
EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
14/09/23

Present:

Councillors: Elwyn Jones (Chair)
Paul Rowlinson (Vice-chair)

Councillors: Jina Gwyrfai, Dawn Lynne Jones, Dewi Jones, Gareth Tudor Jones, Gwilym Jones, Cai Larsen, Beth Lawton, Dewi Owen, Gwynfor Owen, John Pughe Roberts, Richard Glyn Roberts, Huw Llwyd Rowlands, Rhys Tudur and Sasha Williams.

Co-opted Members: Manon Williams (Parent/Governor Representative for Arfon) and Elise Poulter (NEU).

Officers in attendance: Geraint Owen (Corporate Director), Bethan Adams (Scrutiny Advisor) and Eirian Roberts (Democracy Services Officer).

Present for item 5: Councillor Ioan Thomas (Cabinet Member – Finance), Dewi Morgan (Head of Finance Department) and Huw Ynyr (Assistant Head of Information Technology).

Present for item 6: Councillor Beca Brown (Cabinet Member for Education), Garem Jackson (Head of Education Department), Debbie Anne Jones (Assistant Head: Corporate Services), Gwyn Tudur (Assistant Head: Secondary) and Rhys Glyn (Head of Gwynedd's Immersion Education System).

Present for item 7: Councillor Beca Brown (Cabinet Member for Education), Garem Jackson (Head of Education Department), Debbie Anne Jones (Assistant Head: Corporate Services), Gwern ap Rhisiart (Assistant Head: Primary) and Gwyn Tudur (Assistant Head: Secondary).

Present for item 8: Councillor Beca Brown (Cabinet Member for Education), Garem Jackson (Head of Education Department), Ffion Edwards Ellis (Assistant Head: Additional Learning Needs and Inclusion) and Ellen Rowlands (Education Department Inclusion Manager).

Elise Poulter, NEU, was welcomed as the new representative of the teachers' unions on the committee.

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Iwan Huws and Llio Elenid Owen, and also from Colette Owen (The Catholic Church).

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declarations of personal interest were received.

3. URGENT ITEMS

None to note.

4. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous committee meeting held on 8 June 2023 as a true record.

5. DIGITAL PLAN – 2023-28

The Cabinet Member for Finance, the Corporate Director, the Head of Finance Department and the Assistant Head of Information Technology were welcomed to the meeting.

Submitted - the report of the Cabinet Member for Finance presenting the Digital Plan in its draft form for the purpose of pre-scrutiny, and to receive observations and feedback on the proposed content of the work programme.

The Cabinet Member set out the context, the Corporate Director explained his role as Chair of the Digital Transformation Board and the Assistant Head of Information Technology further detailed the content of the plan. Members were then given an opportunity to ask questions and submit observations.

It was noted that one of the recommendations of a report published by the Bevan Foundation recently, as a result of looking at the poverty situation in the Arfon area in particular, was that Cyngor Gwynedd should ensure that all application forms for grants and allowances for which it had administrative powers were available digitally. It was noted that it was clear from this research, and also from speaking to people facing poverty and to the various organisations that supported them, that this was a problem, and it was asked whether there were plans to address the situation. In response, it was confirmed that offering more digital provision was part of the Plan, but that there was no intention to discontinue the option of using paper forms either.

In response to a further question, it was confirmed that the forms would be digital online ones, rather than documents to be downloaded.

While accepting that the initial costs of establishing the new arrangements would be high, it was asked whether the Department was confident that the new systems would save money over time. It was also asked whether the Department was satisfied that all aspects of the digitisation were essential, and that there were no elements included for cosmetic reasons. In response, it was noted that:

- Nothing cosmetic was included and that the focus was on the things that were essential and which would improve the Council once they were embedded.
- There would be significant work taking place over the next six weeks not only to identify the costs, but also the opportunities to make savings.

Reference was made to a letter sent out by the Council recently which gave people the opportunity to respond by going to the website, phoning or texting, and concern was expressed that those few people who did not have a computer or telephone were being left behind. In response, it was noted that:

- The officers needed to know about those examples, but that the digital technology was not being introduced at the expense of the other channels, and the intention was not to leave anyone behind.
- It was important to recognise that there were still people who needed a face-to-face conversation, and although the Council wanted as many people as possible to use the digital methods, it had not completely discarded the paper element, nor the face-to-face element.

It was suggested that digital technology increased the distance between the two people who communicated with each other. There was a danger of losing sight of flesh and blood

aspects as these developments progressed, and it was possible that a lack of empathy and lack of understanding could flourish because of this distance. In response, it was noted that the comment was acknowledged and that this was something to consider.

It was noted that the members were missing face-to-face contact with the Council's staff since the Covid period, and by going further down that road, there was a danger that the Council's accountability to the members, and ultimately to its electorate, would move further away too. In response, it was noted that:

- The intention was to submit a report to Cabinet on 19 September on the establishment of a long-term Hybrid Working Plan for the Council's staff which would mean that all officers who were able to work hybridly would be expected to attend the office with their colleagues for at least two days a week, every working week.
- There was a wish to emphasise that this was a minimum of two days, and that it did not mean that people would only be in the office for two days.
- This would enable us to continue to support and get the best from our staff in order to provide the best possible services for the people of Gwynedd.

It was noted that if the Council intended to use artificial intelligence, it was important that the members received training explaining exactly what it entailed, and how it would be used. In response, it was noted that there was room to educate people about this, but that the Council would not rush into using artificial intelligence, and that any use of the technology would be undertaken in a responsible way.

The teachers unions' representative noted that the Trades Union Congress had recently discussed artificial intelligence in the workplace and that she could share the relevant documents, which included the trade unions' position on this, with the Council. In response, it was noted that the officers would welcome the information and that it would be an important contribution to any future discussion.

The intention to create new systems was welcomed, instead of trying to build on systems that already existed, but, to ensure effective collaboration, the importance of ensuring that the Council's systems could work with the systems used by other organisations such as the Health Board, the Fire and Rescue Authority and the other county councils, was emphasised. In response, it was noted that Cyngor Gwynedd could not do this single-handedly, and as stated in the Plan, the Council would be a willing and ready partner to support measures and initiatives to abolish digital barriers to enable collaboration with strategic partners, which would include the Health Board, neighbouring councils and the third sector, etc.

It was asked if the Council had a programme to train people in the use of computers and tablets. In response, it was noted that paragraph 9 under the 'Administration and Business Systems' priority field stated that the Council would continue to support the North Wales Regional Skills Partnership to improve digital skills in the county, as well as the improvement programmes that were part of the Digital Gwynedd programme campaign to increase digital inclusion. However, perhaps more emphasis needed to be placed on the fact that the Digital Gwynedd programme went out into the community to deliver training to users.

It was asked whether the Council would be in a position to respond quickly enough if new developments came onto the market during the Digital Plan period. In response, it was noted that:

- There was complete agreement that it was necessary to be alert to new developments in the digital field, even revisiting the priorities within the lifetime of the Plan.
- There was also an intention to carry out work in terms of improving people's digital thinking, which meant that digital developments could be rooted in the Council sooner than was currently possible.
- The Council would be in a position where it would be possible to adapt to whichever social media would be in place in the future.

The Digital Transformation Board was wished well in its work and the aim to *'carve out a bold path on our journey to becoming a digital County'* and *'capitalising on opportunities to innovate and embed digital technology to improve our residents' standard of living, work together better with partners and strengthen and improve our services' responsiveness to our customers' needs and expectations'* was welcomed. Reference was made to the list of key headings in the report when aiming for a digital council, and it was noted that the first and most important of all was *'There is a clear place for the Welsh language in all digital developments'*. It was noted further that the report acknowledged that contacting the Council on the phone remained a popular choice among customers, and the Council was praised overall for responding to phone calls. It was noted that the IT Department itself led in that respect and that their highly effective and efficient mode of operation was a model for the rest of the departments.

The member was thanked for his kind words, and it was noted that the message would be conveyed to the Service's staff.

It was enquired what was the time-scale in terms of establishing a sub-group to act on digital developments among the workforce. In response, it was noted that:

- Although the sub-group had not yet been established, the work of planning for what the sub-group would be required to lead on in due course was already underway.
- The Organisational Learning and Development Manager was a key part of that, and contributions would also be needed from other people who had already been identified.
- Although the group had not yet been established, that would certainly happen within the next couple of months.

In response to a request for more information regarding the intention to create a data warehouse, it was stated that:

- The Council currently had around 300 systems, which collected all kinds of different information.
- The majority of systems addressed certain things that were common across everything, such as names and addresses, and the more systems we had, the greater the reach of the accuracy of the data.
- The data warehouse would be a medium, not only to be able to report from it, but also a medium to clean and be more accurate in terms of the data.
- The resource would also provide more of an overview across the Council's services, so rather than having a one-sided report from one system, it would enable us to look at a range of services and trends in relation to service users across a number of services.
- This would put the Council in a position to make evidence-based decisions and be able to predict how best to shape the services for the future.

The intention to have a system where it would be possible for a customer to raise an enquiry and receive constant updates on where the Council was in dealing with that enquiry was welcomed, and it was noted that it was hoped that the same enquiry tracking system would be available for councillors too. In response, it was noted that the observation was fully accepted and that the officers would note this.

At the end of the discussion, the Cabinet Member emphasised that the Digital Plan would not be a document that stood still, and that it would be continuously reviewed.

RESOLVED to accept the report and to note the observations.

6. GWYNEDD CATEGORY 3 SECONDARY SCHOOLS SCRUTINY INVESTIGATION REPORT

The Cabinet Member for Education, the Head of Education Department, the Assistant Head: Corporate Services, the Assistant Head: Secondary and the Head of Gwynedd's Immersion Education System were welcomed to the meeting.

The Chair of the Investigation, Councillor Paul Rowlinson, presented the final report of the Gwynedd Category 3 Secondary Schools Scrutiny Investigation and members of the scrutiny committee were asked to consider the content, make observations and ask any relevant questions, proposing any amendments and approving the report.

The Chair of the Investigation suggested that the section on GwE should not be discussed in detail, as it was understood that GwE disagreed with some of the issues identified, but it was emphasised that Recommendation 17 only requested further discussion between the Education Authority and GwE.

The Chair of the Investigation thanked the Investigation Team, and especially the Lead Officer, for their work, and thanked the staff, pupils and governors of the three schools for giving of their time to present the evidence.

The Chair thanked the members of the Investigation for their work. The members were then invited to ask questions, offer observations, or propose amendments to the report.

Special thanks were given to the pupils of the schools for their willingness to speak extremely openly with the members of the Investigation.

It was emphasised that there was a need to give more support to organisations that helped children and young people to speak Welsh socially, such as the Young Farmers and the Urdd, and to present them in a positive way in the schools. It was noted that Cyngor Gwynedd had lost its youth clubs and that it was necessary to find out what social opportunities were available to encourage the use of the Welsh language.

It was suggested that the figures in Appendix 5 seemed incredibly good, and it was asked where the data was obtained from. In response, it was explained that the data was submitted to the Authority by the schools. In response to a further question on the same matter, it was confirmed that the members of the Investigation had not challenged the figures in any detail, and that they had accepted the data submitted by the schools.

Concern was expressed that the three schools selected did not give a picture of the situation in all Gwynedd schools, as all three of them were mostly in indigenous Welsh communities, and it was suggested that there were other schools in Gwynedd that would have reflected a very different scenario.

Concern was expressed at parents' ability to refuse Welsh-medium education for their children, thereby depriving their children of the opportunity to have a good career and live in the area in the future. It was also noted that it became evident during the Investigation that the schools were under great pressure to offer English-medium provision, as parents threatened to move their children to Ysgol Friars or Ysgol Tywyn (which were category 3T schools) otherwise. It was believed that it was necessary to look in more detail at this influence and the impact of the option of going to Ysgol Friars or Ysgol Tywyn on other schools in Gwynedd. Sadness was expressed that some parents and pupils did not have confidence in our language, and it was suggested that it was high time that the Education Authority, the schools and the headteachers took a very strong stance and refused parents to move their children to the category 3T schools, and insisted that the Welsh language was sufficient in our schools as a medium. It was also suggested that it might be easier for the schools to refuse requests from parents to move their children if this was sold as the Authority's policy, rather than the school's policy.

With regard to those parents who refused Welsh-medium education for their children, it was asked what affordable and accessible provision was available for them to learn the language themselves, so that the problem did not arise in the future. In response, it was noted that:

- With regard to the parents who were committed to their children attending the centres for latecomers, there was a Welsh for Adults tutor present at every open morning in order to show parents the provision available for online and face-to-face learning, together with the resources available for them to help their children.
- These arrangements had now been running for over a year and a half and many had registered for Welsh lessons with their children.
- The Service organised a face-to-face meeting and a virtual meeting with Hunaniaith to promote social events in the different areas in order to encourage parents to take advantage of opportunities to practise their Welsh with their children.

It was noted that it was encouraging to witness and feel the commitment of the staff and pupils to Welsh-medium education and that this gave reason to be optimistic about the future.

It was stated that the members' respect and admiration for the sincerity of the vast majority of the schools' staff, and the Council's officers, who committed to trying to get the children completely bilingual, should be noted. If there were complaints about anything, it was certain that no one was complaining about individuals, but there were possibly a few systems, sometimes within our control and sometimes outside of our control, that let us down.

It was noted that the report gave the impression that everything was on track in terms of the data, but also highlighted a number of problems, possibly anecdotal at the moment, and perhaps more data and hard facts were needed, rather than just anecdotes.

The opinion was expressed that some recommendations needed to be strengthened, e.g. the Language Policy. It was believed that mentioning bilingualism opened the door to considerable ambiguity, and if we were in favour of Welsh-medium education, then Welsh-medium education for it, with English being taught as a subject to the highest possible standard. Otherwise, we opened the door to complaints and requests. In terms of the data regarding the Welsh-medium provision, it was emphasised that this should be a standing item on the agenda of every meeting of the Secondary Headteachers' Forum, instead of us requesting for this to happen once a year, as stated in the recommendations.

It was noted in the recommendations that there was a need to strengthen collaboration with agencies. There was mention of the Curriculum for Wales, GwE and the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, but what about Careers Wales?

It was noted that no data had been seen regarding the number of latecomers who entered the secondary schools in year 10 or 11, and therefore had not attended the language centres. It was suggested that a separate study was needed on that, looking at methods of including young people and providing additional support for them, such as half an hour of immersion in Welsh at the beginning of each school day.

It was noted that it must be borne in mind that the schools could only do so much in the current financial climate, but that our language was suffering due to austerity and budget cuts in Westminster.

It was noted that the data suggested that parents and learners wished to change the medium of education from Welsh to English as the learners approached GCSE and A Level, and it was asked, as well as the marketing campaign for the parents of the children who arrived at the schools, whether it would also be beneficial to run a separate campaign for the learners themselves. Such a campaign could be carried out in conjunction with key partners such as the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol and Careers Wales, encouraging the learners to follow their courses through the medium of Welsh by making the link between the Welsh language and better-paid jobs. Examples of successes could also be looked at, e.g. individuals from non-Welsh-speaking households who now worked through the medium of Welsh.

The Cabinet Member was invited to respond to the main findings and recommendations of the Investigation, and was asked to confirm whether or not she accepted the recommendations. The Cabinet Member noted that:

- The discussion and the report were extremely valuable, and she wished to reiterate the thanks to the members of the Investigation and the schools that had participated.
- There were many very encouraging aspects to the report, as well as aspects that needed to be looked at further.
- There was a clear overlap in places with the Education Strategy and the work that needed to be done on the Education Language Policy, and this was to be very useful as it would shed light on a few other pieces of work where it was possible to draw things together.
- The reference to the social opportunities to use the Welsh language, and that the schools were part of their communities, rather than existing in a bubble, was welcomed.
- The reference to defining bilingualism was extremely important as the way Gwynedd operated was very different, and there may be a lack of understanding of that by some individuals/organisations.
- She felt very passionate about the work to support the transitional schools, and very much welcomed anything that drove that forward.
- Any move to strengthen the method of data collection was going to help the Authority with its strategic work.
- The reference to promoting the offer from the Welsh Government to provide free Welsh lessons for teachers who wished to develop their Welsh skills was a very important request.
- She welcomed the fact that there were parents of latecomers who chose to learn Welsh alongside their children as that could change the whole linguistic shape of a family.

- She was extremely passionate about anything that strengthened the opportunities for people to acquire a language, and welcomed the many references to that in the work.

In conclusion, the Cabinet Member confirmed that she accepted the recommendations of the Investigation in principle and wished to take the report to the Cabinet for discussion due to the overlap with the Education Strategy and the Education Language Policy, and the likely need for a resource to realise certain pieces of work, such as strengthening the linguistic provision/support for latecomers who joined in year 10 or 11.

After the committee had formally approved the report, and also decided to receive an update from the Cabinet Member on implementation per recommendation at the meeting of 21 March 2024, the Chair noted:

- During the period of the Investigation, at its meeting on 4 May 2023 the full Council adopted the following notice of motion presented by Councillor Rhys Tudur:

In order for the Council to be innovative in its method of monitoring the implementation of Welsh medium education and progress in detail and effectively in our schools, I ask the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee to consider the most appropriate way of gathering data and monitoring the Welsh-medium provision in every secondary school against the baselines of the categories in which the schools are included.

- Considering the work of the Investigation, and specifically Recommendations 1 and 2, the committee needed to come to a conclusion on whether there was further work to be done, or whether what was presented by the Investigation met the requirements.

As what was requested in the notice of motion was being addressed through the recommendations of the Investigation, and the Cabinet Member and the Department were considering whether action would be taken, it was agreed that there was no further work for the committee to do at present to respond to the notice of motion.

RESOLVED

- (i) To approve the Gwynedd Category 3 Secondary Schools Scrutiny Investigation Report.**
- (ii) To receive an update from the Cabinet Member on the implementation per recommendation at the meeting on 21 March 2024.**
- (iii) To accept that what was undertaken by the Investigation answered the requirement in terms of the notice of motion presented by Councillor Rhys Tudur to the Full Council on 4 May 2023.**

7. GWYNEDD EDUCATION STRATEGY TOWARDS 2032

The Assistant Head: Primary was welcomed to the meeting for this item.

Submitted - the report of the Cabinet Member for Education, at the request of the committee members, and members were asked to submit observations on the vision and objectives of the Education Department noted in the draft Education Strategy towards 2032 and beyond, and also submit observations on the Equality and Well-being Impact Assessments.

The Cabinet Member set out the context and the members were then given an opportunity to ask questions and offer observations.

With regard to the comment in the report that the document was a living one that could be visited regularly over the period of the Strategy, it was asked how easy it would be, and what the timetable would be for introducing any changes, because if it was a matter of years, or even a matter of months, it could not actually be called a living document. In response, it was noted that:

- The document would be reviewed internally on a regular basis.
- As education was an area where policies could change quite quickly in different areas, the Department would respond positively to any change by having the document evolve and change as necessary.

It was noted that the report did not contain much mention of additional learning needs, apart from a reference to the Additional Learning Needs Act, and concern was expressed regarding three specific issues, namely:

- Gwynedd's education strategy on ALN in the mainstream for the next 10 years.
- Overcrowding in the two ALN schools in Gwynedd.
- The number of children in the mainstream who could not cope with the mainstream education system.

In response, it was noted that:

- The Education Strategy was a high-level education strategy for all children in the county and that the comment regarding special education children who had additional and inclusion needs was implicit in Objective 3 - learner health and well-being, which referred to all learners.
- The Strategy also referred to the duty the Authority had to review the school stock in the context of special schools, should it be necessary to do so.
- Under the high-level strategy, the Authority had a Schools Modernisation Strategy for Band C which would be submitted to the Welsh Government in due course.
- There were a number of policies and strategies in the layers below the high-level strategy, and that was where the detail would be.

The opinion was expressed that the Strategy, possibly, did not take into account the work of the Gwynedd Category 3 Schools Scrutiny Investigation (item 6 above), as the members of the Investigation emphasised the difficulties that arose as a result of the emphasis on bilingualism. It was noted that the second objective of the Strategy was to '*Extend and strengthen our Welsh-medium and bilingual provision*', but that '*bilingual*' could not mean anything other than English-medium provision in this context, as Welsh had already been addressed within the objective. Therefore, it was recommended that the Education Strategy should be re-examined in the light of the scrutiny Investigation report, and specifically in terms of how bilingualism was dealt with. In response, it was noted that:

- This was a great example of how the Strategy was a living and evolving document.
- The objective in the context of the Welsh language and bilingualism was a reflection of the situation as it was at present.
- There was already a commitment to review the Education Language Policy, and the outcome of that would then inform this document.

It was suggested that deleting every example of '*bilingualism*' and '*bilingual*' from the document was a convenient way of ensuring that the document said what it was expected to do and corresponded to some of the Council's other objectives and strategies.

It was noted that one of the values that was stated in the columns on the second page of the document, as a basis for the way we would set about shaping the education system in Gwynedd for the future, was to prepare young people for the world of work. Although that was very commendable and to be expected, there was also a wish to see a reference here to preparing young people to be citizens. In response, it was noted that the comment was very much welcomed, and that it was probably implicit in the first column in terms of the curriculum and learning experiences, but it was agreed that it should be clearer in the document.

It was enquired whether it would be possible to remove the references to '*bilingualism*' and '*bilingual*' from the objectives in the report, as it was clear that the aim was to increase the Welsh-medium provision.

It was noted that there was not much reference in the Strategy to responding to the change in demographics, although the Cabinet Member noted, in response to a recent question in the full Council, that the Strategy stated how we would develop the system to the future and responded to the demographic challenges. There was mention of the need to ensure that we were ready to respond to demographic changes, but no explanation as to how that was intended to be achieved. It was noted that the question was asked in the context of the closure, or the possibility of the closure of Ysgol Felinwnda. That was a matter of concern, not only about closing a school, but concern in the catchment area overall about schools and rural communities in general, and the feeling that a clear strategy was needed from the Council so that parents and people in the community knew, and to some extent understood the Council's mindset, if small schools had to close because of demographics. In response, it was noted that:

- The Authority was committed to looking at demography and the problems it caused in some communities.
- This was, probably, implicit in column 5 of the values, which mentioned the development of the right type of educational establishments in moving forward.
- As already stated in response to other comments, there were a number of very detailed strategies in the layers below this high-level strategy.
- We were very much aware of the problem we already had, but even more so on the horizon, in terms of demography, and therefore the Department's work and strategies in relation to reorganising our system would focus on what was noted in the fifth column of the values as a sub-strategy to be able to achieve that.

The concerns expressed earlier in the discussion regarding special education provision were reiterated. It was noted that there was a desire for the Strategy to include a specific section regarding the special education schools as the difficulty of gaining admission to those schools meant that children with profound needs had to remain in the mainstream schools, which were completely unsuitable for their needs. In response, it was noted that:

- As already stated, this was a high-level strategy, and the Authority had a strategy for moving forward to look at this.
- A satellite unit had been opened in order to expand the provision.
- The challenges facing the special education sector were not confined to Gwynedd, and there were a number of factors behind that.
- Before the new school in Hafod Lon was built, there were a number of children with very intense needs attending mainstream schools, possibly due to parents' perception of the old resource. More wanted to send their children to the new school, and that was to be welcomed.
- As medical techniques and medical care evolved over recent years, many children and young people were surviving who would not have done so previously. That was

excellent and something to be extremely grateful for, but it was not without its pressure on the sector.

- The Department would carry out a piece of work to look at the special education strategy in order to make sure that we had sufficient space, and that the resources were there.
- The commitment of the staff of the two special schools to the care, well-being and education of the children with profound needs was totally extraordinary.

It was questioned whether the use of the words 'more able and talented' in relation to the Seren Network was suitable in this context as all learners were talented and had different strengths. In response, it was noted that there was no disagreement with that, but that this was a recognised national term for a cohort or group of children.

It was noted that the Strategy specified a commitment to reduce the impact of poverty on the progress and achievements of learners, and it was asked how it was intended to do this. In response, it was noted that:

- This was an obvious priority and that the Cabinet Member had already committed in the Council's Plan to carry out a piece of work to look at the cost of the school day.
- There was a need to think sophisticatedly about poverty, as poverty was more extensive than financial poverty alone.
- The purpose of the piece of work was to look at the barriers that prevented children from reaching their educational potential, and to do whatever could be done to remove these.

It was asked whether we knew anything about the social background of the 'more able and talented' children in general. In response, it was noted that:

- We were talking about 'more able and talented' in an academic context in the case in question, but that able and talented was wider than that, and according to Welsh Government guidance, was more than just an academic measure.
- Seren had been challenged on the question of attracting a wide enough social cross-section, and had taken steps to ensure they were more open.

Concern was expressed at the significant increase over the summer in school transport costs for families who were not eligible for free transport for their children. In response, it was noted that the Authority was unfortunately bound by the policy, but that it would be interesting to look at this in the context of the Cabinet Member's piece of work on the cost of the school day.

RESOLVED to accept the report and to note the observations.

8. PUPILS' ATTENDANCE AND BEHAVIOUR IN GWYNEDD SCHOOLS

The Assistant Head: Special Educational Needs and Inclusion and the Education Department Inclusion Manager were welcomed to the meeting in addition for this item.

The report of the Cabinet Member for Education was presented providing information on attendance levels and exclusions across Gwynedd schools, including an outline of the main reasons for absences and exclusions. Committee members were asked to consider whether any other aspect of attendance and exclusions needed to be scrutinised, along with the impact of the provision offered to encourage improvement in the attendance and behaviour of Gwynedd pupils.

The Cabinet Member provided the context, the Inclusion Manager detailed the content of the report and then the members were given the opportunity to ask questions and offer observations.

It was asked what accounted for the fact that behaviour and attendance problems following the COVID-19 pandemic continued, as you would have expected the children to become re-accustomed to going to school as time progressed, and for the figures to decrease. In response, it was noted that:

- Several of the exclusions related to violence against peers and members of school staff.
- There was also a significant increase in drug use, with many children now carrying drugs into school to sell, or for their own use. It was noted that there was a case at the moment where the Service was very concerned about one pupil in Year 6.
- Everyone expected the first year following the pandemic to be challenging, but unfortunately, things had deteriorated since then.

It was asked whether children with additional learning needs were more likely to be affected by this, and if so, to what extent. In response, it was noted that:

- Data was collected monthly, with an officer recording each exclusion and noting whether they were children with additional needs, whether they had an individual development plan and whether they were children who received free school meals.
- There was no definite pattern of children in these categories, and some of the children also came from backgrounds that we would not have expected to manifest as problematic within the schools.

It was asked whether there was evidence that efforts to improve attendance, by writing to parents and making threats, etc., led pupils to disengage from the system altogether. In response, it was noted that:

- The number of children who were de-registered had increased, and that, in itself, was a concern for the Service.
- The Service had welfare officers who supported families.
- The Authority fined or prosecuted parents only as a last resort as there was no desire to lead to a greater increase in the number of pupils being home educated.
- The Service had a specific team within the Department that looked at home educating and checked settings and the progress and standard of the education the children received.

It was noted that Gwynedd's permanent exclusions figure for 2022/23, i.e. 48, was alarming and it was asked what exactly the Authority intended to do differently from what it had done in the past, and what it intended to put in place anew to ensure that this figure would fall by September 2024. It was asked what the figures were in other counties similar to Gwynedd, such as Anglesey and Ceredigion, over the same period. It was also asked if there was a school (without naming it) that almost never excluded, and what could be learned from that good practice, and also was there a school (again without naming it) that excluded more regularly than similar schools. In response, it was noted that:

- It was agreed that the figures were alarming and the schools were thanked for reporting so transparently and honestly on the number of permanent exclusions.
- The Service was fully aware of the work that needed to be done, and it was intended to commission a piece of work over the next year by a former Estyn inspector, who

specialised in inclusion, looking at the use of inclusion funding in schools. This work would start in the next two months and would provide a framework on how to improve the service for the future.

- The Department also had teams that supported schools in the primary and secondary sectors, in order to model positive behaviour and put strategies in place, etc. and it was intended to appoint additional officers to these teams within the next few months.
- The Department had been successful in attracting a significant amount of funding from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) which would be used to offer programmes to schools in terms of specialist services relating to behaviour. There was no guarantee that this would make a difference, but it would highlight the type of support that was needed.
- Regarding figures for other counties, the ALN&I Service operated for Gwynedd and Anglesey, and the service also collaborated with its peers across the counties of the north, and it was clear that those counties too faced the same challenges.
- The Service was concerned about the high levels of exclusions in five schools mainly in the Arfon area, and that the schools that rarely excluded were in the south of the county.
- It could be misleading to look at the individual numbers of pupils that schools excluded and it was more accurate to look at that as a percentage of the school's population.
- It was essential to look at reconciling the reasons for excluding pupils across the county, considering whether there was a difference in levels of tolerance among schools; what strategies did some schools use to prevent the type of behaviour from escalating into something that merited exclusion, and was there a specific period, reasons, behaviour or factors that were acceptable in one school, which would not be acceptable in another school.
- Funding followed a child who transferred to another school as a result of an exclusion, or for whatever reason, so that the school admitting the child found it easier to provide for that child.
- In view of the current situation, it was no surprise that Estyn had chosen inclusion as one specific area to look at in detail as part of its recent inspection of education services.

It was asked if the Admissions and Exclusions Panels still existed, and if so, why had there been no further contact with those lay members who had attended two days of intensive training in the field before the pandemic. In response, it was noted that:

- The Panels continued to exist, but few requests were received for independent hearings.
- That discussions had been held with the Legal Service regarding the need to train new and experienced governors in order to draw attention to their responsibility when a child is excluded. In addition to discussions with the Assistant Resources Officer, who was responsible for co-ordinating training for governors, in order to re-visit the matter, a specific training package for new governors had been adapted so that it was appropriate and current.
- It was appreciated to have people volunteer on the panel because it was extremely important that the voices of children and families were heard by a group of individuals who were completely independent of the school.

It was asked how likely the children excluded for a fixed period were of being excluded again, time and again. In response, it was noted that:

- The Service had a database that tracked every individual who was excluded.
- In accordance with Welsh Government guidelines, an individual could be excluded for more than 15 days, or over a period during an academic year, and then a behaviour panel had to be held with the governing body, the parents and the individual in order to avoid progressing to a permanent exclusion.

It was noted that several studies clearly indicated that young people were one of the groups most affected by Covid, and it was felt that young people were being forgotten. It was noted that leisure provision for young people outside of school, such as youth clubs, etc. had a very beneficial effect on the mental health of individuals, and it was asked if the Department, in conjunction with the Youth Service, considered this as a way of trying to tackle the problems. In response, it was noted that it was agreed with the observation and that it was necessary to look at how the resource that the Council had within the Youth Service was used in order to take full advantage of it.

Referring to fixed-period exclusions that occur repeatedly to the same child, it was noted that it was evident that the strategies did not always work, and that children were sometimes identified with special needs in terms of behaviour and got an individual plan and were treated differently, and did not get further exclusions as a result. It was asked if those numbers increased in the same way, and were they successful. In response, it was noted that it was important to look at that too, and it was believed that headteachers were committed to doing so.

The fact that the funding followed a child who moved school due to an exclusion was welcomed, but in addition to the usual cost of educating the child, these children, very often, needed much more support, and it was asked whether putting a premium on the funding that was transferred to the schools that accepted children under these circumstances would be considered. In response, it was noted that a sum of around £1.1m went to the secondary sector to assist with this type of issue, and although it was not suggested for a moment that the money was not being used properly, perhaps it was necessary carry out a piece of work to look at what exactly the schools were doing with this money.

It was noted that the solution to these problems did not lie with the Education Department and the Council alone and that we had to look at the picture as a whole in terms of the young person's home, community and health, especially in view of the major cuts the agencies that support families and the health sector had faced in recent years. It was emphasised that all the agencies should sit around the table to ensure the best outcome for the young person, but because every department and every field received cuts, everyone was holding on tightly to their own purse strings. It was noted that it was necessary to look at more than the bare figures and to look at what was the real reason that a young person displayed this type of behaviour. There was a lot of work to be done, and a challenging time lay ahead of us, but through plans such as these, etc., it was greatly hoped that the figures would start to decrease, but there was a need for other agencies to be around the table too.

It was noted that only after everything else had failed was the difficult and painful decision taken to exclude a pupil permanently and that the decision had to be for the benefit of the staff and other pupils, and also for the benefit of the pupil who was about to be excluded.

Referring to the reasons for excluding pupils, it was noted that the report and committee's discussion had placed the focus on those that were excluded, but that the rest of the class, who were affected by the 'persistent disruptive behaviour' had to be borne in mind too. It was asked to what extent 'threatening and violent conducts' were on the increase, and to

what extent 'persistent disruptive behaviour', which affected the majority of other pupils, was on the increase. In response, it was noted that:

- The reason behind each exclusion was recorded.
- An increase in violence was seen, and there was also an increase in refusing to conform to school rules, disrupting the class regularly and being verbally abusive to staff and peers.
- The use of e-cigarettes was also a big problem in schools.
- Each school had its own behaviour policy, and the Authority could not influence those policies.
- Some schools undertook internal exclusions, where a child who disrupted the class was moved to another class where a key person was available to conduct recovery discussions with them.

The members' appreciation was expressed of all the work carried out by the staff involved with vulnerable pupils who found it difficult to cope in school for whatever reasons.

RESOLVED to accept the report and to note the observations.

9. EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD PROGRAMME 2023/24

Submitted - the committee's forward programme for 2023/24.

The committee was asked to accept the request from the Education Department to consider programming an additional item and re-schedule some items that needed to be scrutinised during 2023/24, as detailed in the report.

It was noted that Additional Learning Needs in the mainstream and special schools had been denoted as a potential item for programming during the year, and calls were made for the item to be scrutinised in the March 2024 meeting in view of some of the comments that had arisen during the discussion on the Education Strategy (item 7 above). In response, it was noted that it would be timely to scrutinise the item in March so that the scrutinisers' comments could be fed into any capital investment programme in the field in the future.

RESOLVED:

- (i) To accept the request from the Education Department to programme an additional item and re-schedule some items that needed to be scrutinised during 2023/24.**
- (ii) To scrutinise the item on Additional Learning Needs in the mainstream and special schools at the meeting in March 2024.**
- (iii) To adopt an amended work programme for 2023/24.**

The meeting commenced at 10.30 a.m. and concluded at 2.55 p.m.

Chair