled pupils back.
- It was added that pupil well-being and related issues would be schools' priority.

8. GwE WORK PROGRAMME - AUTUMN TERM 2020, REGIONAL UPDATE AND PRIORITIES

DECISION:

The Joint Committee approves the content of the report, GwE's work programme and draft priorities for 2021-22 that will be continually reviewed in response to the Covid-19 situation and Government guidelines and regulations.

DISCUSSION:

GwE's Assistant Director presented the report and the Joint-Committee were reminded that the service work programme had been re-directed over the last period.

Reference was made to the good work and cooperation between GwE and the Local Authorities in order to meet schools' ever-changing needs. It was added that school staff had welcomed the advisers' role.

GwE's draft priorities for 2021-22 were highlighted and outlined.

Comments arising from the discussion:

- It was noted that it needed to be ensured that teachers do not return in September to any examination grade appeals - need to ensure that a robust appeals process is in place.
- It was asked where accountability lies in regard to distance learning - it was noted that provision varies from school to school with some offering live lessons and others not.
- It was added that a regional statement might be needed from GwE advising on the expectations regarding remote learning.
- It was noted that parents/carers had received a questionnaire to express their expectations. It was proposed for the members to hold these discussions with their education officers.

9. SUPPORTING SCHOOLS

DECISION:

The Joint Committee approves the content of the report on the focus of GwE's work over the next two terms.

DISCUSSION:

The report was presented and the focus of GwE's work over the next two terms was outlined. It was noted that the focus would be on supporting school leaders and staff to identify achievements, what has worked well for them over the last period, and any outstanding issues.

The Joint Committee were reminded of Estyn's intention to re-engage with their work this term and therefore Supporting Improvement Advisers will be supporting schools so that they are in a strong position.

Ellyn Jones elaborated on the next steps i.e. to focus on supporting provisions within schools, supporting blended learning and supporting schools to measure the impact of their actions on progress in learning.

It was added that the next steps would ensure that all schools could confidently report on their standards and pupils' progress.

Comments arising from the discussion:

- The work was appreciated by the Joint Committee and they were glad to hear of the preparations.
- It was questioned how best to ensure that extra funding is used efficiently.
- It was asked what the plans are for assessing children's needs, particularly children who require additional support due to mental health deterioration.
- It was added that the next steps would be new ground for school staff, as they have never had to cope with post-pandemic reality.

In response to the comments, the following were noted:

- Assurance was given that any extra funding would be used for children's long-term well-being.
- The focus will be on learners' holistic needs - emotional, social and physical.

10. THE REFORM JOURNEY AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

DECISION:

The Joint Committee accepts and approves the content of the report.

DISCUSSION:

GwE's Managing Director presented an overview of the current situation as regards the Reform Journey, adding that schools are at different stages in terms of readiness and capacity.

Despite procedures having slowed down over the last period, work is ongoing to support the Curriculum for Wales.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Joint-Committee, appreciated the comprehensive report.

11. DISTANCE/REMOTE LEARNING AND PARENT/CARER ENGAGEMENT

DECISION:

- a) The Joint Committee accepts and approves the report.
- b) To support the strategy and support in place for schools in relation to parent/carer engagement and remote learning in North Wales.

DISCUSSION:

The report was presented noting that it consists of two documents intended to further support and assist schools and parents/carers to respond to questions and queries regarding remote learning. It was added that the intention is to develop a regional strategy to improve parent/carer engagement so that they can effectively support their children throughout and beyond the COVID period.

The importance of engagement between schools and parents/carers over the remote learning period was highlighted as one of the main priorities in the next phase.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Joint-Committee, appreciated the comprehensive report.

12. ACCELERATED LEARNING PROGRAMMES FOR THE WELSH LANGUAGE

DECISION:

The Joint-Committee approves the content of the report and plans to develop Accelerated Learning programmes for children being educated through the medium of Welsh (First Language).

DISCUSSION:

GwE's Assistant Director presented the report noting that the content had been covered in previous items. An outline was given of the course when noting the purpose of the report i.e. to further develop accelerated learning programmes for Welsh first language.

Estyn's thematic report highlighted concern regarding pupils losing the Welsh they had acquired in school, especially those from non-Welsh speaking homes.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Joint-Committee, appreciated the comprehensive report.

13. MEETING CALENDAR 2021/2022

DECISION:

The Joint Committee approves the meeting calendar as noted in Appendix 1.

The meeting started at 10.30am and concluded at 12.17pm.

CHAIRPERSON