



Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru
Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales

Report following the monitoring of

**GwE Consortium
Bryn Eirias
Ffordd Abergele
Colwyn Bay
Conwy
LL29 8BY**

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by

**Estyn, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and
Training in Wales**

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Outcome of visit

Introduction

In April 2016, Estyn inspected the school improvement services provided by GwE. In October 2017, Estyn visited GwE to review the progress made by the consortium in relation to the recommendations identified in the inspection.

In evaluating progress for each recommendation, we considered the following:

- Has the consortium understood the reasons behind the recommendation?
- Has the consortium taken reasonable action to address the recommendation successfully, taking into account its starting point, the time between an inspection and a follow-up visit, as well as the complexity of the issues to be addressed?
- Has the consortium been supported appropriately in addressing the recommendations by its partner local authorities?
- Has the consortium ensured that changes arising from its progress in addressing each recommendation have become embedded enough within its working practices to secure sustained improvement?

In forming a judgement about the progress against the recommendations, the monitoring team took into account the trends in performance over the last five years as a context for the evaluation of the impact of its work in schools. However, it is important to note that outcomes cannot be attributed solely to the work of the regional consortium as other partners in the system also play an important role.

The monitoring team considered a range of evidence including the consortium's business planning, evaluations, challenge advisers' reports, target setting procedures, risk assessments and the views of headteachers.

Estyn does not plan to make any further follow-up visits to GwE. Any remaining areas for improvement will be monitored informally by Estyn's regional link inspector and the relevant local authority link inspectors, and considered during future inspections of local government education services.

Progress since the last inspection

Since the core inspection, GwE has conducted an intensive and comprehensive review of its work and its effect on standards, provision and leadership across the region. Early action following this work has ensured that stakeholders at all levels have increasing confidence in GwE's ability to provide an effective school improvement service. Significant changes have been made to management structures to distribute leadership and ensure clear lines of accountability. The managing director's strong and decisive leadership has been a key factor in promoting the substantial improvements in the quality of the school improvement services since the inspection.

Recommendation 1: Ensure that the school improvement service uses data, target setting and tracking procedures more effectively to challenge and support schools in order to improve performance of all learners across schools and local authorities, particularly in key stage 4

Strong progress in addressing the recommendation

GwE has ensured a more proportionate allocation of resources and time to work with secondary schools than at the time of the core inspection. Leaders have given appropriate consideration to the views of stakeholders and have established a more supportive and productive culture. Where previously, challenge advisers were proficient at challenging schools on areas they needed to improve, they didn't focus sufficiently on providing the support to enable this to happen. GwE has re-focused the role of the challenge advisers and rebranded them as improvement support advisers. Meaningful use is made of the improvement support advisers' expertise and specialisms. They understand their roles well and everyone has a clear remit. As a result, there is a better balance between the level of challenge and support to schools, and there is an emphasis on organising and working jointly. Where a higher level of challenge is needed in order to raise standards, GwE acts quickly and purposefully. This new approach has led to robust improvements in standards in the foundation phase and in key stages 2 and 3 across the region since the core inspection. One good example of this is the support that was given to the English department of a school that is in a statutory category, which contributed to a considerable improvement in outcomes at the end of key stage 4.

GwE has taken very positive steps to improve its data-handling system from the foundation phase to key stage 4. This sophisticated system includes comprehensive data for each key stage and is analysed purposefully for individual schools, sectors, local authorities and the region. This system has led to better consistency in the type of data that is considered and the way in which it is used. As a result, data is used much more effectively to challenge and allocate specific support for schools, which was not seen at the time of the core inspection.

GwE, in partnership with local authorities and schools, has strengthened the system of setting targets and made it more consistent. The GwE's targets derive directly from individual pupils' targets. Schools are given very clear guidelines on how to set targets that are meaningful and realistic. As a result, the targets for the primary sector and key stage 3 are close to end of key stage performance.

GwE gives schools clear guidance on tracking outcomes against targets. Schools submit predictions of performance regularly to the consortium, and leaders at all levels are given full access to this data. Productive use is made of this information to conduct detailed discussions in schools and to devise purposeful support for managers and individual departments. In addition, it gives a high-level overview of the performance of schools and groups of pupils across the region. This allows leaders to ensure the quality of GwE's work in improving schools.

As part of the revised approach of working with schools, the GwE produces a purposeful support programme for each school. Schools now have a more meaningful input in the process of devising support programmes to meet their needs. This means that there are valuable opportunities to develop wider areas or target

specific issues following headteachers' evaluations, for example increasing the capacity of middle managers or improving the quality of provision in the sixth form.

The quality of work of the core subject improvement support advisers is excellent. They respond sensibly, and often very creatively, to the needs of individual schools and provide very clear and beneficial guidance for core subject leaders across the region. This has had a very positive effect on standards in specific schools, in addition to strengthening and ensuring consistency in the quality of planning, learning and teaching across the region in key stage 4.

GwE responds positively to requests from local authorities to conduct intensive internal reviews in individual schools. Extensive investment in human resources and time ensures that schools receive comprehensive and fair reviews. Reports that derive from these reviews are rigorous and include purposeful recommendations.

The early and direct action to improve the quality of the regional service since the core inspection has led to significant improvements in standards in the foundation phase and in key stages 2 and 3. In addition, interventions targeted at those schools that needed immediate action have succeeded in raising standards in a short period of time, in most cases. Despite the clear improvements in the school improvement service's quality of provision and leadership, it is too early to measure the overall effect of this across the region in key stage 4.

Recommendation 2: Improve the quality of evaluation in the delivery of school improvement services

Very good progress in addressing the recommendation

Since the inspection, GwE has made a number of improvements to the way in which it evaluates the quality of the school improvement service. The methodical planning framework ensures that accountability and monitoring processes alike are cohesive. One of the planning framework's strengths is that it is simple and understood by all. This means that GwE's staff are very clear about their responsibilities and the expectations of them in terms of fulfilling their roles.

Business plans for the different work streams follow a consistent procedure. Managers track and evaluate progress against targets in the business plans regularly, and report to the relevant boards in line with the timescales. They use up-to-date evidence to adapt the activity, when appropriate, and respond quickly to arising needs.

Following a training activity or a school visit, improvement support advisers submit a report that identifies strengths and areas for improvement. In general, these are evaluative and appropriate and emphasise the effect of activities on pupils' outcomes, be they qualitative or quantitative outcomes. This allows GwE's leaders to gather strong first-hand evidence of the effect and quality of school improvement activities, and to use this information in order to identify good practice or respond to concerns.

In order to build staff competencies and capacity, GwE works in partnership with Bangor University on the 'Collaborative Institute for Education Research, Evidence

and Impact' project to develop evaluation systems and methodology. This enables staff from GwE and the region's schools to begin to evaluate the effect of major and complex projects appropriately. This work is also part of GwE's wider approach to develop a professional learning workforce that is involved increasingly in action research projects. In addition, it reflects GwE's ambition to develop as a learning organisation that is learning from the past and looking at ways to innovate for the future.

Recommendation 3: Improve the rigour of the arrangements for identifying and managing risk

Very good progress in addressing the recommendation

GwE now uses a clear and agreed process to identify and manage risks. This includes a useful risk register with appropriate references to the possible effect of the main risks that have been identified to funding and governance, and to achieving the priorities in business plans. Business plans at different levels within GwE now include sensible references to risks. As a result, there is a much better link between risk assessments and improvement plans and the GwE's strategic objectives.

GwE has developed a stronger culture of evaluating risk. Risks are considered and evaluated systematically, fairly and proportionately by the joint committee and other relevant boards. Appropriate considerations are in place to reduce the potential effect of risks. The joint committee now use their awareness of risks more systematically in order to help them make decisions and consider the lessons that have been learnt. As a result, there is better strategic management within GwE to protect interests and challenge issues that are a cause for concern. However, it is too early to see how effective the mitigating actions are that have been identified for many of the risks.

Recommendation 4: Ensure that business and operational plans contain clear success criteria and that progress against these are monitored effectively

Very good progress in addressing the recommendation

GwE has ensured much more robust arrangements for planning for improvement. Leaders make effective use of performance indicators to monitor progress against milestones and to take remedial steps, when appropriate.

GwE has set challenging and measurable objectives by 2020 to improve standards, the curriculum, assessment, leadership, wellbeing and teaching. These are supported by detailed business plans, and clear threads run through the plans' various layers. Action plans include specific objectives, measurable and achievable targets, including milestones and costs. Responsibilities are delegated clearly to teams or individuals, and they include appropriate sources of funding. GwE plans for the medium term and the current year sensibly, and ensures a strategic and sustainable approach to school improvement.

Progress against plans is evaluated regularly at different levels. GwE has strengthened lines of accountability at all levels of planning across the region; for example, through the clear accountability framework, improvement support advisers review their plans each quarter and evaluate progress and effect appropriately. This

includes tracking expenditure against the plans' outcomes. There is a clear procedure whereby senior leaders monitor action and evaluate plans, and the joint committee and other relevant boards evaluate progress and challenge performance appropriately.

Although the performance management process is relatively new, there are good examples where planning, priorities and actions are having a positive effect on standards and provision in schools, for example planning to support schools to prepare for a Curriculum for Wales.

Recommendation 5: Clarify the strategic role of the regional networks and their accountability to the Joint Committee

Very good progress in addressing the recommendation

Since the inspection, the education authorities in north Wales have either de-commissioned the regional networks or, in the context of the Welsh language network, brought them under the auspices of GwE's strategic management. The structural change means that headteachers and other stakeholders have better clarity about their roles and responsibilities in important areas, and they know who to approach for support when needed. In addition, their accountability to the joint committee is completely clear.

The structural change means that GwE has strategic management of these areas, which provides more opportunity to promote and support cohesive improvement in the region's schools. A good example is the better support for the foundation phase across the region, which is having a positive effect on improving the quality of provision and pupils' outcomes.

The Welsh language support network discusses far-reaching plans for workforce planning that will meet the region's linguistic needs in the future. The context of discussions is the Welsh Government's strategic plans to increase the number of Welsh speakers. Although planning and discussions are in their early stages, GwE is keen to continue to play a central role in this work.

Recommendation 6: Develop an appropriate framework to assess value for money; ensure that the business plan is accompanied by a medium-term financial plan and that work-streams are fully costed

Strong progress in addressing the recommendation

GwE's business planning process now identifies the cost of all activities within business plans at all levels, including how grants correspond with priorities in the business plan. Business plan holders are required to evaluate their use of resources each quarter, and there is a clear process for raising concerns. This monitoring ensures that leaders understand their effectiveness when using resources, whether core funding or grant funding. Senior leaders make beneficial use of quarterly monitoring to track progress against priorities. Business plan holders are held to account effectively through the monitoring process.

GwE has developed a medium-term financial plan that identifies the risks that could affect funding levels, for example inflation, changes to local authority contributions to core budgets and levels of grant funding. The plan identifies various financial

scenarios based on clear assumptions that GwE can use to respond to the challenges that are identified when planning annual budgets. The host funding authority, in co-operation with GwE officers, reviews the plan in response to relevant information that could affect the models, and takes steps to address the negative impact of those scenarios. This helps GwE to respond more strategically to changes in funding by factors outside its direct control. GwE is developing a coherent workforce plan that is aligning with the results of its recent organisational health survey and the perceptions of the 'learning organisation' survey.

Recently, GwE has produced an appropriate value for money policy and framework, which links clearly the resources that are used with the results that are achieved. Responsibility for ensuring value for money is beginning to become embedded throughout all of GwE's work. Senior leaders and the remainder of the staff alike share the responsibility for ensuring value for money.

The framework provides appropriate guidance for business plan holders on how to conduct value for money assessments. A few value for money evaluations do not currently capture the views of stakeholders or include measures for more economic, efficient and effective action.

As a result of developing the appropriate policy, the framework and sharing responsibility, the GwE is now in a better position to assess value for money.

Recommendations

In order to maintain and improve on this progress, GwE should continue to maintain the level of progress it has already made, and continue to address those inspection recommendations in which further progress is needed.