
GWE JOINT COMMITTEE
20/03/2024

Present:

Councillors: Julie Fallon (Chair) (Conwy County Borough Council), Beca Brown (Cyngor Gwynedd), Dafydd Roberts (Isle of Anglesey County Council), Gill German (Denbighshire Council), Mared Eastwood (Flintshire Council) and Phil Wynn (Wrexham County Borough Council).

Co-opted Members Without a Vote: Paul Smith (Secondary Schools' Representative), Manon Williams (Primary Schools' Representative) and Noel Fitzgerald (Special Schools' Representative).

Officers without a vote: Marc Berw Hughes (Isle of Anglesey County Council), Dr Lowri Brown (Conwy County Borough Council), Gwern ap Rhisiart (Cyngor Gwynedd), Claire Homard (Flintshire Council) and Geraint Davies (Denbighshire Council).

Officers present:

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

Cyngor Gwynedd (Host Authority) - Ffion Madog Evans (Assistant Head of Finance), Siôn Huws (Propriety and Elections Manager), Gwion Jones (Senior Accountant) and Sioned Mai Jones (Democracy Services Officer).

At the beginning of the meeting, new members of the Joint Committee, Manon Williams, Paul Smith and Noel Fitzgerald, were welcomed as new Schools' representatives.

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Dewi Morgan (Head of Finance Department), Karen Evans (Wrexham County Borough Council) and Graham Boase (Denbighshire Council).

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declarations of personal interest were received from any members present.

3. URGENT ITEMS

No urgent matters were raised.

4. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

It was confirmed that the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee held on 6 December 2023, were correct.

5. GWE BUDGET 2023-2024 - THIRD QUARTER REVIEW

The report was presented giving a financial update to members of the Joint Committee about GwE's budget until the end of December 2023 and the projections for the end of the financial year. It was noted, based on expenditure and income, that it was anticipated that there would be a net overspend of £59,500 by the end of the 2023/24 financial year. It was confirmed that this information was still current. It was noted that this compared to £37,000 that was anticipated in the review at the end of September, which meant that the overspend had increased.

It was noted that there was an overspend of £46,000 under the heading of Employees; this came about after GwE received a savings target of £102,000 under this heading in 2023/24. It was added that the overspend was being reduced as a result of two permanent jobs that had not been filled, as well as staff turnover. Attention was drawn to the underspend of £16,500 under the heading of Transport, mainly because of the new ways of working. It was added that an overspend of £23,000 was anticipated under the heading of Supplies and Services, with GwE being hit with IT equipment renovation costs this year.

It was expressed that there was an intention to use an available fund to fund the overspend of £59,500 that was anticipated; this would leave £239,000 in the fund.

There were no observations.

RESOLVED

To accept and approve the report on the review of the GwE budget to the end of December 2023.

6. GWE REGIONAL BUSINESS PLAN 2023/2024 - QUARTER 3 MONITORING

GwE's Assistant Director presented the report on progress against the Regional Business Plan and focused on the period from the end of September to December 2023.

He reported that 28 detailed plans existed on the provision available for schools across the Region and that very enriching support had been provided to those schools. He explained that Appendix 2 referred to the regional data and the number that have engaged with the provision.

It was expressed that the report was comprehensive and the staff were thanked for their work to create the report.

RESOLVED

To approve and accept the monitoring report for quarter 3.

7. THE FUTURE OF IMPROVING SCHOOLS IN NORTH WALES

GwE's Managing Director presented the report, noting that substantial change was underway to what had been a regional service. It was expressed that this period was the hardest period that he had experienced in almost 40 years of working in Education and that one of the main challenges was coping with the uncertainty.

Reference was made to the timetable since 18 December and the recommendations received following Dylan Jones' review. It was noted that there would be a new model

of schools' improvement service and there would be a need to look at the capacity within that system; there was no detailed plan about the new system at the moment. It was mentioned that the Local Authorities were facing challenges, and this was highlighted in part 3.2 of the report. The general risks and financial implications were explained.

It was noted that there would be a period of change before the new model came into being and that the impact of a change to grants would have an immediate effect. It was explained that the service would stop being a service shared across north Wales. This meant that there would be a major change from 1 April where the schools' improvement service would become a commission service from different individual Local Authorities. It was highlighted that there was a need for an intensive discussion about the role of the Joint Committee for the future and the role of the Management Board, and that this was an area of governance that would need to be looked at when moving forward.

Reference was made to the possibility that there would be a new Minister for Education following announcing the new First Minister today and that this could lead to a delay. It was noted that the timetable given was April 2025 to have a new schools' improvement model in place. Concern was expressed that the timetable of April 2025 could be challenging to Local Authorities.

Sympathy was expressed with the Host Authority's services, as it would mean additional work for Cyngor Gwynedd's Finance, Legal and Human Resources services, as well as additional costs for everyone, such as closure costs and possible redundancies. In the next meeting of the Joint Committee in May, it was noted that there was a need to look at the team's configuration, considering how the budgets would be by the end of March 2025. There would also be a need to consider which posts could be released at the moment.

It was explained that the budget was tight on every level and that the funding allocated to improve schools would be reduced substantially. It was emphasised that clarity was needed regarding the national professional learning model. Reference was made to staff's low morale due to all the uncertainty and the inability to inform staff of their current options.

To conclude, it was acknowledged that everyone would like more detail and more information, highlighting that Phase 2 of Dylan Jones' inquiry was currently being conducted.

The Chair noted that a meeting had been arranged with the Minister for Education in April. Members of the Joint Committee were given an opportunity to express any specific concerns or questions so that the Chair could convey them in the meeting in April. It was agreed that GwE would collate questions for the Chair.

The members submitted the following observations:

- It was acknowledged that the situation had been difficult especially for GwE staff, and thanks were expressed to them.
- It was noted that the situation had been poorly managed and there was some uncertainty on the way forward.
- The importance of retaining the focus and standards in order to continue to support schools across the region and offer the best education for pupils was emphasised.
- It was reported that there had been meetings among the Chief Officers to try and work through the implications of the changes to the grant funding and the terms and conditions.

- It was noted that the Joint Committee faced a challenge on three levels:
 - o It was noted that the priority was the learners and the schools and that it was important that the best support continued to be offered. It was expressed that it was essential not to destabilise the schools' current performances.
 - o It was noted that there was planning work to be done for the new National Model and that there was a lack of clarity regarding the national focus. It was reiterated that a series of meetings had been arranged. These would include a National Directors Group with many representative directors and colleagues from the Welsh Government to discuss the detail. The first meeting would be held on Friday.
 - o It was noted that the current model would come to an end at the end of March 2025. Additional resources would be needed then and there would be implications in terms of staff redundancies and closure of the service. There would also be costs to establish new partnerships between the Authorities. It was believed that there were limited resources to deal with this.

Headteachers who represented the schools on the Joint Committee were given an opportunity to make observations. Amongst the observations, reference was made to the disappointment and the uncertainty, noting that it was difficult for schools to prioritise when they did not know what they were facing. It was added that the schools had received the best support during the last seven years as a result of the Supporting Improvement Advisers who provided a valuable service. Concerns were expressed about the service for the future. Sympathy was expressed towards GwE staff, reiterating that the staff's attitude and professionalism was to be commended.

It was proposed to add two sentences to the recommendation and it was agreed to add them as (b) and (c) in the Resolution.

Gratitude was expressed to the members for a useful discussion and it was emphasised that collaboration would continue in the hope that more information would be received from the Welsh Government to put a plan in place.

GwE's Managing Director was asked to pass on the Joint Committee's gratitude and appreciation to GwE staff for their professionalism under difficult circumstances.

To conclude, GwE's Managing Director expressed his thanks for the observations, reiterating that any new model would have to be better than what previously existed. He expressed that there was a need to consider where the additional value of any new structure was. It was reiterated that it was important for schools to be aware that the level of support would be significantly reduced from April and over the next financial year because of the cuts to the budget and the grants' implications. This would be communicated more effectively and in more detail with the schools after Easter.

RESOLVED

- a) To note the content of the report and consider risk implications for 2024-25 and beyond.**
- b) That the Management Board submit a report at the meeting of the Joint Committee in May on the way forward which will deal with a timetable and governance matters as well as budgetary implications.**
- c) For the voting members of the Joint Committee to agree to submit a list of questions to be presented to the Minister for Education in the meeting that has been arranged for April.**

8. GWE BUDGET 2024/2025 (BASELINE BUDGET)

The report on the budget was presented explaining that it reflected the change that had followed the Welsh Government's decision to amend the method of allocating Education grants for 2024/25. It was added that the savings target of 10% by the Authorities had been included in the baseline budget.

Reference was made to the Welsh Government's change to arrangements in terms of grants in part 2.1 of the report noting that the Local Authorities' Education grant would be paid directly to the Councils or the schools.

Attention was drawn to the table in part 2.3 of the report which noted the headings that were no longer GwE's responsibility and showed the financial changes as a result of that. It was noted that the funding had been reduced from £6.2 million in 2023/24 to £4.5 million in 2024/25 which was a reduction of £1.7 million. It was explained that the main reason was a cut by the Welsh Government in the amount of grants.

Reference was made to Appendix 2 which gave an overview of the core budget for 2024/25. It was explained that the table summarised the information in terms of the core funding which was a total of £4 million. Furthermore, reference was made to Appendix 1 which noted the budget of £8.46 million that had been set and noted the income that corresponded to the expenditure. It was expressed that a balanced budget had been set for GwE for 2024/25.

In addition, it was explained after considering inflation on all of GwE's spending for 2024/25, as the Education grants were not inflated annually, this meant a cut that was a total of £737,000 instead of the figure of £392,000.

During the ensuing discussion, the members submitted the following observations:

- It was emphasised that GwE's core contribution had reduced by 18% and not 10% considering the inflation referred to in part 3 of the report. It was noted that this would be further explained in the meeting in May where the funding's distribution would be discussed.
- It was expressed that sensitive information would be discussed in the next meeting that related to GwE staff's current posts. It was confirmed that there was a need to look at the exempt information category for some items in the next meeting and produce the agenda in accordance with that.
- Cyngor Gwynedd's Finance staff were thanked for their support and their work whilst producing the budget. It was reiterated that the publication timetable had been very short and appreciation was expressed for their hard work.

RESOLVED

To adopt the baseline budget for the 2024/25 financial year as submitted in Appendix 1 of the report, namely £8,460,971.

9. 2024-2025 MEETINGS CALENDAR

The report was submitted as an item for information to enable members of the Joint Committee to note the dates in their calendars, noting that there may be a need for an element of flexibility from the members. It was explained that more meetings may be needed if urgent decisions needed to be made as a result of the current situation.

The Joint Committee was thanked for its work and contributions.

RESOLVED

To approve the Joint Committee meetings calendar for the 2024-25 year.

The meeting commenced at 10.30am and concluded at 11.30am.

CHAIR