
EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 10/06/21

Present: Councillor Beth Lawton (Chair)
Councillor Cai Larsen (Vice-chair)

Councillors: Steve Collings, Aled Evans, Alwyn Gruffydd, Selwyn Griffiths, Judith Humphreys, Elwyn Jones, Gareth Tudor Morris Jones, Huw Wyn Jones, Dewi Owen, Elfed Powell Roberts, Mair Rowlands, Paul Rowlinson and Mike Stevens.

Co-opted Members: Anest Gray Frazer (Church in Wales), Colette Owen (The Catholic Church), Ruth Roe (Meirionnydd Parent/Governors' Representative), Manon Williams (Arfon Parent/Governors' Representative) and Dilwyn Elis Hughes (UCAC).

Officers present: Vera Jones (Democracy and Language Services Manager), Bethan Adams (Scrutiny Adviser) and Eirian Roberts (Democracy Services Officer).

Present for item 7:

Councillor Cemlyn Williams (Cabinet Member for Education)
Garem Jackson (Head of Education)
Debbie Anne Jones (Education Corporate Services Manager)
Diane Jones (Arfon Area Education Officer)
Rhian Parry Jones (Gwynedd Secondary Education Officer)

Present for item 8:

Councillor Cemlyn Williams (Cabinet Member for Education)
Owen Owens (Senior Manager - Schools)
Sharon Vaughan (Core Leader - Secondary, GwE)
Geraint Evans (Core Leader – Primary, GwE)
Rhian Parry Jones (Gwynedd Secondary Education Officer)

1. ELECTION OF CHAIR

RESOLVED to elect Councillor Beth Lawton as Chair of this committee for 2021/22.

2. ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIR

RESOLVED to elect Councillor Cai Larsen as Vice-chair of this committee for 2021/22.

3. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Rheinallt Puw and Dewi Roberts.

4. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declarations of personal interest were received.

5. URGENT ITEMS

None to note.

6. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous committee meeting held on 15 April 2021 as a true record.

7. EDUCATION AND THE WELSH LANGUAGE: A NEW VISION FOR THE IMMERSION EDUCATION SYSTEM TOWARDS 2032 AND BEYOND

The Cabinet Member for Education and officers from the Education Department were welcomed to the meeting.

Submitted - the report of the Cabinet Member for Education inviting the scrutinisers to give observations on the proposed vision for the immersion education system towards 2032 and beyond.

The Cabinet Member set out the context, noting that the new vision was intended to build on the good work achieved by the language centres over the last few decades, acknowledge the hard work of the staff, and update and modernise the provision.

The Head of Education noted:

- That he believed that this was an exciting vision, which laid the foundation for a celebrated service to do more good work, thus updating the service to be part of the 21st century schools programme.
- That the Department and the staff of the language centres were anxious not to lose sight of the lessons learned as a result of re-purposing the service and reaching more children in a different way during the pandemic, and that there was a desire to build further on those strengths and approaches.
- That members had already received a copy of Estyn's letter to the Chief Executive which highlighted the Authority's work in supporting schools and children during the pandemic period, and in particular commending the work of the language centres in re-purposing the service.

Members were given an opportunity to ask questions and make observations. During the discussion, the following observations were noted:

- The success of the language centres over the years was recognised in ensuring that learners acquire the Welsh language.
- There was agreement with the intention to strengthen accountability as part of the new vision.
- The proposal to equip schools' workforce to support learners to make further progress in building confidence and acquiring the Welsh language was supported.
- The proposal to establish an immersion education provision in Bangor was supported.
- The Education Department was asked to provide more detail on the immersion education system when it becomes available.
- Opinion was divided on the funding source for the immersion education system, with some members supportive of the intention that schools would contribute, thus increasing accountability and shared ownership of the system between the Education Department and the schools, but the wish was also expressed for the Council corporately to be funding the budgetary gap due to the fact that the Welsh language was one of the Council's main priorities.

In response to the observations and questions from members, it was noted:

- In terms of the schools' input and contribution to the revised vision and service, it was proposed to engage informally with schools' headteachers on the new vision. Also, if the new system came into force, it was likely that a management board would be established for the new system which would include representation from the school system. This meant that the schools could contribute and jointly own and shape the provision, to ensure that the system responds to the needs of the schools, while simultaneously keeping up to date with educational developments taking place in the classroom.
- In terms of lifelong learning, and the opportunities that may arise in relation to providing services to the community, there is an intention to look at opportunities beyond immersion education alone, such as childcare and opportunities for parents and adults to learn Welsh, as more detail on the new sites becomes apparent.
- In terms of measures of success, the target for every 5 year old to receive Welsh medium education was given to every authority as a measure, and this was the medium in the foundation phase in schools in Gwynedd. It was agreed that children could be lost as they progressed from one key stage to another, but the focus on continuity would receive specific attention within the new Welsh in Education Strategic Plan, as well as the informal use of Welsh and opportunities beyond the education system for children and young people to use Welsh. There were also specific measures to measure learners' progress over their 8-10 week period on the site of the immersion system, and there was a need to ensure that this progress continued once pupils had transferred back to the school system.
- In terms of accountability, schools would be central to this new system. Feedback from headteachers during the lockdown period praised the closer links between centres and schools, and as the school sector contributed towards the funding of the new immersion vision, the accountability, together with the voice of schools in the running and strategic direction of the service, would increase. It also meant that the service could be more responsive as local situations regarding the language profile of our communities changed. It was wished to establish a system whereby the children would receive the greatest benefits from the immersion system and the expertise of the staff, but that this would happen more in collaboration with the schools, and the children would have the opportunity during this period to return to school from time to time, and to assimilate and use their new language skills with their peers. It was believed that headteachers would take on these responsibilities and accountability, and moving forward, that a system of governance could be established with the head of the new immersion service, the Education Department and the schools as key partners in this.
- It was premature to come to a conclusion as to who would contribute to funding the provision. It could be argued that there would be an arrangement whereby the entire system would contribute equally across the service, but the benefit of having a closer financial link with those schools that have children attending the immersion system could also be seen as this ensured greater accountability and greater actual responsibility from those schools towards the success of the immersion system. However, the first step at this stage was to establish the vision, receive political and corporate consent on that, and obtain Cabinet approval in due course. Subsequently, it would be possible to move on to work through the detail, and it was emphasised that the Department would be more than happy to involve elected members in the discussion along the way.
- The aim was not to completely transform the system, but to build on existing strengths, aiming for excellence and reaching more children.

- Although the argument that learners attending their local school for one day each week could change the language of that school was understood, the Authority had a duty of care towards these children, and an integral and important part of the new service would be to ensure that those children could return to their original school on the fifth day, and have the opportunity to use Welsh there.
- The staffing issues could not be elaborated upon at this time due to the need to consult in the first instance on the vision, and receive political approval on that. The Cabinet had no direct role in employment matters, and the Department would have to consider and consult on the staffing issues in due course. As it was likely that the staff implementing the new vision would belong to one entity, rather than individual centres, more flexibility would be needed in the staffing system so that staff could possibly be redeployed to target the exact needs of the children.
- The comment was accepted that there was a need for teachers who are experts in language acquisition in each of the centres, and that the Department would ensure appropriate staffing.
- The pressure on the immersion service had increased during the pandemic period as more incomers moved to Gwynedd, and an immersion system had to be provided that enabled us to reach these additional children who had moved into the county, and who would move in in the future. The concern regarding the lack of continuation of the language centre at Penrhyndeudraeth was understood, but key to this was the fact that provision will still be available for children in that area, whilst other areas would receive new investment, i.e. Tywyn and Bangor, i.e. strategic locations where the Department envisaged some of the greatest needs for the future.
- In terms of the rationale for the formation of centres for years 5-9, leaving the primary ones as years 2-4 only, the service and staff expertise and approach to teaching would be targeted at specific sections. The needs of the youngest children were very different to the needs of the older children, and the methods of learning and internalising information, assimilating skills, etc. were very different as a child's neurological development progressed. The intention here was to try to reinforce the concept of development that occurs from the mid-primary age to mid-secondary age. The Department believed that targeting this middle age was an effective way to make the transition to a more formal education beyond year 9, and also a means of increasing the number of children and young people in Gwynedd who continued to study subjects through the medium of Welsh up to GCSE, A Level and beyond.

RESOLVED to accept the report and ask the Education Department and Cabinet Member for Education to consider the observations of the committee, and that the scrutiny committee receives a further report on this when more details are available.

8. COVID EDUCATION GRANTS TO SUPPORT PUPILS

Officers of the Education Department and GwE were welcomed to the meeting.

Submitted – the report of the Cabinet Member for Education detailing the Accelerated Learning Programme Grant received by schools to assist pupils as a result of Covid.

The Senior Manager for Schools detailed the background and conditions of the grant, noting that the total funding allocated to Gwynedd schools was approximately £2,220,440.

The GwE Core Leader - Primary, referred to the Regional Grant Planning Dashboard created by GwE to support schools to plan effectively for the spending of the grants, whilst

also providing an overview of the primary school schemes. Then, the GwE Core Leader - Secondary, gave an overview of the secondary school schemes.

Members were given an opportunity to ask questions and make observations.

It was suggested that once the schools have had the opportunity to fully utilise the grant, it would be beneficial to receive a summary of the views of headteachers, teachers and pupils who have benefited from the additional support, so that the impact of the grant can be quantified. It was also suggested that it would be useful to have a summary of the good practice highlighted by GwE Core Leaders.

In response, it was explained that the headteachers were expected to submit information to the Education Department and GwE in the autumn term about the impact of the grants, and that this could be brought before the scrutinisers at that time. It was also noted that the Welsh Government was keen to obtain examples of the good practice referred to, so that it could be shared nationally.

In conclusion, the Cabinet Member for Education emphasised the importance of ensuring consistency of provision across the county. He expressed his appreciation of the work carried out, but agreed that neither GwE nor the Department was in a position to provide a full update at this time. He further noted that he was aware of the activities that had been conducted, and that sharing good practice was a very important element of this.

RESOLVED to accept the report and to note the observations received, while also hoping to have an update on this later on in the year.

9. DRAFT SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME 2021/22

A draft scrutiny work programme for 2021/22 was submitted for adoption.

It was noted that one item from this meeting had slipped.

RESOLVED to adopt the scrutiny work programme 2021/22.

The meeting commenced at 10.30 am and concluded at 12.35 pm

CHAIRMAN