

ITEM 6 - QUESTIONS

(A) A question from a Member of the Public

(1) Question from Mr Ieuan Wyn on behalf of Cylch yr Iaith (*address provided in accordance with the requirements of the Constitution*)

“Given that the Council's Education Department and the Cabinet have allowed a situation where -

- children are immersed in the language immersion units for 20% less of the time than they were previously, due to cutting the time the children are at the units from five days a week to four;
- staffing at the immersion units has been cut from two teachers to one;
- immersion units are having to close at times due to staff absences and a shortage of qualified supply teachers;
- and, due to this reduction, limiting the capacity of immersion unit staff to go to the schools to provide guidance and support;

is it true to say that the Council's Education Department and Cabinet have been responsible for weakening the effectiveness of the immersion provision, and that the situation needs to be rectified?”

Response - Cabinet Member for Education, Councillor Beca Brown

“A report based on the Education Department's vision for the Immersion System towards 2023 and beyond was submitted before the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee on 10 June 2021. It was noted in the report that immersion education is at the core of Gwynedd's education language policy and the WESP. It was also noted that the pilot commissioned at the request of the Council's Cabinet highlighted the need for the new vision to consider the welfare of the learners, and the need for them to keep in touch with their peers while attending the language units as many found it difficult to settle after returning to their local school; together with the need to strengthen the relationship with schools to enable further progress in terms of developing in service training for the staff based on language acquisition and successful immersion principles. When discussing the new vision with Gwynedd's Primary and Secondary headteachers on June 16th and 17th, 2021 the intention for the latecomers to continue the link with their local school during the intensive immersion course was welcomed. As a result all learners attend a language immersion centre for 4 days a week over a period of 10 weeks. On the 5th day the children return to their schools with the support of a member of staff from the language unit. The Cabinet unanimously approved this decision on 6 July 2021.

Since establishing the immersion education system in January 2023, two intensive immersion courses have been held. The teachers' assessments indicate the learners' achievement at the end of the Spring and Summer course is consistent with the results of previous courses. Head teachers' comments are also positive and indicate that the children appreciate the opportunity to keep in touch with their school and their peers, in addition they recognise the relationship between both the units and the schools have strengthened.

When establishing the new Immersion Education System a new staffing structure was adopted to include a senior management team: Head and Deputy; teachers and senior assistants. The structure ensures continuous professional development for all members of staff and permanent contracts, a guarantee for the workforce to ensure consistency and continuity within the system. The new structure within the system recognises the contribution of all staff as key to the success of the immersion courses.

We know for certain that no immersion language unit within the system has been closed as a result of the absence or shortage of qualified Teachers during the past twelve months, and the new staffing structure ensures more resilience within the Immersion System to be able to respond to circumstances where a member of staff is absent.

Within the system, a weekly opportunity is provided for the staff to visit mainstream schools to support and help teachers in general in terms of planning and supporting newcomers to the county and children who need an extra boost. They also spend a period at the end of each course providing aftercare support for the children. In addition, the staff of the immersion system have conducted specific training for all Foundation Phase staff in the county based on successful immersion principles and similar courses will be held for KS2 and KS3 staff at the beginning of the autumn term this year.

We are currently consulting with primary and secondary headteachers in more English-speaking areas to collaborate, train and offer practical support in their schools throughout September before the immersion courses start on 1st October 2023. This is a new proposal for schools in order to respond to the increasing challenges they face in these areas.

The Education Department and the Council's Cabinet's main priority when establishing and implementing the Immersion Education System was the child's interests and well-being. Full consideration has been given to the well-being of all learners in ensuring that they are in a good place to learn and acquire a new language. As a result we consider the provision to be more inclusive and effective.

Furthermore, a full team of Estyn inspectors inspected the authority last week and within the inspection they chose to specifically scrutinize the Welsh language field. Although the findings of that inspection is not yet public, that report will have been published at the beginning of September."

(B) Questions from Elected Members

(1) Question from Councillor Dewi Jones

"Does the Council consider deprivation levels in a community when determining how much provision a community receives from Cyngor Gwynedd's Youth Service?"

Response - Cabinet Member for Education, Councillor Beca Brown

"As part of the process of the Youth Service Re-Modelling in 2018 an Equality Impact Assessment was completed which included details of other features such as Deprivation and Poverty. In response to this assessment, it was noted the importance for the service

to continue to maintain an office and youth centre in the 2 most deprived communities (in line with the Welsh Government's definition - Maesgeirchen and Caernarfon). In addition to attendance, the service in partnership with Caernarfon Town Council and with Maesgeirchen Partnership, has ensured consistent provision in these 2 communities for young people throughout the year (Social Club in Caernarfon; Year-round Community Projects in Maesgeirchen).

The service continues to be a free service with a presence in all secondary schools and communities across Gwynedd. The community activities taking place have reached 42 communities across the county, including other deprived areas such as Deiniolen, Bethesda, Blaenau Ffestiniog and Penygroes. The Post 16 Support Team also supports young people across the county, responding to their needs regardless of where they live.

The Youth Service is there to serve young people across Gwynedd and recognises that a young person from any community in the county can face obstacles and challenges growing up, disconnecting from education, training or work, no matter where they live.

Over the past year there have been almost nineteen thousand (18,736) contacts with the service from Gwynedd's children and young people. Over ten thousand (10,747) of these are linked to the community projects.

Youth work is a universal service that respects the perspectives and opinions of young people by having them contribute to the design, creation and establishment of services and provision that meet their needs and meet their aspirations. Provision depends on the participation of young people taking into account their requirements, wants, interests and aspirations.”

(2) Question from Councillor Huw Rowlands

"What schemes are being implemented to improve the refuse collection arrangements in Gwynedd, in order to overcome the current deficiencies, so that collections happen on time and in accordance with the statutory requirements?"

Response - Cabinet Member for the Environment, Councillor Dafydd Meurig

“Thank you for the question.

As you will be aware, work is currently ongoing to transform the waste collection service here in Gwynedd. We work closely with the workforce, supervisors and unions to transform this field.

High levels of sickness and historical arrangements meant that the service was unable to maximise productive working hours in the past. It is likely that our residents did not see any significant difference in their collections as additional resources were provided in an attempt to overcome these problems. This led to significant expenditure, indeed, Cyngor Gwynedd was the second most expensive county in Wales in relation to expenditure per household on waste services in 21-22.

In order to address this, we have re-evaluated and have re-designed the collection service, and this was the main reason why collection failures happened, in particular in the Arfon area over recent months.

However, the work of laying the managerial foundations has been completed. We have also now met and corresponded with all staff members to emphasise our expectations. The new arrangements that have been implemented appear to be working, and we expect Gwynedd's residents to see an improvement in their collections.

The service might not be perfect from the outset. We cannot guarantee that all bins will be collected at the right time, every time. However, efforts are being made to improve communication with communities by providing timely information on social media and to local members. If the crews are unable to collect on the usual day, all efforts will be made to arrange collection on the following day.

A job advert for two posts was advertised on 22/06/2023, which will help to overcome any short-term staffing problems. We are also re-examining our fleet, to ensure that we have the most suitable and reliable vehicles. We will also invest in technology to assist the team leaders to manage the routes more effectively.

We apologise for the inconvenience that this has caused Gwynedd's residents, but we are confident that we will see a service, that our staff and residents, can be proud of again."

(3) Question from Councillor Gwynfor Owen

"As someone who represents two of the best beaches in the world, namely Llandanwg Beach and Harlech Beach, whilst also stating that various other beaches in our county fall into the same category, I would like to express my disappointment that the Council had not applied for Blue Flag status for any of our beaches this year. Can I ask what was the reason that the Council did not apply?"

Response - Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for the Economy, Councillor Nia Jeffreys

"In Wales, the Blue Flag Beach Awards are administered by Keep Wales Tidy. It involves an annual process, and applications are assessed against set guidelines and criteria. The Blue Flag Beach Awards guidelines are reviewed annually, with increasing demands on local authorities.

In Gwynedd, the Council's beach management functions are delivered by the Maritime Service. The Service prepares annual risk assessments for individual beaches – and the beach management arrangements are based upon mitigation measures identified within the risk assessments. For a period of over twenty years, applications submitted by the Council have been approved on this basis. However, the current Blue Flag guidelines requires independent risk assessments to consider certain aspects, and in this regard the Council's risk assessment are not considered adequate. The Council's risk assessments are undertaken by experienced and qualified staff with detailed understanding of individual beaches.

Recent changes to the Blue Flag Award guidelines have been discussed with other local authorities in North West Wales. Concerns have been raised that additional requirements are expensive, onerous and at odds with established beach management arrangements, and it was decided that Gwynedd Council, Isle of Anglesey and Conwy Council would not submit applications this year. Gwynedd Council has not celebrated Blue Flag Awards

during two of the last three years, and yet our beaches have been amongst the busiest ever. The Blue Flag is just one accreditation which evaluates beaches based various criteria, and may not necessarily acclaim the outstanding features on Llandanwg and Harlech beaches as referred to.

Our beaches are as clean, safe and popular as they have always been. Water quality is measured regularly, with many beaches achieving the highest standard of 'excellent'. Our beaches remain amongst the best in Wales and will continue to attract thousands of visitors again this summer".

(4) Question from Councillor Jina Gwyrfaï

"In collaboration with Keep Wales Tidy, several Gwynedd communities are trying to reduce litter. The 'Tidying Up Team' is installing additional bins in strategic locations.

However, the litter problem is often worsened, although unintentionally, by this Council as:

- i) Litter/recycling lorries scatter litter as they roam through the area;
- ii) Grass-cutting contractors leave the cuttings and litter that has come to light on the roadside.

I would like to know what measures are in the pipeline to improve this situation?"

Response – Cabinet Member for Highways, Municipal and Gwynedd Consultancy, Councillor Berwyn Parry Jones (on behalf of the 2 relevant services, i.e. HE/YGC and Environment)

"Unfortunately, this is a historical problem within the collection service, and unfortunately the situation gets worse when the weather is windy. It is also likely that the Cartgylchu we use for the recycling is not the most durable equipment in some conditions. In addition, we see and receive complaints that some locations are worse than others, namely around entrances to our transfer sites and some routes that are serviced by the small trucks. We intend to re-examine these vehicles with a view to replace them with more suitable vehicles. We will also keep track of the situation, through our complaint's procedure, and remind the workforce to close the back doors of the lorry after loading and before driving to the next bin collection.

Further to the comment, I would also like to confirm that the Streetscene Service will review their litter pick routes within the urban area. As a result, the officers will work closely with the Waste and Recycling Collection Service to ensure, as far as is reasonably possible, that the collection of street litter within specific locations, takes place as soon as possible after the recycling rounds so that any loose litter can be collected promptly.

Roadside maintenance outside the towns and villages is undertaken through private contractors. The agreement only includes the grass cutting work, and the subsequent litter pick is carried out by our internal work teams. However, the contractors are required to report their location daily when arranging the cutting work so that it will be possible subsequently to co-ordinate the 'litter pick' work in a timely manner after the verge cutting programme. Some locations are subject to a greater litter problem, such as the busiest roads in the County, and our resources will be prioritized to these areas with the other areas subsequently visited.

Unfortunately, roadside litter is a problem on our County and Trunk Roads which is not only a breach of the law but also an eyesore and has a bad effect on the beautiful environment we have here in Gwynedd. We will also over the next few months be arranging an awareness campaign reminding residents and visitors to dispose of their rubbish in an appropriate and correct manner.”

(5) Question from Councillor Elin Hywel

"With a substantial increase in the prominent use of Vapes by young people, especially young people of secondary education age, what steps are the Council taking to support our secondary schools to tackle this new and concerning challenge?"

Response - Cabinet Member for Education, Councillor Beca Brown

“According to the recent research 'Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) E-cigarette use (vapes) among young people in the UK 2023.' the proportion of children experimenting with vaping has grown by 50% year on year, from one in thirteen to one in nine. Children's awareness of promoting vapes has also increased, particularly in stores where more than half of all children say they see e-cigarettes promoted, and online where nearly a third report promoting e-cigarettes.

This is a growing problem in our secondary schools across the Authority and reflects the same challenge that communities across Gwynedd have.

The challenge of pupils starting Vaping comes from a specific age profile which is mainly associated with secondary schools. As a result, it is suitable for schools to review and adapt relevant policies in this area. In addition to this it is essential that schools adapt the design of their curriculum to meet specific challenges such as Vaping. The Curriculum for Wales and its Health and Wellbeing area of learning and experience is a very suitable platform to achieve this.

The Education Department is awaiting confirmation of grant funding to support this area and specific work is planned to be commissioned to support schools. As part of this scheme, work will be undertaken to target learners and raise awareness of the dangers of vaping, substance misuse, impact on the body, mental health and social implications. The scheme will be implemented in conjunction with the 'What's the score?' service, the Youth Justice Service and the ALN and Inclusion Service.

Research and data on the risks of Vaping is very limited, and the Education Department will continue to be proactive by taking advantage of any guidance or training being developed in this area.

In addition to the above, it is the responsibility of everyone to ensure that we report any illegal cases of Vaping sales to children and young people under the age of 18 through the Trading Standards service.”

(6) Question from Councillor Richard Glyn Roberts

"Bearing in mind:-

- That there has been no significant change to Gwynedd's Welsh education policy over the last twenty years to seek to counteract the language shift and the

continuous fraying, from Census to Census, of the remaining Welsh-speaking society,

- And after it became apparent that the education department is not monitoring the medium of education in the county's schools,
- And in light of the uncertainty regarding the exact number of pupils in the county who receive education through the medium of English

Is it not timely to address this and give serious consideration, from anew, to increase the provision at every secondary school in Gwynedd previously in categories 2A or 2B so that it corresponds to the provision in 3P Welsh-medium schools (i.e. where 100% of the children undertake at least 90% of their education in Welsh) and introduce a suitable monitoring system at once to ensure this?"

Response - Cabinet Member for Education, Councillor Beca Brown

"I refer to the response I gave to a similar question from Councillor Rhys Tudur in the last Full Council meeting held on 4 May 2023. At that time, I noted that our education language policy is a local matter for us in Gwynedd, and it is a matter for the Cabinet to consider to what extent we believe it is necessary to take steps to update the policy or not. The national system for categorising schools according to the Welsh medium provision is currently a non-statutory guide, and schools are not expected to record their category in accordance with the guide until PLASC January 2024. The school categorisation system according to the Welsh medium provision is a national administrative framework, rather than a tool to change policy locally, and a national administrative framework has existed since 2007.

In the same response I also noted with pride the intention to update the Language Policy to reflect the changes that have been taking place in education recently e.g Curriculum for Wales will be implemented in all schools in Gwynedd and across Wales from September 2023 onwards. The Department has also been collecting information on the Welsh and bilingual provision in our schools and this information as well as the findings of the scrutiny investigation which looks at the Welsh language in 3 secondary schools in the county (which will be known in September 2023), will be of assistance as we proceed to update the Language Policy over the coming months.

Of course, our Language Policy drives the school categorization system, as the categorization system is based on the provision of our schools as defined by our policy. In this context, I would like to point out that discussions have started in response to the need to update the policy, and this work will be inclusive and the subject of consultation, with the intention of achieving this goal within 12 months."

(7) Question from Councillor Rhys Tudur

"Considering the criticism the Council received in an article on Cymru Fyw '*Teithio Llesol: Siom nad yw rhai Cyngorau â diddordeb*' (Active Travel: Disappointment that some Councils are uninterested), which involved applications for Active Travel route grants beyond the annual core funding pot of £500,000 per year;

To what extent has the Council managed to obtain Active Travel grants that are beyond its core funding pot for rural areas over the last five years and to what extent does the

Council need to improve its staffing structures to have more success in making future applications?"

Response - Cabinet Member for the Environment, Councillor Dafydd Meurig

"Thank you to Councillor Rhys Tudur for the question. Certainly, improving walking and cycling infrastructure in Gwynedd is one of the Council's priorities and over the years Cyngor Gwynedd has achieved innovative work in this field, with 116 KM of walking and cycling routes across the county.

However, it is important to acknowledge that introducing improvements to the network is very costly and, therefore, the Council is very dependent on being able to attract grant funding to achieve any substantial change.

The Welsh Government offers financial grants for Active Travel schemes on an annual basis. Whilst it is not always timely to submit an application for a range of reasons, which include ensuring the consent of landowners etc., substantial work is proceeding to ensure that plans are in place and that grant funding bids are as strong as possible.

The demand for this funding is very competitive and, in order to succeed, there is a need to submit evidence of how any scheme would address the Government's specific aims of:

- Reducing the number of current vehicles on the road network;
- Increasing the number of people who walk and cycle on their daily journeys.

In rural areas, with a lower population, making the case and addressing these criteria is much more challenging.

In response to this, councils, representing rural areas in mid-Wales, are attempting to put pressure on the Government to steer a strategic plan for active travel in rural areas to ensure that our rural communities receive worthy support.

This year, Cyngor Gwynedd submitted a funding application to construct three plans, namely:

- A £1.6m foot and cycle path between Tywyn and Aberdyfi;
- A £1.2m foot and cycle path on Ffordd Penrhos, Bangor;
- A £350,000 foot and cycle path between the Pengelli Wyn Estate and Arfon Leisure Centre, Caernarfon.

The Council has secured funding to construct an Active Travel Route on Ffordd Penrhos, but the other two applications were unsuccessful this year. In addition, £280,000 has been secured from the Safe Routes in Communities fund to improve walking and cycling provision near Ysgol Godre'r Berwyn in Bala.

In the period from 2018/19 to 2022/23, the Council submitted applications that would be worth approximately £10.5 million, and it received approximately £1.5 million of what was requested by means of financial sources such as Active Travel and Safe Routes in Communities.

Despite this, we have also benefited from using the core funding to develop schemes that have enabled the Council to attract funding from different sources, which include £2.6

million to introduce improvements to the Brynrefail roundabout and we have also managed to secure £1.8 million from the Levelling Up fund to introduce improvements to Lôn Las Ogwen.

Officers are discussing how we can strengthen other schemes with Transport for Wales to secure future funding. Officers are using a proportion of the £500,000 Active Travel core funding that has been received to develop schemes in other areas, with the intention of being able to submit grant applications to realise schemes in the coming years.

Whilst accepting capacity challenges faced by the Service that is mainly responsible for developing and managing Active Travel schemes over the past year or two, I am confident that the worst is behind us. In addition, the paths and access unit has joined the Traffic and Projects Service, and I am confident that the close collaboration across the field will strengthen our efforts in the field of Active Travel in the future.”