

GWYNEDD COUNCIL CABINET



Cyngor Gwynedd Cabinet meeting report

Date of meeting:	7 March 2023
Cabinet Member:	Cllr. Beca Brown
Liaison Officer:	Garem Jackson, Head of Education
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Item Title:	Post-16 Education in Arfon – Band B Sustainable Learning Communities Programme

1. THE DECISION SOUGHT

- 1.1 The Cabinet’s permission to undertake further work with stakeholders that form the Gwynedd and Anglesey Post-16 Education Consortium to develop possible models for post-16 Education in Arfon following on from the informal engagement period on post-16 Education in Arfon that took place during the Autumn term 2020.

2. THE REASON FOR THE NEED FOR A DECISION

- 2.1 On 10 March 2020 the Cabinet was approached to request *“permission to hold discussions with stakeholders to consider the current provision and highlight the key considerations to mutually identify the direction and opportunities to strengthen post-16 secondary education provision in Arfon. It is expected that a further report will be presented to the Cabinet to report back on the outcome of the discussions.”*
- 2.2 Since 2013, secondary schools in Arfon have been in partnership with Cyngor Gwynedd, Anglesey secondary schools and Grŵp Llandrillo Menai known as the Gwynedd Anglesey post-16 Education Consortium. The Consortium sets the area’s post-16 curriculum through a partnership agreement.
- 2.3 The post-16 curriculum provision in Gwynedd and Anglesey is drawn up through an agreement and decision of the partnership rather than by individual schools and colleges. This means that every school regardless of the size of their sixth form provision could offer the 25 A level subjects and 5 BTEC level 3 subjects to meet the 30 subjects that each school is required to offer.
- 2.4 Securing the support of the Cabinet to move forward with the Post-16 Education project in Arfon would enable the Education Department to hold discussions and carry out further work to develop models for post-16 education in Arfon in conjunction with the Consortium's partners and key project stakeholders.

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3. INTRODUCTION

- 3.1 In March 2020 permission was obtained from the Cabinet to start an informal engagement process with key stakeholders to consider the current provision and highlight the key considerations in order to identify the direction and opportunities to strengthen the post-16 education provision in Arfon. A detailed report entitled [Post-16 Education Overview](#) was drawn up as the basis for the engagement.
- 3.2 It was intended to start the informal engagement process at the end of March 2020. However, before the Cabinet's decision came into force, the whole of the UK went into lockdown on 20 March 2020. As a result of responding to the crisis of the pandemic, and its impact on our schools, at the time it was not possible to proceed with the informal engagement process as intended.
- 3.3 In September 2020, the informal engagement process was resumed virtually, over a period of 6 weeks between 10 November and 22 December 2020. The conclusions of the Informal Engagement process were reported before the [Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee on 4 February 2021](#).
- 3.4 During the informal meetings, minor changes to the current system were discussed on one end - to a sixth form centre for all learners on the other.
- 3.5 As some time has passed since consideration of this area began in 2018 and the original case for change was established in 2020, the Education Department has revisited the case for change as there are new considerations that may influence the direction of the project due to the pandemic.

4. THE INFORMAL ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

- 4.1 As part of the engagement process, the following background documentation was published on the Council's [website](#)
 - Cabinet Report 10 March 2020
 - Post-16 Education Overview (March 2020)
 - IAITH Ltd Report 'Assessment of the current post-16 education provision in Gwynedd' (April 2019)
 - Presentation October 2020
 - The vision and the Objectives
 - Response Form
- 4.2 To support the engagement period, virtual meetings were held with learners, parents, teaching staff and governors to enable key stakeholders to voice their opinions and ask any questions regarding the field. Six virtual sessions were held, and over 140 stakeholders attended.

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- 4.3 To promote the engagement process and the virtual sessions - press releases, social media coverage and e-mail communication were used to raise awareness amongst stakeholders.
- 4.4 In addition, to encourage as many as possible to contribute to the conversation, special virtual sessions were held to gather opinions and ideas from learners in Arfon regarding the style of post-16 education system that would meet the vision together with their needs into the future.
- 4.5 Below are the details of all the engagement sessions held:

The Informal Engagement Process	Timetable	Frequency and medium
Arfon secondary headteachers' meeting – update and outline the next steps and engagement timetable	14 October 2020	1 virtual meeting
Arfon Elected Members Meeting – update and outline the next steps and the engagement timetable	15 October 2020	1 virtual meeting
Meeting of Governing Bodies of Arfon High Schools – update and outline the next steps and the engagement timetable	w/c 19 October 2020	6 virtual meetings
Gwynedd special school headteachers' meeting – update and outline the next steps and the engagement schedule	11 November 2020	1 virtual meeting
Grŵp Llandrillo Menai representatives meeting – update and outline the next steps and the engagement schedule	18 November 2020	1 virtual meeting
Publish informal engagement on Arfon's post-16 education on the Council's website	10 November 2020	Council website, press release, e-mail to stakeholders
Engagement Session for Governors	30 November + 9 December 2020	2 virtual meetings
Engagement Session for Staff	1 + 7 December 2020	2 virtual meetings
Engagement Session for parents, learners, and any member of the public	2 + 8 December 2020	2 virtual meetings
Engagement Sessions with learners (2 groups from each secondary school in Arfon + 1 group from GLIM)	December 2020 (to be completed in January 2021)	13 virtual meetings

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5 MAIN MESSAGES FROM INFORMAL ENGAGEMENT

As a result of the engagement, the comments received can be grouped under the following themes below -

- Quality of education
- The Welsh language
- Learners' welfare
- Travel
- Facilities / learning environment
- Virtual learning

5.2 Quality of education

The majority of comments conveyed that the quality of education is generally good in the schools.

"We believe that any change in the provision / organisation must be able to clearly show how it will at least maintain the quality of the education and experiences currently offered."

There were recommendations among parents and learners on how to improve the current system which included the following comments -

- Increase practical learning and use of alternative environments.
- Increase real life experiences by offering workshops/sessions with local employees, lessons skills required after education such as paying taxes, how to buy a house and more information around politics and voting.
- Increase the number of subjects available in one institution so that all learners have the same opportunity without the need to travel.

In general, there was no wish to centralise the post-16 provision in Arfon.

"I would not be supportive of seeing a Tertiary College in Arfon which would perhaps see our schools lose their best teachers and weaken the experience and facilities for the rest of the pupils."

It was suggested that more collaboration with Grŵp Llandrillo Menai would be sensible rather than competing with them and what they offer.

"In my opinion, a system that allows collaboration between the schools and Coleg Menai would make sense rather than one that is going to try to compete with Coleg Menai."

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5.3 The Welsh Language

Several strong opinions were noted in favour of Welsh-medium and bilingual education.

"One crucial aspect of the current system is its provision through the medium of Welsh in Arfon schools. This is absolutely essential whatever comes out of the big conversation."

and

"Following courses through the medium of Welsh should be the default position where possible and we still need to promote the benefits of Welsh medium education."

The majority of comments recognised the importance of the Welsh language as an asset in Wales and in our communities. Several stakeholders supported maintaining and strengthening the Welsh-medium provision in the context of post-16 education.

Despite recognising the importance of the Welsh language, a minority believed it was important to ensure learners' skills in English as well,

"I am concerned about the provision of what is described as bi-lingual education...the process of education should ensure that all students achieve a good standard in English."

Among a small number of responses, there was concern about the quality of Welsh education, including the shortage of bilingual teachers and the Welsh-medium resources available,

"The lack of resources through the medium of Welsh is a problem."


5.4 The Welfare of Learners

A large part of the responses received acknowledge the pastoral and safe environment that the current schools offer because of the close relationship with teachers, a detailed knowledge of the learners and the sense of belonging. As one learner says,

"We know the teachers better here and they know us better – relationship with the teachers is important."

Some concerns were expressed that one large organisation would not be able to offer first class pastoral care. Several comments were received that the current schools have the skills and experience needed to ensure that learners receive the best care whilst studying their A - Level subjects. Comments were made expressing the desire from learners to receive the best quality education at their home school,

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"The sense of a close family in our school is continuously passed on to future pupils. I don't want to see this change."

There were comments that referred to the risk of setting up something that would be too big and that would not address the welfare of the learners as a matter of priority and that would not recognise the strengths and weaknesses of the learners as well as a school where they have been studying for a few years. That opinion was expressed among the parents –

"Since they (teachers) have taught the pupils in previous years they already know the pupils when they start in the sixth form. This means that they could ensure that every pupil reaches their full potential and if necessary, offer them pastoral care."

5.5 Travel

The opinion of many stakeholders was that travel has a negative impact on the education of post-16 learners, and that it is better for learners to stay in the same learning environment where possible. It was highlighted by some that the impact of post-16 learners travelling across the county for their education has a negative effect on the environment.

"81 people in taxis is not good for the environment."

Some said that if travel is to continue to be an element of post-16 education, investment is needed to improve the public transport system.

"In a rural area where provision is spread out, better buses and transport to allow students to access courses in different areas seems the best approach."

A suggestion was received from a minority that the educators should travel rather than the learners to offer specialist subjects.


"If we have a subject expert, perhaps we share teachers across different educational establishments? Instead of the students travelling, could the teachers do so instead?"

It was recognised that travel between schools and colleges is an unavoidable factor in an area such as Arfon, and it was suggested that centralising the provision would not remove the need to travel completely to attend post-16 courses.

"From centralisation of 6th form, the problem remains; young people having to travel from their local area to be educated in a centrally located 6th form."

5.6 Facilities and learning environment

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Many of the comments regarding the learning environment stated that there is a need to invest in the existing buildings in the Arfon area to modernise them and create a suitable learning environment for post-16 education.

"Our schools need to be developed with spending on modern resources, not spending on a brand-new college in order to get rid of our traditional 6th form."

However, a small number indicated that the quality of the education was more of a priority than the learning environment and an environment with updated facilities does not necessarily lead to first class post-16 education.

"Modern facilities are important but not as important as quality of provision and a high level of attainment."

It was suggested to utilise the money to invest in our school buildings enabling all learners to benefit from the modern facilities.

"Despite the excellent teaching that takes place, a learning environment that is supported with dedicated resources resulting from equal and fair funding from Cyngor Gwynedd promotes learning and teaching."

5.7 Virtual learning

A large number of the responses expressed concern about any proposals that suggested that technology could replace face-to-face learning. It was suggested that technology should be used to support learning in a structured way not at the expense of face-to-face teaching.

"...however, digital technology has a significant role to play in 'blended learning' when it complements rather than replaces teaching."

In addition, a large number were in favor of using technology as an additional learning tool to enrich the educational experience.

"Teaching through virtual methods has now become familiar to us all. With monitoring the quality of education it can be an effective method of teaching. Cost effective too!!"

Many anticipated the financial benefits that could result from using technology to provide a combined learning system if the teachers received standard training and suitable resources were available.

"The use of technology will reduce the need to travel between schools... time and money should be invested in creating digital resources and providing appropriate training for staff as not all of them possess the digital skills to the same standard."

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5.8 The main messages received from the informal engagement process can be summarised as follows:

- The main priority is the Quality of Education.
- ICT should be used to supplement and support face-to-face learning.
- That Welsh and bilingual Education is fundamentally important (despite comments to the contrary).
- That the capital investment should be used to improve the facilities of our secondary schools in general so that all learners aged 11-18 can benefit.
- That there is general opposition to any intention to centralise the provision
- That there were several comments about the provision of GLIM in terms of quality, medium, and pastoral care.

6. NEW CONSIDERATIONS IN THE WAKE OF THE PANDEMIC THAT MAY AFFECT THE DIRECTION OF POST-16 EDUCATION

6.1 Virtual Learning

In the period of the pandemic when the schools and colleges were closed, all learning was moved to online virtual learning. Although this medium was not ideal for all learners, it was an effective means of keeping in touch with the school during the lockdown. A general response from post-16 learners during the informal engagement period on post-16 education in Arfon was that the majority preferred to receive their education with their peers in a class in front of a teacher and that technology could be used to complement and support the face to face learning. The opinion of parents during the informal engagement on post-16 education in Arfon was the same with the majority in favour of face-to-face learning. Considering the significant investment that has been made in the technology to enable virtual learning during the pandemic, real consideration should be given to hybrid learning models as a way forward for post-16 education in Arfon. We should strive to improve on the advances made in the field of digital learning during the pandemic.

6.2 E-Sgol

[E-Sgol | Website](#) This project is funded by the Welsh Government in order to assist schools in mainly rural areas with their post-16 and Welsh-medium provision. E-Sgol can make it possible for schools to offer more subjects for post-16 learners. The learning takes place virtually through *Microsoft Teams* and combined learning methods are used using Hwb. The obvious advantage of an E-Sgol in a rural area is that there is no need to travel from one school to another and that leads to more time in the school where the pupils are registered. With that comes financial savings as there are no travel costs to go to lessons in other schools leading to a reduction in carbon footprint, together with improving the experience for the learner.

6.3 Post-16 travel pass

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As a result of the abolition of the cost attached to the travel ticket for post-16 learners, pupils are free to travel from their homes to any post-16 education institution in Gwynedd on certain specific journeys free of charge. In abolishing the fee, one barrier to enabling learners to choose to continue in education in the post-16 period has been removed.

6.4 Estyn Report

In January 2021 Estyn published a thematic report called [Post-16 Partnerships](#) which gives attention to the strategic partnership work for post-16 education in schools and colleges in Wales.

The main findings of the report are:

According to the majority of senior leaders in schools with a sixth form, the relationship with their local colleges is not as strong as it is with other schools on the whole.

- Many providers work together effectively to share post-16 provision where learners from different providers come together to form collective teaching groups.
- In a few cases, different planning, funding and oversight regimes hinder productive partnerships between providers.

The findings in the Estyn report recognises the Gwynedd and Anglesey Consortium as good practice.

7 CONCLUSIONS

7.1 It was noted from the engagement period that the quality of the education was the main priority and ensuring that the experience is available to all learners. Other prominent themes were the Welsh language and the provision of Welsh and bilingual education. Also, due to the pandemic, the use of technology was discussed at length, and the general opinion expressed was that face-to-face learning is the best educational experience any learner can have, but that digital learning can support the face-to-face contact.

7.2 Following on from the informal engagement period, it became clear that there was no desire to centralise the provision on one site such as an Academic College or to co-locate with Grŵp Llandrillo Menai.

7.3 This is the Education Department's ambition for post-16 education in Arfon:

- A post-16 education system that can offer more face-to-face courses and hybrid courses as it is less dependent on transporting learners in taxis from one location to another, to improve the learner's experience, and respond to the current financial

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austerity situation and increase in fuel costs, together with contributing to reducing the carbon footprint.

- Appropriate numbers of learners following courses to ensure rich learning experiences and valuable opportunities to share experiences and flourish amongst peers.
- Sufficient variety in the choice of courses available to all learners.
- Excellent pastoral support, personal support, health, and wellbeing support for all learners.
- A significant investment in the resources and infrastructure to ensure appropriate spaces for hybrid pedagogy provision as a means of preparing learners to be independent learners.
- A consistent experience that would ensure fairness for all learners in wherever they study.

7.3 The Education Department seeks permission from the Cabinet to undertake further work with stakeholders that form the Gwynedd and Anglesey Post-16 Education Consortium to develop possible models for post-16 Education in Arfon following the outcome of the informal engagement period.


8 NEXT STEPS

- 8.1 Dependent on approval from the Cabinet to carry out further work with stakeholders who form the Gwynedd and Anglesey Post-16 Education Consortium to develop possible models for post-16 education in Arfon, the intention is to proceed immediately with the work of looking at the current system and key considerations in order to strengthen the post-16 provision in Arfon.
- 8.2 If the Cabinet decides to approve the recommendation, it is anticipated that a further report will be submitted to the Cabinet in the Autumn term 2023 to report back on the results of the work on developing possible models for post-16 education in Arfon.

9 ANY CONSULTATIONS HELD PRIOR TO THE RECOMMENDATION OF THE DECISION

The Well-being of Future Generations Act

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The Education Department has a role to promote the well-being goals of the Act among the county's learners through its activities and projects. The Act places a duty on public bodies in Wales to improve economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being. As part of the duty the Council has published well-being objectives which outline how we will improve well-being in the "Gwynedd Plan 2018-2023". It is intended to take into account the requirements of the well-being act and carry out an assessment in the context of the 7 well-being goals of the Act as a result of the work to develop possible models for post-16 Arfon provision.

Equality

The Education Department has a responsibility to promote equality together with general duties to ensure fairness and foster good relationships. The Equality Act 2010 requires the Council to consider the effect of any change to a new policy or procedure on people with protected equality characteristics, namely race, gender, disability, language, religion or belief and age.

An initial Equality Impact Assessment has been drawn up as part of the work of illustrating a current overview of the post-16 education provision in Gwynedd, and the assessment will be updated regularly as a result of further discussions. **See Appendix 1.**

10 THE OPINION OF THE STATUTORY OFFICERS

Monitoring Officer:

"This report has been the subject of input from the Legal Services. No observations to add from a propriety perspective."

Head of Finance:

"The decision sought is to hold further discussions in order to undertake modelling work. Apart from any direct costs to develop the models I am satisfied that the decision sought will not create a spending commitment in itself. The Cabinet will require further details, including detailed financial estimates, before reaching any decision on the way forward following the modelling."

Appendices:

Appendix 1 - Equality Impact Assessment