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## EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 9/12/21

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

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

**Co-opted Members:** Ruth Roe (Meirionnydd Parent/Governors' Representative) and Manon Williams (Arfon Parent/Teachers' Representative).

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

**Present for item 5:** Councillor Gareth Thomas (Cabinet Member for the Economy and Community), Sioned Williams (Head of Economy and Community), Dylan Griffiths (Economy Development Programmes Manager) and Kelvin Roberts (Employability Programme Leader).

**Present for item 6:** Councillor Cemlyn Williams (Cabinet Member for Education), Garem Jackson (Head of Education Department), Debbie Anne Jones (Corporate Education Services Manager) and Bethan Griffith (Education Ancillary Services Manager).

**Present for item 7:**

Education Department Councillor Cemlyn Williams (Cabinet Member for Education), Garem Jackson (Head of Education Department), Debbie Anne Jones (Education Corporate Services Officer), Gwern ap Rhisiart (Dwyfor/Meirion Area Education Officer), Rhian Parry Jones (Gwynedd Secondary Education Officer) and Ffion Edwards Ellis (Assistant Head of ALN and Inclusion).

GwE Alwyn Lloyd Jones (Assistant Director - Standards), Elfyn Vaughan Jones (Senior Leader – Secondary), Sharon Vaughan (Core Leader - Secondary) and Geraint Evans (Core Leader - Primary).

### 1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Colette Owen (The Catholic Church) and Karen Vaughan Jones (Parent / Governor Representative Dwyfor).

### 2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

Councillor Selwyn Griffiths declared a personal interest in item 5 - Unemployment Levels and Support back to Employment - as his son was the author of the report to the committee. He was of the opinion that it was not a prejudicial interest, and he did not withdraw from the meeting during the discussion on the item.

Councillor Dewi Roberts declared a personal interest in Item 6 - School Dinners - as a member of his family was a Governor at Ysgol Dyffryn Nantlle. He was of the opinion that it was not a prejudicial interest, and he did not withdraw from the meeting during the discussion on the item.

### 3. URGENT ITEMS

None to note.

### 4. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee that was held on 21 October, 2021 as a true record.

### 5. UNEMPLOYMENT LEVELS AND SUPPORT BACK TO EMPLOYMENT

The Cabinet Member and officers from the Economy and Community Department were welcomed to the meeting.

The report of the Cabinet Member for Economy and Community was submitted, at the request of the scrutiny committee, outlining the changes in unemployment and what support the Council offered to the people of Gwynedd.

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

Individual members submitted the following observations:-

- Concern was expressed that so many of the county's young people left every year, there was also concern that the statistics presented to the committee could not be relied upon as there was so much outward migration. The Welsh Government had a target to get a million Welsh-speakers by 2050, and if these plans were dependent on a grant from the Government, there was an opportunity here to resolve past outward migration, particularly due to the county's demography and the importance of the Welsh language in the county, by informing the Government what could be done to strengthen the Welsh-speaking areas and to try and prevent outward migration.
- The importance of looking at future employment needs was emphasised to ensure that those young people currently going through the education system possessed the required skills for the jobs that would be available at the end of their time in education. Concern was expressed that young people in rural areas such as Pen Llŷn had to travel far to attend college courses. It was also noted that there were people with different expertise who may be in a position to provide training to local people to assist them to get work, and it was suggested that these people should be targeted.
- It was noted that the jobs/housing situation in the county was a vicious circle. Jobs were needed, however, to attract good employers, housing was needed. There was a lack of housing, however, houses could not be built in the hope of attracting employers. It was noted that Brighter Foods in Tywyn were anxious to expand significantly as a result of receiving an investment of £42m, however, they were having difficulty to attract staff due to the lack of housing in the area. It was added that south Meirionnydd had seriously suffered since the demise of the Development Board for Rural Wales some years ago. Reference was also made to a farm shop, that was eager to expand and relocate to an empty unit on Tywyn High Street, but could not get planning approval for this, it was suggested that the Council should relax the planning restrictions and encourage more house building in the area.
- Concern was expressed that recruitment campaigns in several sectors, such as care, hospitality, school assistants and the Health Board's vaccination programme,

were all fishing in the same pool, and success in one sector may be at the expense of the rest.

- It was noted that there was an opportunity here for a career pathway for people who came to work for the Council, particularly in the care sector, however, the report did not address this.

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

- That the Department had a programme to create high value jobs, with the aim of creating quality jobs in Gwynedd to keep our young people here. However, some of the Government's decisions, especially the recent decision not to proceed with the Llanbedr bypass scheme, had been a major blow to the area, and meant that it would be very difficult to get companies to invest in the Aerospace Centre in the future. It was obvious that the Government was turning its back on the rural areas with everything focused in the towns and cities.
- There were a few comments in the Independent Panel's report that caused concern, such as the comment that work should be directed to the growth areas identified in the Regional Development Framework, as Gwynedd was not one of those areas. Naturally, young people wanted the experience of going away to different places to get different experiences, however, it was important that we can create opportunities for them to be able to return to the county. Gwynedd's economic weakness was the lack of variety of jobs, and the aim of the effort at Llanbedr, and also Trawsfynydd, was to get that variety that would enable families to remain in the area. The fact that there was a political agreement to establish the Arfor Programme for a further period was welcomed, and it was hoped that it would be possible to influence this programme to concentrate on retaining work in rural communities to maintain services.
- In terms of supporting hospitality and tourism, the huge increase in the number of visitors to the area last summer was noted, as fewer people went abroad on holiday, this had caused problems for the industry and for the society that supported the industry. A hope was expressed that the joint work with the National Park to develop a sustainable visitor economy would support the industry, and reference was made to a recent conference about this. It was further noted that workshops would take place in January, with the aim of drafting an action programme by March.
- The situation over the last 18 months had sped-up the need to create, not only more jobs, but better jobs. The Department supported businesses, alongside supporting people to get those jobs, and the Gwynedd Work Team had been working diligently on some interventions that would facilitate this, e.g. by supporting people who were already in jobs to move on to better-paid jobs, etc., and by so doing create opportunities for people who were returning to work, or were coming to work for the first time. In addition, the Department led the STEM Programme in North Wales on behalf of Gwynedd, Anglesey and Conwy councils. The Department had also developed its relationship with the Education Department considerably during this last period and a piece of work was currently ongoing looking at employers' needs, and how to highlight these to children while they were still at school. Next year, namely the last year of the Council Plan 2018-23, would be a period to review and take stock, looking at the needs in terms of the economy and the people of Gwynedd in moving forward.
- There was much more data available than was in the report. The third graph in Appendix 1 of the report indicated the unemployment pattern over the last three years (stable in 2019, a huge jump in 2020 and a reduction in 2021) and it was noted that the source of information could be sent to members to be able to see this

type of information in greater detail. It was further noted that the Gwynedd Work Team was working closely with the Council's Care Team, not only to attract people to want to work in the field and helping them to get the necessary skills, but also to assist the care sector to think how they packaged the work, to attract more people. It was further noted that a jobs noticeboard had been created to analyse where job opportunities arose across the county, and in which sectors, the Team was also analysing to which sectors those people supported into jobs had gone, to see if this corresponded to employers' needs. It was noted, since the beginning of April, approximately 40% of the 150 persons supported into work had gone into the tourism and hospitality sector, with approximately 8% to the care sector. It was also noted, since preparing the report, the number of supported persons had now increased from 150 to 170. It was added that the Team continued to work with the Care Staff Development Team to try to attract more people into this field, and one work-stream looked specifically on using transferable skills to support the care sector over the winter, e.g. employing caravan cleaning seasonal staff to undertake domestic care work over the winter.

- The challenge of underemployment, or people who would wish, or were able to undertake more in terms of work, but did not have the opportunity, was one of the challenges in terms of increasing income for families, and also in terms of satisfying the needs that businesses and other sectors had. Work was being undertaken in marketing and advertising to assist people who wished to improve their capacity to work, and this was via a helpline and social media, etc., however, changing the situation would take time. It was also a fairly on-going process of looking at the different working patterns. The Gwynedd Work Team had undertaken a piece of work to look at the possibility that companies could employ seasonal staff throughout the year by spreading the salary over 12 months, rather than only pay during the summer months. The options in terms of jobs that could work side by side were looked at and an employment noticeboard had been created on Facebook to respond quickly to employers' needs. Information was also shared via the Council's Benefits Team, food banks and CAB.
- Work had proceeded between the Human Resources Service and the Gwynedd Work Team to look at career pathways within the Council.
- There was more information to come regarding the Shared Prosperity Fund. Details were awaited regarding the application process during the summer, however, there was no certainty that there would not be a gap with this. The Government was also looking at bridging by continuing and extending some of the programmes over a period of time.

**RESOLVED to accept the report, noting the observations made during the meeting.**

## **6. SCHOOL DINNERS**

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

The Cabinet Member's report was presented providing information on schools' arrangements to seek to ensure that no child faced a day without a dinner at school, as well as the situation with school dinner debts and the processes that were underway in order to respond to that situation.

Prior to commencing the discussion, the Cabinet Member referred to the recent letter sent from Ysgol Dyffryn Nantlle to parents regarding school dinner payments, noting that he wished to give assurance to members that the Council had not refused a school dinner to

any child in the county, whatever their circumstances. He further noted that the Chair of the School's Governors had asked the Department to re-visit their processes, and he confirmed that the Department would respond to this.

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

Individual members submitted the following observations:-

- Enthusiastic support was expressed to the Government's intention to extend free school meals to all primary pupils. It was noted that this had several advantages, e.g. children would learn better in the afternoon following a healthy lunch, it would tackle obesity, it did not discriminate between those who got free school meals and those who paid as well as removing the problem of families who were eligible for free school meals, but did not claim them for different reasons.
- Referring to the situation that had arisen at Ysgol Dyffryn Nantlle, disappointment was expressed that this had not been reported to the previous Full Council. There was wide and general concern amongst councillors regarding what had occurred, and each one should have had an opportunity to ask questions. It was further noted that the report referred to a 'lack of clarity', however, it did not explain what this 'lack of clarity' was and did not offer an apology for what had happened. Claims had been made by the head in charge that the Authority had used him as a scapegoat, and the report did not address the serious questions that needed answers.
- Concern was expressed regarding any proposal to externalise the service and create regional kitchens and closing school kitchens would lead to unemployment.
- The importance of providing nutritious, quality meals to schoolchildren was emphasised and it was suggested that there was an opportunity here to use, e.g. vegetables grown on school land / in the community, in school meals.
- It was noted, although it was obvious that what had occurred at Ysgol Dyffryn Nantlle had caused pain and embarrassment to the Authority, the Authority had responded to the situation quickly and appropriately, to correct any misapprehension. They had to be sensitive to poverty in responding to the situation, and it also had to be accepted that a small minority would take advantage of any weak systems in terms of collection of school dinner money. The most important principle was that it was not the child's fault if parents did not pay, even if they had the means to pay.
- Confirmation that Gwynedd did not prevent any child from having a school dinner was welcomed.
- A wish was expressed to have regular updates regarding the Authority's arrangements as the new plans moved forward.
- It was noted that learning lessons was vitally important, and there was an opportunity to look to the future and ensure the success of this important strategy in terms of free school meals to every primary pupil, and to also lobby for the same for the secondary sector and to do everything within our ability to rectify poverty injustice.

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

- Regarding the Government's plans to extend free school meals, it was currently understood that it was proposed to look at this during the 2022/23 financial year, and to introduce the changes gradually and to focus firstly on the youngest children. It was acknowledged that the timetable was very tight, and the Department had already commenced looking at this to be proactive and ensure that its internal arrangements would enable them to address this need as soon as possible.

- Under current legislation, a parent had to apply for free school meals, despite possibly being in receipt of benefits. Schools reminded parents of this, and tried to encourage them to submit an application. Despite this, people were reluctant to make applications for benefits, including free school meals, and it was noted that all elected members had a responsibility to ensure that their constituents submitted these applications. It was also noted that the Council's Welfare Claims Unit had a key role in this. It was further noted that the Government's scheme was a huge step in the context of well-being and our responsibility to children, and removed any stigma associated with such applications.
- The Authority had apologised in a press release for the situation that had arisen at Ysgol Dyffryn Nantlle, and also to schools and the elected members. The incident had been unfortunate and had caused concern to many, however, lessons had been learnt, and they had contacted the schools immediately to remind everyone of the Authority's aspiration that no child should go without dinner in Gwynedd schools. Regarding the lack of clarity in the report, it may be fair to say that the guidance was not clear enough at one point, however, this was also a matter of interpretation, and they had acted swiftly to clear any lack of clarity and strengthen and confirm the Council's stance. The main focus in moving forward was to ensure that any arrangement was reviewed. A very open and mature conversation had been conducted with all headteachers, and very positive comments had been received from them, as a system, buying into this principle unconditionally.
- In terms of externalising the service and the creation of regional kitchens, it was explained that it was currently very early days, and these were only initial considerations. The Department would give detailed attention to each one of the options on the table, and it would also take the comments of the scrutineers into account when undertaking this.
- Schools were free to interpret the new curriculum in the context of local issues, and the comment regarding well-being and healthy living, operating healthily and healthy schools were becoming more and more central to the new curriculum. Therefore, the proposal to continue the conversation with schools was welcomed to ensure that the day-to-day aspects, such as healthy eating and school dinner, were interwoven as part of the curriculum.
- The Department was more than willing to provide a further report in due course, and members were also requested to work with the Authority to promote the new plans in their communities.

**RESOLVED to accept the report, and ask the Education Department for regular updates as the new plans move forward.**

## **7. EDUCATION ANNUAL REPORTS**

### **(A) THE ANNUAL REPORT OF THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT 2020-21 AND PRIORITIES**

The Education Department's Annual Report for 2020-21 was presented.

Before commencing the discussion, the Cabinet Member thanked the schools, headteachers, staff and teachers for maintaining, not only the educational provision, but also provisions such as catering and cleaning during an extremely challenging year. He added that it was also important to recognise the appreciation of the schools and headteachers of the support given by the Education Department during this period, and he was of the view that the relationship between the Department and schools had strengthened during the pandemic.

These comments were supported by the Head of Education and he noted that he also wished to pay a tribute to the Department's officers who supported all the work, and also to the Environment Department's staff for the invaluable advice and support given by health and safety officers and the prompt and effective joint working to keep things going. He noted that the disruption to the education and welfare of children had been kept as low as possible because of the resilience and perseverance of a great number of Gwynedd residents, and the elected members could be proud of our schools and their role as governors supporting schools across the county.

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

Individual members submitted the following observations:-

- The Department was thanked for providing a summary report, that clearly conveyed the messages.
- Referring to paragraph 3.8 of the pre-report, the fact that the word 'bilingual' had disappeared from the narrative was welcomed, as the emphasis should be on learning through the medium of Welsh, and the hope was expressed that this could be built upon over the years in our schools.

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

- Regarding the current situation in schools, data changed daily, however, it now appeared that the situation had reached a peak in some circumstances, with many staff and children returning to schools. The situation had been incredibly difficult with up to 30% of the staff and children away from school in some classes. In those cases, there had been a move to virtual education and Department officers, together with health and safety officers, had to make very swift and far-reaching decisions at times. The situation by now had stabilised in some pockets, and the Department did everything within its ability to keep the schools open and as safe as possible. It was also noted that headteachers who were off school due to Covid had continued to run those schools from home.
- The Government had asked the Additional Learning Needs Service to provide a figure of the additional expenditure seen in the field thus far, and where additional expenditure was expected to be in the future.
- That some of the discussions regarding post-16 education had not been held as regularly as desired recently due to the pressure on schools to deal with keeping open, however, it was proposed to re-commence the discussion fully in January to move forward as soon as possible to see how the current provision could be improved.
- It was agreed that the move towards Welsh medium education was to be welcomed. It was explained that this was mainly a national move, however, the Government had been consulting on this with the Head of Education and officers in Gwynedd as Gwynedd was naturally seen as a county that led nationally on Welsh medium and bilingual education. Under the new system, it would not be possible for schools to remain static for an extended period in terms of the medium of their provision, with the expectation that authorities ensure that schools continue to make progress in terms of their Welsh language provision as soon as possible.
- The Authority had a responsibility to ensure relevant and specific training for all its staff in schools. The need to undertake this had been escalated even more during the pandemic, due to schools' concern regarding losing the pastoral contact between the most vulnerable children and professional staff, as they did not see

those children daily. It was noted that schools were to be commended regarding the contact with vulnerable children throughout the pandemic, and it was suggested that more details about this could be given in a further report to the committee. It was reported to the Strategic Safeguarding Panel and the Operational Panel on the additional training that had been undertaken in this area. The Department's focus was more than ever on well-being and safeguarding, and it was believed that schools had managed to do this very well, with guidance and as a result of the additional training.

- Devices for teachers were currently being prepared and the arrangements for maintenance were proceeding. Once this was in place, over 1,000 devices for staff and over 5,000 devices for secondary children would be distributed to schools. It was anticipated that this would happen early in the new year.
- The aim of the Digital Strategy was to improve the structure surrounding supporting IT in schools. Internet infrastructure, nationally, was currently managed by the Council, with every device in schools being partly managed by the school technician and partly by Cynnal. As part of the strategy of moving to a different maintenance model, it was proposed to internalise the service so that Gwynedd Council could support computers across every school, and would therefore ensure consistency in terms of provision.
- Regarding additional finance to support pupils due to Covid, this work was on-going, not only on a county basis, but also regionally, to ensure that schools collaborated in leagues to make the best of the resource to rectify the disadvantages children had experienced during the pandemic. The Department would keep an eye on the outcomes of the joint plans with the Schools Improvement Service.

## **(B) GWE ANNUAL REPORT 2020/21**

Officers from GwE were welcomed to the meeting.

The GwE Annual Report for 2020-21 was presented.

In presenting the report, the GwE Assistant Director (Standards) noted that he wished to acknowledge the outstanding work undertaken during a very challenging time in schools.

Then the Core Leaders gave details of developments for the new curriculum that would commence in primary schools in 2022.

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

Individual members submitted the following observations:-

- It was welcomed that the title 'Challenge Officers' had disappeared and the key words now were 'support', 'development', 'improvement' and 'assistance', etc.
- Concern was expressed that children, e.g. Year 10, who received formal weekly tests, did not know if the results of those assessments would contribute to their final grades or otherwise.

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

- Although performance data would not be available from now on, the practice of going into classrooms, book scrutiny and talking with teachers and children

was of benefit to the Service to ensure that they had a very good knowledge of the schools. It was not believed that focusing on a narrow set of performance indicators at the end of a key stage gave a full picture of the school, and in moving forward without this data, it was important to get the full holistic picture of a school around the 4 purposes of the new curriculum. The Service also looked at children's welfare, how learners developed towards the 4 purposes, and by forming a baseline, the Service would prepare a report for every school in Gwynedd, together with a regional report with a local flavour as an appendix, summarising where the schools were, and what the standards were. Obviously, it was necessary to be sensitive to the current situation in schools, and the Service worked very closely with Authority officers, who had a picture of the situation of schools in terms of attendance, inclusion, ALN, etc., to get the fuller picture. There was consistency across the region in terms of the method of operation and identifying schools, and it was necessary to identify any slippages early on and to respond and give support to the schools. By taking co-ownership for the outcomes and working with the schools to put a support plan in place, full support could be secured to ensure the required improvement. It was further noted that Gwynedd had taken a lead role and had implemented this very early. As for every regional plan, a local flavour was required and some minor changes had been made to the plan in Gwynedd in cooperation with the Schools Improvement Service.

- A teacher leaving, who had been responsible for developing an element of the new curriculum locally, should not be a problem as the local curriculum had been prepared by the whole school.
- The intention of the Inspectorate in Wales was to re-commence school inspections in the Spring term. Regular discussions took place with Estyn, and the Service needed to be sensitive to the current situation of schools, and to inspect schools in this context. It was further noted that Estyn would pilot inspections in around 30 schools initially, and there was an opportunity for schools to volunteer to be part of this. It was expected that it would be possible to return to the usual inspection system after Easter, although the framework had changed somewhat. Messages from the pilot scheme would be important for schools to be clearer in terms of the expectations when every school would be able to receive an inspection from Easter onwards, and by then the situation in schools would be closely monitored. It was further noted that it was hoped that the absence of school data would update the inspection system to consider the context of local schools and children's attainment, rather than just looking at the bare data, and this process of inspection would result in a more local and useful inspection report for the school.
- There was agreement regarding the comment about the word 'challenge' and the job title had been changed to 'Improvement Support Advisor', that had made a difference in terms of culture change.
- Regarding the reference to the local aspect in the curriculum, there was an opportunity here for teachers to go in depth into subjects to improve children's understanding of subjects that would give them work opportunities locally, and also open their horizons to what was in the big wide world. It was also noted that there was an evident link with the previous item and the quality of jobs and employment levels in Gwynedd. Getting this right, and specifically perhaps the STEM subjects, and to target and ensure that children got the depth of knowledge required in the field, a local flavour would not only ensure that children gained access to quality jobs that paid appropriately and enabled them to remain in the county, but would also, considering the experiences and

the qualifications our young people would have, be a means of attracting industries to Gwynedd.

- The authorities and the Schools Improvement Service consistently brought pressure to bear on authorities such as Qualifications Wales to be clear regarding their procedures with examinations or testing children and young people, and there was a need for this clarity more than ever his year. There was mention that the Government and Qualifications Wales had moved to a model of external examination next summer, if possible, however, the schools were also preparing for the possibility of internal assessments. Clarity was required immediately regarding this for schools to be able to prepare appropriately, however, it was understood that a decision would not be made until April next year, which was too close to the end of the school year. It was further noted that the GwE Joint Committee had written to the Minister calling for an early decision on this, and the region had also taken a lead role calling on the Welsh Government and Qualifications Wales for an early solution. In addition, the Cabinet Member for Education had used every opportunity to send the message and lobby on our behalf, and had been a key voice in the regional discussion that had led to sending correspondence to the Government for an early answer.
- That Qualifications Wales had requested schools to ensure that they informed children beforehand if an assessment contributed to the final grade. They could be confident that the schools were aware of this requirement. The guidelines from WJEC and Qualifications Wales were clear enough, and in addition to the responsibility on schools, there was also a responsibility on the Service to remind schools of the regulations and to support them.

**RESOLVED to accept the reports, noting the observations made during the meeting.**

## **8. REVISED SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME**

The revised scrutiny work programme for 2021-22 was presented.

Reference was made to this committee's decision at its previous meeting to refer the item regarding Ysgol Abersoch back to the Cabinet to re-consider. It was noted that they had not managed to convince the Cabinet to change its mind on the matter, as it had confirmed its own decision. It was emphasised that this was not fair on the county's residents, and matters referred from the Cabinet for scrutiny should be forwarded to the full Council, rather than refer them back to the Cabinet, for a final decision.

Referring to the item 'Support for teachers with online abuse', the Head of Education noted that Estyn had published a report this week based on thematic work they had, and our recommendations would be incorporated with Estyn recommendations to ensure that the Authority led on this, and that we did our best to remove this problem from our schools. In response to a question, it was explained that the main focus of the report to committee would be the suggestive element of sexual abuse on social media, however, it was a matter for the committee to determine if they wished this item to be broader.

**RESOLVED to approve the amended work programme.**

The meeting commenced at 10.30 am and concluded at 1.25 pm

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**CHAIR**