

Complete Agenda



Democracy Service
Swyddfa'r Cyngor
CAERNARFON
Gwynedd
LL55 1SH

THE COUNCIL – 28TH SEPTEMBER, 2023

ITEM 6 - QUESTIONS

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(1) Question from Councillor Gruffydd Williams

"Following the announcement that Barclays will close more of its branches including Pwllheli, may I ask why the Council has not considered threatening to change banks as Barclays is the bank that the Council uses? If the Council threatened to move to another bank and also asked other county councils to follow suit, it could be possible to persuade them not to close branches."

Response - Cabinet Member for Finance, Councillor Ioan Thomas

"The recent disappointing announcement by Barclays Bank that the Pwllheli branch was closing on the 15th of November this year, following the closure of the Caernarfon, Porthmadog and Dolgellau branches over the last two years.

The Council has an agreement with Barclays rather than with specific branches. As a result of closing branches Barclays has negotiated an agreement with the Post Office which allows Barclays customers to pay in and also withdraw cash at the Post Offices in Gwynedd, we as a Council make use of this.

We can confirm that the Council's current agreement with Barclays which is for a period of 3 years ends in September 2024. In accordance with the requirements, we as a Council will therefore be looking at preparing a new tender in the coming months. It will be necessary to ensure an appropriate process that addresses our procurement objectives but also leads to the appointment of a bank.

Global banking trends have changed over the past few years with fewer cheques, less cash, and more electronic transactions. All the main banks that the Council would be able to use have closed branches over the past few years.

Since Gwynedd Council was established back in 1996, Barclays bank has been successful when we go out to tender.

Over the past few years some banks have pulled out of the local authority market entirely and the market is much more limited than the personal banking market.

From the point of view of the Council and its banking needs, the situation does not lend itself to simple solutions. Securing banking services is key to maintaining our services and that is evaluated against our ability to influence the wider decisions of these large companies."

(2) Question from Councillor Dewi Jones

"What steps will Cyngor Gwynedd take following the publishing in August of the Bevan Institute's report on poverty in Arfon?"

Response - The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for the Economy, Councillor Nia Jeffreys

“The Bevan Foundation report presents several recommendations across numerous and wide areas of work and currently officers across Council departments - in Finance, Economy, Education, Environment and Housing - are giving detailed consideration to all the issues raised.

At first glance it is encouraging that some of their recommendations are already in place, or in the pipeline, by Cyngor Gwynedd. Such as digital forms for applications for our benefits; our work to date on social benefits in our procurement and tendering arrangements; the partnership work on fuel poverty schemes; and our arrangements for empowering communities through the Regeneration Framework.

We also have strategic, long-term projects in the Council's Plan 2023-28, from Keeping the Benefit Local to the Housing Action Plan, which seek to address other issues mentioned in the recommendations, including, wages, housing prices, affordable transport, and childcare.

As the report itself states, the main powers to make a real difference to the residents of Arfon, and Gwynedd sit with Westminster. We are continuously looking for every possible opportunity to address and tackle the challenges of poverty. Because of that, and to ensure that we make the most of our powers and abilities across our departments, we have invested £350k towards the Supporting People Programme. As many of you are already aware, that program has led on the establishment of the “Croeso Cynnes” scheme; food grants and community pantries; community and staff events on maximizing income, avoiding scams, claiming benefits; providing digital inclusion support and free access to data; free menstrual products and so on.

As the Cabinet Member with cross-departmental responsibility for the Supporting People Programme, I would like to thank the Bevan Foundation for this detailed report, and for putting a spotlight on the experience of poverty in Arfon. It is unacceptable that families and individuals in the twenty-first century still face severe poverty, and this is equally true of communities in Dwyfor and Meirionnydd.

After all the Departments and officers have had the opportunity to respond fully to the report, we will look at feeding relevant recommendations into our work programme for the future. By doing this we can be sure that as a Council we are doing everything we can to reduce poverty, and its impact, within our communities.”

(3) Question from Councillor Louise Hughes

“Everyone accepts the 20mph limit in front of schools and densely populated areas. However, given the public outcry and the unprecedented numbers signing the online petition to the Senedd, the confusion over signage etc and bearing in mind people who use their vehicles for work (care workers, the emergency services, delivery drivers, postal workers, buses etc), are we as a Council happy with the new legislation and will we be using the discretion afforded to individual Local Authorities to exempt the 20mph limit in specified areas?”

Response - Cabinet Member for the Environment, Councillor Dafydd Meurig

“The Welsh Government has introduced the 20mph restriction on restricted roads in Wales, which came into force on 17 September 2023.

In general, restricted roads are usually in urban areas and include roads where street lighting has been installed no more than 200 yards apart.

The Government's evidence shows that people feel more comfortable to walk and cycle when vehicle speed is slower, and that it is safer for children to walk to school; and older people, disabled people or people with additional needs can also travel more independently.

In general, the principle of reducing the number of road accidents and trying to encourage more walking and cycling is to be welcomed.

The role of the Council as the local Highways Authority is to implement the change. In that respect, the work of preparing for the changes has involved substantial cross-departmental work by Council staff when considering and introducing the change on roads the Council is responsible for.

This has included considering the suitability of the change in locations, extensive consultation and introducing traffic orders. The vast majority of signs have been changed on the Council network, with work continuing.

As part of the change, former 30mph speed limits have been reduced to 20mph in most sites in Gwynedd. However, as part of the detailed review process by Council engineers that was undertaken in accordance with Welsh Government guidance, 85 sites in the county have been identified where there is justification for not changing to 20mph and, therefore, they have remained at 30mph.

Of course, the responsibility on 20mph on trunk roads in Gwynedd is a matter for the North and Mid Wales Trunk Road Agent as the relevant Highways Authority.”

(4) Question from Councillor Rhys Tudur

"To what extent does the Authority and the Schools monitor the success of immersion to ascertain how many children, having spent a period at the Immersion Centres, go on to study at least half of their subjects through the medium of Welsh?"

Response - Cabinet Member for Education, Councillor Beca Brown

“The Immersion education staff regularly monitor the learners' progress in all the language units. Before they start in the Welsh language immersion units a baseline assessment is carried out in consultation with primary and secondary mainstream school staff. During the course formative assessments are carried out through all kinds of activities observing, communicating and giving feedback to learners in order to get to know their strengths as well as areas for further development. This strategy is an informal process which gives the staff the opportunity to gather and collect information, developing an individual holistic profile for each learner, in order to plan the next learning stages. This process continuously supports individual learners on a daily basis to make progress. The information when collated, also improves immersive pedagogy.

At the end of the ten week course individual summative assessments are carried out to assess the children's linguistic progress on the learning continuum. Curriculum for Wales benchmarks and progress descriptions are used in the Areas of Learning and Experience, specifically Languages, Literacy and Communication to identify strengths and areas for improvement. An individual report is presented to each mainstream primary and secondary school on each child's progress and attainment. In addition, an open morning is organised in each immersion unit for parents and school staff to discuss the learners' work and their progress during the course. In addition, reports are presented to the County's Chief Executive, and myself as Education Cabinet Member as part of the Council's Education Department's Evaluation process.

Once the children have returned to mainstream education it is the responsibility of the individual schools to continue tracking the learners' progress along the continuum as part of their school assessment arrangements. However, the staff of the immersion units track the progress of latecomers who have attended the immersion centers to find out if they have taken a GCSE Welsh First Language or Welsh Second Language course. The Authority collects data regarding the number of KS4 learners who follow at least 3 GCSE subjects through the medium of Welsh and the number of learners who follow 5 GCSE subjects through the medium of Welsh. However it is the responsibility of individual schools to trace the linguistic paths of individual learners including latecomers who follow at least half of their subjects through the medium of Welsh in the mainstream Education.

In their recent inspection report, Estyn noted that the provision in the secondary schools for learners to sit exams through the medium of Welsh is a reflection of the Authority's policy and vision to develop bilingual learners:

'Schools provide many GCSE subjects through the medium of Welsh and a large number of pupils sit an examination in GCSE Welsh first language. This reflects the authority's vision and policy to develop pupils who are fully bilingual and promotes the advantages of studying through the medium of Welsh.'

(5) A question from Councillor Delyth Lloyd Griffiths

"Electors in my ward have raised the matter of under-occupancy in the social sector recently. There is a high number of individuals who are living in social housing in villages where there is only a small number of social housing left.

What are the Council and the Housing Associations doing to assist individuals who are under occupying homes in the social sector to move to homes that are suitable for them?

Is it possible for the Council and Housing Associations to identify the need in Gwynedd?

By identifying the need, is there a way of establishing or improving the existing service that is available for residents who are eager to move to a new home?

We ask the Council to work with all Housing Associations to identify the practical support that is available for individuals who are eager to move house but who need practical support with the process of moving."

Response – Council Leader, Councillor Dyfrig Siencyn, in the absence of the Cabinet Member for Housing, Councillor Craig ab Iago

“We are aware that under-occupancy causes barriers to some individuals and families, and as a result arrangements and processes are already in place within the Common Housing Allocation Policy that facilitates arrangements for the Housing Associations for individuals and families who wish to move because of under-occupancy (clauses 3.22 and 3.36 in the [Common Housing Allocations Policy](#)).

We are happy to raise the points noted by the Member with the Housing Associations in the Housing Partnership Board, where there will be an opportunity to discuss current arrangements and to conduct further research into cases of under-occupancy to identify specific opportunities to offer additional support.”

(6) Question from Councillor Angela Russell

"On behalf of the Independent Group, I would like to know what process the Council followed in reaching the decision to correspond with Gwynedd residents on Article 4. We as members feel that we have been left in the dark, especially when the consultation was held over the summer period, and that this therefore will not be a true representation."

Response - Cabinet Member for the Environment, Councillor Dafydd Meurig

“It is considered that every effort was made to ensure that all Members had an opportunity to know about the public engagement arrangements, and the work related to the Article 4 Direction.

Following amendments to planning legislation in October 2022, Local Planning Authorities have the power to issue an Article 4 Direction to try to manage the use of housing for holiday use, whether as a second home or short-term holiday let. A report was submitted to the Communities Scrutiny Committee on 27 October 2022 which provided an overview of the changes in planning legislation, and how the Council proposed to respond to those changes in an attempt to gain better control of second homes and short-term holiday lets.

The process of making an Article 4 Direction is laid out in the Town and Country Planning (Permitted General Development) Order 2022 (as amended). Amongst the related statutory requirements is the need to:-

- Issue the notice of an Article 4 Direction to those affected, unless it is considered impractical to do so;
- Conduct a period of public engagement for a minimum of 21 days.

A report was submitted to the Communities Scrutiny Committee on 9 March 2023 that included the evidence base to justify the issuing of an Article 4 Direction, as well as an indicative overview of the next steps. The Communities Scrutiny Committee’s decision was to recommend to the Cabinet that it should approve the issuing of an Article 4 Direction for the Gwynedd Local Planning Authority Area.

A decision on the proposal to issue a notice of an Article 4 Direction was made during a meeting of the Cyngor Gwynedd Cabinet that was held on 13 June 2023. This report

detailed all the engagement methods, including the intention to send letter correspondence to all residential houses in the Gwynedd Local Planning Authority area to notify them of the proposal and the associated engagement period.

Subsequently, a session to raise awareness was held with the Council's members on 29 June 2023. As stated in the details of the invitation that was sent out, this session was an opportunity for all the members to receive information and ask questions about the purpose and the timeline of making the Article 4 Direction, and to also receive information about the engagement period. During the session, officers provided details of the methods of raising awareness, which included details around when the engagement period would be undertaken, and the intention to send letters to every residential house in the Gwynedd Local Planning Authority area.

To assist any member who could not attend the live session, and in accordance with the guidance that was included in the invitation, a recording of the session was placed on the Members' Intranet (Training Section). **All** Members were sent a message via the Members' Bulletins of 21/7/23 and 28/7/23, to confirm that a recording of this session was available for them to view, should they wish to do so. Furthermore, we emphasise that regular updates relating to the Article 4 Direction are placed on the Members' intranet.

With regard to the public engagement period, it is important to ensure that the process complies with the relevant statutory requirements. In this respect, it is emphasised that the statutory requirement is to conduct a period of engagement for at least 21 days. In order to ensure that residents were given a fair opportunity to voice their opinion on the matter, it was resolved to conduct the engagement period for 6 weeks. This period covered the summer period and beyond, in the hope that this would ensure that the area's residents as well as those visiting during the summer are aware of the proposal and the extended engagement period. It is therefore emphasised that the engagement period undertaken went well beyond the statutory requirement."

(7) Question from Councillor Richard Glyn Roberts

"To what extent has the failure to inspect and enforce planning conditions that restrict the operational periods of touring caravan sites and the period a caravan can be kept on a pitch led to an increase in permanent and continuous use?"

Response - Cabinet Member for the Environment, Councillor Dafydd Meurig

"The Council has responsibilities as a Local Planning Authority and as a Licensing Authority, in relation to the development and control of touring caravan sites. In terms of planning, the responsibilities relate to land use matters, with the licensing responsibilities dealing with public health and safety.

There is close collaboration between the Planning Service and the Public Protection Service when planning applications relating to caravan sites are presented, or where there are allegations of breaching planning or licensing rules.

Unfortunately, the Council does not have enough staff to conduct proactive inspections of every touring caravan site in the Gwynedd Planning Authority area and the remainder of the County. The inspection work the Council undertakes is therefore reactive, which is

dependent as a starting point, on receiving information and evidence from local residents, members and town and community councils, about allegations of breaches of planning or licensing rules on a particular site.

When planning permission is granted for any type of development, it is the responsibility of the landowner to ensure compliance with the relevant plans and all conditions.

The question assumes that planning conditions have been breached with the operating period of touring caravan sites, due to a failure to inspect and enforce those conditions. It is believed that consideration would have to be given to the exact relevant evidence available to support this assumption and on a case-by-case basis, before that conclusion can be reached. It is therefore very difficult to weigh up to what extent, arrangements to inspect and enforce contributes to the existence of continuous uninterrupted use of touring caravan sites.

It is recognised that there are currently challenges with a lack of capacity in the planning enforcement area, mainly due to difficulties in recruiting new staff, but plans are in place to try to address that. However, reactive enforcement inspections are conducted, which are based on assessing if firm evidence exists that there is a planning breach in the first place, and if there is, it will then be considered if there is a planning basis and if it is in the public interest to enforce. With touring caravan sites in particular, gathering evidence to confirm that planning rules have been breached, can be difficult due to the mobile nature of the use.

It must also be emphasised that enforcement powers are discretionary, and that the Planning Service does implement these powers by issuing enforcement notices, where robust evidence justifies this. It must also be borne in mind that there is a right to appeal against enforcement notices.

If the Councillor has concerns about any specific touring caravan sites, then the Planning Service will be happy to discuss this further.”

(8) Question from Councillor Jina Gwyrfa

"Non Welsh-speaking children who are immersed in the language Centres spend one day a week back at their schools, to maintain contact with the teachers and children. The likelihood is that they are still using English to play and communicate. Does the Education Department assess the impact this is having on the language use of the remainder of the children, and on the schools' Welsh ethos?"

Response - Cabinet Member for Education, Councillor Beca Brown

“Since establishing the Welsh Immersion Education System in January 2023, the pupils spend 4 days over a period of 10 weeks in the language immersion units, returning to mainstream education every Friday. Ensuring continuous contact with their school is a key element in ensuring the well-being of learners as well as enabling them to immerse themselves naturally in the company of their peers and their teachers.

During the week the staff prepare the learners for the transition days back at their school by practicing specific patterns, simple questions and possible answers that they could use to practice through the medium of Welsh in class and during break times. From week to

week we expand their vocabulary and patterns. In addition a member of the units' staff supports the learners on the transition days to motivate and encourage them to use the language patterns and also to discuss strategies to overcome obstacles when applying their skills in new situations.

These weekly visits are an opportunity for the children to gradually integrate into their school communities but also an opportunity to raise the staff's awareness of the immersion process and their responsibilities as key partners in the process. When attending the immersion units the learners start their journey to learn the Welsh language and it is important that the school is an integral part of that journey from the start. It is also important that mainstream staff are fully aware of the structure and development of the course from week to week in order to maintain and support the children to develop into confident bilingual learners when they return full time to mainstream education.

Each school has a responsibility to provide appropriately for the needs of each child, including any needs in terms of the Welsh language, whether that is a formal or informal use of language. Support and resources are provided to mainstream schools to ensure that they have appropriate provision for newcomers to the county. In addition, all primary schools in Gwynedd follow and implement the principles of the Language Charter to promote the social use of the Welsh language. They vary their strategies successfully to address various linguistic situations across the county to promote the use of the Welsh language in a social context.

In their recent report, Estyn noted that Gwynedd's primary and secondary schools are successfully promoting the social use of the Welsh language through the activities of the language charter.

The use of the Welsh language in informal situations in primary and secondary schools is encouraged appropriately through Welsh Language Charter activities. This contributes to improving pupils' Welsh language skills and Welshness, in addition to supporting cooperation between primary and secondary schools.

The Education Department will evaluate the impact of the new Welsh Language Immersion Education System, focusing on the structure of the new course and the impact of the transition days on the learners' linguistic progress."