

APPENDIX A:

LOCAL MEMBER'S COMMENTS FOR CABINET REPORT 28 MARCH 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to offer comments as a local member on the intention to close Ysgol Felinwnda from 31 August 2023.

When formulating an opinion on the matter, I considered the opinion of the local community, governors, and others involved with the school.

Ysgol Felinwnda has been serving the rural communities of Saron and Dinas with excellence since 1895. It is a school that has been providing successful education for generations, and the staff and governors have succeeded in ensuring a learning environment where the children feel safe and thrive.

Estyn ruled that the school provides good education in their last two inspections.

There is no denying that Ysgol Felinwnda is the smallest school in Gwynedd, that the number of pupils has fallen to 8 by January 2023, and that future projections are fragile. I can therefore understand that Gwynedd Council wants to consider the future of the school, this is reasonable.

Nevertheless, I am not of the opinion that the statutory process recommended by the Cabinet to follow, namely to issue a Statutory Notice on March 28, in order to close the school from 31 August 2023, is a process that will ensure justice and fairness for pupils, parents or the school community. This will not give stakeholders any opportunity to be part of any discussion or offer input about the school's future.

The Welsh Government's School Organisation Code 011/2018 states that a statutory process can be followed which omits public consultation, when there are less than 10 pupils. However, this was not the procedure followed by Gwynedd Council, when it was considered and decided to close Ysgol Llanaelhaearn and Abersoch. These schools were in a very similar situation in terms of pupil numbers.

In addition, Ysgol Llanaelhaearn and Abersoch had initial discussions with Gwynedd Council in order to consider options for the future. A school review panel was also set up to discuss the future of the schools, and discussions took place for a year before holding a public consultation. This gave the stakeholders the opportunity to contribute to possible options to solve the main challenges. The end of the process is the publication of a Statutory Notice. Why doesn't Ysgol Felinwnda have the same opportunities that these schools had?

I therefore ask the Cabinet to postpone the decision to issue a statutory warning, and instead hold discussions and public consultation first, before coming to a further decision on the matter.

The recommended process does not give the school, parents or the community the opportunity to offer a voice or hold a discussion on the future of the school, or work to increase the number of pupils.

I would like to highlight that there have been no discussions with Gwynedd Council on the matter, apart from one short meeting of less than half an hour with governors and staff at the beginning of March. This was a meeting to note Gwynedd Council's intention to issue a Statutory Notice on 28 March. A meeting to mark a fait accompli rather than a meeting offering an opportunity for discussion.

As part of the statutory process, the Cabinet report includes impact assessments on the Welsh language, the community, and the quality and standards of education, but community members, parents, staff and the governors have not had the opportunity to propose input on these.

In the same way, there was no opportunity to offer an opinion on the choice of an alternative school, and with regard to the proposal to designate Ysgol Bontnewydd as an alternative school, I believe that this requires further consideration.

No one doubts the success of Ysgol Bontnewydd as an educational institution, but Ysgol Llandwrog also has excellences that also merit consideration as an alternative school. The school is approximately the same distance from Ysgol Felinwnda, it has received a good judgment for the standard of education from Estyn. More relevantly, there has been a strong connection between Ysgol Felinwnda and Ysgol Llandwrog for some years. The same Headteacher is shared, and joint activities are held weekly. The mood and nature of Ysgol Llandwrog as a rural school is also more similar to Felinwnda. Felinwnda pupils know Llandwrog teachers and are friends with the children. It would be easier for pupils to assimilate in Llandwrog.

Further discussions and public consultation would provide an opportunity to voice a wider opinion on these issues.

I also express my concern about the effect of closing the school on Canolfan Bro Llanwnda, which is a building in a rural location next door to the school. Various social activities and the Cylch Meithrin is held here.

Although the school does not often use the Centre directly, and it is concluded in the impact assessment that any closure would have a neutral effect on the Centre, in my opinion, it would have a negative effect on the Canolfan Bro Llanwnda. The presence of a school next door, where parents and staff call daily, preserves and increases awareness of the Centre which is in a very rural location.

In the same way, the presence of the school offers an educational continuum for the children of the Cylch Meithrin.

Conclusion

I would be grateful if you would consider my comments above.

Closing a school that has been serving a community for 125 years is no small matter to be accomplished over a few weeks.

It should be remembered that this decision to issue a Statutory Notice has come without notice and without any initial discussions and that no effort or opportunity has been given to discuss the possibility of increasing the number of pupils.

Therefore, for the sake of natural justice, and the principles of Ffordd Gwynedd, I ask the Cabinet to reconsider issuing a Statutory Notice to close Ysgol Felinwnda.

Instead, an opportunity should be offered to hear the voice of the school and the community, by holding further discussions and public consultation as the first step in the process of assessing and considering the future of Ysgol Felinwnda.