

MEETING	SCHOOLS FINANCE FORUM
DATE	28 June 2021
TITLE OF THE ITEM	Immersion Education System towards 2032 and beyond
RELEVANT OFFICER	Debbie Anne Williams Jones Education Corporate Services Manager
CABINET MEMBER	Cemlyn Rees Williams

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The aim of the Language Centres is to provide an intensive Welsh language course for incomers to enable them to integrate into the bilingual society and participate fully in bilingual education experiences.
- 1.2 The first primary Language Centre was opened in Caernarfon in September 1984, and there are now three other language centres in Dolgellau, Llangybi and Penrhyndeudraeth. A Secondary Language Centre was then established in Porthmadog in 2004.
- 1.3 The existing Language Centres are funded by the Education Improvement Grant (EIG), with the Education Department contributing match funding to the grant, as well as contributing to the transport costs of the service.
- 1.4 Following the Council's policy of not addressing inflationary increases in any grant funded posts, together with an increase in costs, two years ago, the Education Department faced having to restructure the service, to meet the budget cut.
- 1.5 On 2 April 2019, a report on the restructuring of the Language Centres was presented to Cabinet, where the Cabinet resolved to approve transitional funding to enable the Department to pilot a staffing structure of a teacher and teaching assistant in one Language Centre with careful monitoring to see if it has an impact on the quality of education and children's attainment.

2. THE NEW VISION FOR IMMERSION EDUCATION

- 2.1 Immersion education is central to Gwynedd's education language policy, and over the past year, the Education Department has been working on creating a new vision for an immersion education system towards 2032 and beyond, building on the strengths and the successes of the Language Centres that have been supporting learners to acquire the Welsh language since 1984.
- 2.2 The main case for change and the need for a new vision for the Gwynedd immersion education system can be summarised to the following fields, and further details about these can be found below:
 - Place the learner's needs at the centre
 - Modernise the provision and make it contemporary
 - Working in partnership
 - An opportunity to create a first-class learning environment

- New opportunities as a result of COVID-19
- Lessons learnt as a result of the Pilot Scheme implemented at the request of the Cabinet.

2.3 Place the learner's needs at the centre

- The need for the system to promote the achievement and welfare of Gwynedd newcomers to acquire the Welsh language while keeping in contact with their local school and peers at the same time.
- The need for the system to be able to assist parents and carers to understand the value of Welsh-medium education to support their children.

2.4 Modernise the provision and make it contemporary

- The need for the system to respond to the needs of the learners and the curriculum.
- The need to invest in the infrastructure for the system including digital resources.

2.5 Working in partnership

- The need for the Education Department and schools to work in partnership and take joint ownership of the immersion education system.
- The need for the immersion education system to provide guidance, support and resources to schools to enable them to support learners to make further progress in terms of their Welsh language confidence/skills.

2.6 An opportunity to create a first-class learning environment

- An opportunity to invest £1.1million of Welsh Government Welsh-medium education capital grant into the immersion education system, improving the learning environment and infrastructure.

2.7 New opportunities as a result of COVID-19

- Blended learning provision i.e. the Language Centres provided blended learning as a result of the numerous lockdowns, namely face-to-face teaching at school, live learning sessions via Teams, together with work on Google Classrooms. This was recognised as excellent practice by Estyn.
- The schools are asking for immersion education expertise and resources to support the Welsh language to be disseminated across the system.

2.8 Lessons learnt as a result of the Pilot Scheme

- The pilot highlighted the need to consider the welfare of learners, and keep in contact with their peers; many are finding it difficult to blend in back at their local school after their time at the Centre.
- The need to strengthen the relationship with schools to enable further progress in terms of support for language development.

2.9 Therefore, based on the case for change, our vision for learners who are new learners of the Welsh language is that they have:

"Access to an excellent immersion education system that provides flexible and sustainable learning experiences of a high standard that equips them as independent learners who have the information and Welsh language skills to enable them to move forward."

To provide an effective transition from immersion education to the local school, ensuring a high standard of experiences and support through the medium of Welsh, that responds to the needs of learners and their families to enable them to succeed and thrive."

2.10 Our vision is to have an immersion education system that places the needs of learners at the centre of our provision. We would like to see a flexible system, which provides first class immersion education for the learners, nurturing their Welsh language skills to enable them to succeed and thrive in our schools, becoming confident bilingual speakers.

2.11 A complete copy of the new vision can be seen in Appendix 1.

3 INFORMAL ENGAGEMENT

3.1 A period of informal engagement on the new vision for the immersion education system towards 2032 and beyond took place between 28 May 2021 and 28 June 2021.

3.2 During this informal engagement period, informal engagement sessions were held with:

- Gwynedd Language Centres Staff
- Teaching Unions and Teaching Assistants' representatives
- Gwynedd Primary and Secondary Head teachers
- Schools Finance Forum
- Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee
- Language Committee
- Learners

3.3 Below is a summary of the comments that are most relevant to the remit of the Schools Budget Forum, namely the comments of the Education and Scrutiny Committee, together with the comments of the Gwynedd primary and secondary school head teachers.

EDUCATION AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE COMMENTS

3.4 A report was presented to the Education and Scrutiny Committee on the new vision for the immersion education system towards 2032 and beyond on 10 June 2021.

3.5 The report presenting the new vision was accepted by members of the Scrutiny Committee together with a request for the Cabinet Member for Education to consider the comments made by the committee members during the discussion, namely:

- Recognition of the Language Centres success over the years in ensuring that learners acquire the Welsh language.
- Agreed with the intention to strengthen accountability as part of the new vision.
- Supported the intention to equip the school workforce to support learners to make further progress in building confidence and acquiring the Welsh language.
- The Education Department was asked to provide more detail on the immersion education system when available.
- There was a variety of views on the funding source of the immersion education system, with some members supportive of the intention that schools would contribute, thus increasing accountability and joint ownership of the system between the Education Department and the schools, but others expressed the wish that the Council corporately should finance the funding gap due to the fact that the Welsh language is one of the Council's main priorities.

3.6 The debate concluded with a unanimous vote in favour of the new vision by the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee, with a request to provide more detail on the immersion education system when available.

COMMENTS BY HEAD TEACHERS

3.7 A presentation on the new vision was given to Gwynedd's secondary head teachers on 16 June 2021, and to primary head teachers on 17 June 2021.

3.8 In response to the new vision, the head teachers submitted the following comments:

- Recognized the challenge of striking the right balance between ensuring intensive immersion to enable learners to acquire the Welsh language as quickly as possible, as well as enabling newcomers to settle and remain in their schools and create new peers.
- It was noted that there is an opportunity for Language Co-ordinators and Heads of Welsh Departments in the secondary schools to contribute their expertise in developing the detail for realizing the vision for the immersion education system towards 2032 and beyond.
- The primary head teachers welcomed the vision and investment, and in particular the intention to establish new immersion education sites in Tywyn and Bangor.
- The proposal to co-fund the new system was supported, but the primary sector emphasized that this should not happen at the expense of resources in schools.

4. FUNDING THE VISION TOWARDS 2032 AND BEYOND

Capital Funding

4.1 In order to deliver the vision, purpose, aim and objectives, we hope to invest £1.1m of Welsh Government Welsh-medium education capital grant into our immersion education system in Gwynedd to ensure a state-of-the-art learning environment, with modern facilities for 21st century learners and educators.

4.2 This capital investment will facilitate the establishment of two completely new immersion education sites in Gwynedd, located in strategic areas of the county and areas of linguistic significance, namely Tywyn and Bangor. It is also intended to improve the facilities in the Eifionydd immersion education site which again is strategically located in the centre of the county. These three immersion education sites will offer primary and secondary provision jointly, bridging years 5-9.

4.3 It is also intended to relocate the Dolgellau Language Centre to a larger site in order to offer the provision to more children, and the Dolgellau site, together with Llangybi and Maesincla, will provide immersion education to years 2-4 of primary schools.

4.4 As a result of the investment, six sites will offer provision to primary age learners and three sites will offer provision for secondary learners, with flexibility between the sites as needed.

Revenue Funding

4.5 It is intended for the Immersion Education System towards 2032 and beyond to be funded from three different sources, namely:

- EIG Grant
- Schools (central)
- Education Department

EIG Grant

4.6 This is the core grant to fund the Immersion Education System, however, as is known, as a result of inflation and an increase in costs, this grant alone is not sufficient to fund the provision in full.

Schools

4.7 The immersion education system is a specialist service and pivotal to the implementation of the Gwynedd education language policy. Consequently, it is intended to ask for a financial contribution from the schools which will be a means of ensuring joint-ownership and a fit-for-purpose immersion education system towards 2032 and beyond.

Education Department

4.8 The Education Department already contributes to the costs of the service, and this contribution will continue, through:

- Match funding for the EIG grant
- Contributing towards the transport costs to the immersion provision.

4.9 Should Cabinet decide to support the new vision for the immersion education system towards 2032 and beyond, then Governing Bodies will be consulted in the Autumn term on establishing the principle that schools make an annual financial contribution to funding the new-look immersion education system from April 2022 onwards.

