

GwE review of current practice and direction of travel

Background and evidence base

I met with a range of senior colleagues from GwE who briefed me on developments and also demonstrated to me the G6 tool and the business planning system. Of course, I was unable to triangulate any of this with the views of other stakeholders (eg head teachers, local authority officers or the Welsh Government) so these findings are based on the evidence brought to me during the one and a half days that I spent with GwE staff.

GwE has come a long way since its foundation in 2013. The critical Estyn report of 2016 has been superseded by a positive Estyn report in 2017. The focus is now on support and on capacity-building for a self-improving system. Challenge Advisers have become “Supporting Improvement Advisers” and this is more than a name change – it signals a determination from the leaders of GwE to build trust with its key stakeholders and to move away from a top-down approach to school improvement, developing a more long-term, supportive and sustainable strategy. However, this is against a background of wholesale change at national level as far as schools are concerned. The National Mission is a coherent and exciting agenda but the amount of change that is required from schools is unprecedented. It will, inevitably, not only create turbulence in schools but it will also push schools to the limit of their capacity and perhaps beyond their capacity. The national changes are, in broad terms, welcomed by the profession – but it is in the successful management of their implementation that the challenges lie. Some of the changes are statutory and are highly demanding.

All this change is against a background of a history of a top-down culture from some local authorities that encouraged dependency amongst school leaders. In addition, there are challenges to school budgets and increasing difficulty in recruiting leaders and teachers, especially in deprived or remote areas.

Grounds for optimism/areas of strength

1. The team has built credibility with schools. Increasingly at secondary level GwE has serving headteachers (either on a secondment basis or as part-time associates). Primary advisers usually have head teacher experience.
2. Relationships with local authorities, including those with the six education portfolio leads, have improved significantly.
3. The professional development programme is increasingly based on need rather than on the interest and specialism of the advisers.
4. The new G6 instrument has the potential to save schools time and to integrate the various scrutiny and monitoring requirements whilst at the same time supporting school self evaluation. It has very significant potential.
5. Internal business plans are robust and are monitored systematically – they connect activity with impact and with budget monitoring. This is impressive.
6. Some of the clusters are working very well and demonstrating outcome-focused collaboration and collective responsibility; though this is still a minority.
7. GwE is doing impressive work to enable pioneer schools to provide some strong collaborative leadership across their clusters for the new Welsh Curriculum, though this is still patchy.
8. The new proposed system for analysing the expected progress of pupils, linked to value-added and contextual factors, is highly impressive and could help to shift the culture away from competition with other schools and away from focusing on borderline pupils towards focusing on every child and his or her progress.

9. It is very early days but the new emphasis on using small data for school improvement has great potential to increase the confidence of schools towards school-based approaches to improvement and can empower teachers to take greater responsibility for improving teaching and learning and support for children in their classrooms/schools.
10. There is a new approach to creating a directory of successful practice which can be shared electronically. This has the potential to support the dissemination of good practice in a practical way.
11. Very significant progress is being made on leadership development – across all 4 regions - linked to impressive leadership development programmes and the new direction provided by the NAEL. This is a huge step forward and has great potential to improve the quality of school leadership.

Challenges/concerns

1. **Leadership from the middle.** There is a tension between on the one hand GwE being perceived as a service to support a self-improving school system and on the other hand GwE being perceived as a delivery arm for the government. GwE is stuck in the middle. Its main funder – the Welsh Government- expects it to deliver on the government’s priorities (and rightly so). However, this could reinforce the top-down approach and could create resistance from schools. The key is for GwE to operate effectively in that space between government and schools – enabling schools to understand the government’s agenda whilst at the same time connecting with the real issues facing schools and building capacity to enable schools to take responsibility for leading this work themselves. GwE has made a good start on this but it is fraught with difficulties. On the one hand, an approach which is too hands-off will lead to a failure to deliver (and thus lead to criticism from the Welsh Government and from local authorities), whilst on the other hand an approach that is too directive will lead to improvement that is not sustainable. The approach needed will require exceptional leadership and astute management from GwE as it builds capacity and incentivises outcomes-focused collaboration whilst intervening directly (and skilfully) where the seriousness of the situation requires it.
2. **Local politics.** The elected members will expect to receive information about their schools that is simple and straightforward and enables them to compare the performance of their local authority with others. The new accountability proposals from the Welsh Government make this less much likely. GwE will need to provide assurance to elected members that the information that they do receive is robust and useful and enables them to fulfil their own obligations as elected members. This will require a cultural shift in some cases and some further investment of time and effort in the relationship between GwE and lead members.
3. **The future v the present.** There is a tension between the immediate needs and the long-term needs of schools. Most schools will always respond to the immediate accountability imperative, as it is too high risk to ignore. GwE has to balance the immediate needs of the system eg the current requirements of Estyn and the National government’s categorisation approach (which will now run for another year) and at the same time to prepare for a very different approach to school accountability that will happen over the next few years. The sooner the proposed new accountability changes are introduced, including a different role for Estyn, the easier it will be to support the new reform agenda.
4. **Leadership of schools and of clusters.** Much is now being expected of school leaders. Most will embrace the new reform agenda in principle but many will lack the expertise to lead within this new environment. The leadership skills required now to lead in a more autonomous self-improving system are more demanding. Even more stark is the requirement to have sufficient school leaders who can step up to lead across clusters and collaboratives. The “lateral” leadership skills needed to lead clusters of schools may take

years to develop. These skills are different from the skills needed for institutional leadership. The pressure is therefore on the NAEL and on GwE to be highly effective in supporting the leadership development agenda.

5. **Capacity in schools.** Most schools will find the implementation of the new reform agenda very challenging. Small secondary and small primary schools – will find it particularly challenging, especially at a time when school budgets are struggling to keep pace with school costs. North Wales has more small schools than other regions and this makes the current agenda particularly challenging. Even when supply cover can be found to support training and development, bringing teachers and leaders out of school may have a negative impact on the quality of teaching in the short-term.

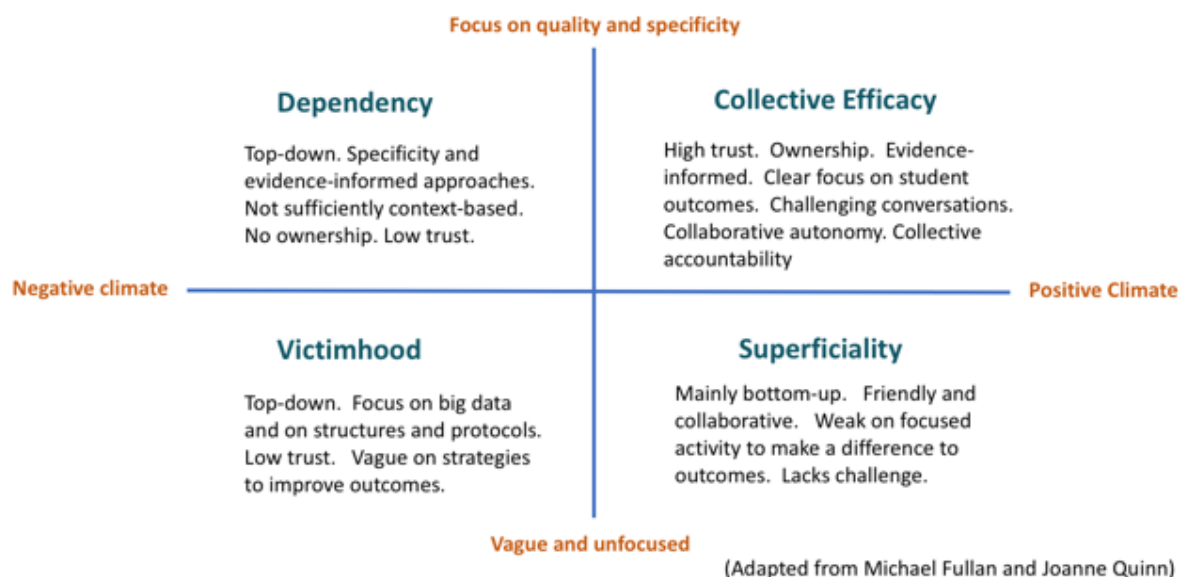
Recommendations

The direction of travel that GwE has adopted is exactly the right one. Much is now in place to move things forward strongly – leadership, clear direction, culture, mission and focus, relationships, credibility with schools and local authorities, systems, quality assurance, data. Above all GwE should hold its nerve and keep doing what it is doing.

1. Adopt a gradual and differentiated approach to leading and supporting change. Moving from top-down change to more empowering approaches is the best way forward but this needs to be a gradual approach. If GwE steps back too quickly then there may be too much of a vacuum and if it intervenes too much it will not build long-term sustainability. The compelling narrative of moving towards lateral leadership and collective responsibility needs to be strong and clear, but its implementation needs to be differentiated based on the particular needs of schools and clusters of schools. What is needed here is “nuanced leadership”.
2. Be clear about the bottom lines for intervention. There will be times when intervention and a top-down approach is the only possible strategy eg when there is systemic failure or when the timelines are so tight that without top-down intervention failure is inevitable. This may, for example, apply to some aspects of the ALN agenda or when schools are in an Estyn category and seriously letting down the children. For the rest of the reform agenda, be prepared to live with a messy, mixed-economy approach. Some clusters may be leading the way and others may be far behind but still making progress. As far as collaboration is concerned, “voluntary but inevitable” is better than top-down and compulsory. Provide support but don’t over-manage or over-control.
3. Look constantly to build on success and to share and disseminate it. Not just through the “successful practice” initiative but also through brokerage of school to school support and other ways to expose teachers and leaders to great practice. Avoid insularity and the recycling of mediocre practice. Many teachers don’t know what great teaching looks like and many leaders don’t know what great leadership looks like. One of your roles is to help people to be exposed to great teaching and great leadership.
4. Looking out for highly talented teachers and leaders is a crucial role for those like GwE who lead in the middle of the system. Who can step up, who can lead a training session, who can be encouraged to lead a cluster, who can be given a chance to shine? Not just the usual suspects. The various leadership development programmes are helping to identify future talent but consider how to develop a local solutions approach to talent management and succession planning, linked to clusters.

- 5 There should be a gradual movement away from a large number of centrally-provided CPD. Seek to use school-based staff increasingly in professional development. Use the work on small data and action research to support this. Gradually, there should be less central CPD and more school or cluster-based CPD, led by practitioners.
- 6 Focus clusters on transparent objectives based on outcomes for children. Encourage them to be willing to share these with parents and with local authorities and to be prepared to be held collectively accountable. Consider carefully how to link SIAs with appropriate clusters, with the focus on facilitation and coaching rather than on leading the cluster themselves.

Change quality and climate in school-to-school collaborations



- 7 Develop a peer review strategy that schools value and want to participate in. Involve schools in shaping it. Unless the school is in an Estyn category or in danger of being in an Estyn category, do not mimic an Estyn inspection through peer review. Integrate peer review into the work of clusters, so that peer review is part of how trust is built up over time within a cluster and is a way of working rather than a one-off process. SIAs can be used to provide some external quality assurance and robustness – to avoid the criticism that peer review is too cosy.
- 8 Develop greater clarity on the role of “system leader”. Identify the skills needed from system leaders – these skills are different from institutional leadership- and develop a programme of support and development for future system leaders.
- 9 Continue to look outward and to welcome challenge from those outside North Wales whilst making sure that what you develop is right for your context – not merely transported from elsewhere.

Conclusion

I am coming away from these two days feeling positive about the prospects for success in North Wales, in spite of the numerous challenges. The quality of the GwE team is high and the strategies are impressive. The direction of travel is the right one and the team are open to external challenge whilst determined to do the right things for the schools and the children in North Wales.

Steve Munby (21.09.18)