

CYNGOR GWYNEDD - Report to Cyngor Gwynedd Cabinet

Title of item:	Performance Report of the Cabinet Member for Education
Cabinet Member:	Cllr Beca Brown, Cabinet Member for Education
Relevant Officer:	Debbie A. W. Jones
Date of meeting:	10 October 2023

1. The decision sought:

To accept and note the information in the report.

2. The reason why the Cabinet needs to make the decision:

In order to ensure effective performance management.

3. Introduction and Rationale

3.1 Background / Introduction

The purpose of this report is to update you on what has been achieved in the field for which I, as Cabinet Member for Education, have responsibility. This includes addressing the summer results, the Estyn inspection of the Authority's Education services, as well as outlining the latest with the pledges made in the Council Plan; the Department's day-to-day work; as well as the latest in terms of savings and cuts schemes.

First of all, I wish to congratulate our schools and learners on excellent results in the GCSE and A Level examinations this summer. I send my best wishes to every young person in Gwynedd who is stepping into the next exciting chapter in their lives, whether to further or higher education, training, apprenticeships or employment.

Also, as you are aware, Garem Jackson has now left his post, citing personal reasons, after being the Head of Education in Gwynedd since 2017. I am eager to take this opportunity to express my appreciation and sincerest gratitude to him for his contribution and enthusiasm over the years, and certainly for his guidance and support to me as Cabinet Member for Education since May 2022, and I wish him the best for the future.

In June, Estyn conducted an inspection of the Authority's Education services and the report was published on 20 September 2023. The report is very positive and I am very proud of that, since it is testament to the hard work and contribution of everyone within the system.

We are implementing the Council Plan for 2023-28, and I herein report on progress to the end of August 2023, whilst acknowledging that it is early days in the context of some of the new pledges included in the document since April this year. Nevertheless, all matters have been the subject of discussion and have been scrutinised by myself at a performance challenge meeting, and I am especially happy with the Department's performance, and I will elaborate on the progress in the report.

3.2 The reasoning and justification for recommending the decision

The Performance on the Council Plan Pledges

Transform education for children in their early years

An external advisor has been commissioned to develop our information platform for the early years field in response to what the children and families of Gwynedd and early years providers / services have told us about the complexity of accessing services. We have also drawn up a draft Action Plan which will be a means to shape a new Strategy for the Early Years field in Gwynedd. I look forward to reporting further on progress in this field of key importance next time.

Free school meals

In December 2021, the Welsh Government announced its plan to provide free school meals to all primary pupils across Wales. Since the announcement, substantial work has been achieved jointly between the Education Department and the Property Development Team to ensure that every primary school in the county has purposeful equipment, and an appropriate dining area to enable every pupil to take advantage of the scheme.

Since 1 September this year, I am very proud that every primary age learner from Reception to Year 6 in Gwynedd is able to receive free school meals. Securing a hot meal at school to every primary child is of great assistance to families, considering the increase in the cost of living, and I am eager for as many families as possible to take advantage of this scheme. As a result, I will ask the Department to promote the offer amongst children and families as well as monitor the numbers who choose school dinners, in order to encourage more families to take advantage of it.

Modernise buildings and the learning environment

As a result of the poor condition of the building and existing learning environment at Ysgol Treferythyr, we will build a new school in Cricieth to improve the learning environment and ensure the best resources in order for learners to thrive. After cutting the turf on the new school site on 6 March 2023, the construction work is progressing

well on the site, and I am looking forward for the new school to open by September 2024.

It is also proposed to build a new school for Our Lady's School on the site of Ysgol Glanadda (now closed) in Bangor. Although the work of confirming the final construction costs for the new school continues, we have submitted the first part of the business case in order to release the funding, to Welsh Government.

It is also proposed to make improvements to Ysgol Hirael, as well as substantial modifications to Ysgol Tryfan in Bangor. Currently, we are in the process of creating initial designs for these improvements, and in due course we will be submitting business cases to Welsh Government to release the funds to realise our aspirations to ensure the best possible learning environment for the learners.

Ysgol y Faenol has also received a substantial extension. However, discussions regarding land transfers continue and consequently, we cannot complete the work on the school's car park at present. I am aware of the local concerns and frustration about the situation, and I wish to confirm that the Department and the Council are doing everything within their ability to try and resolve the situation and complete the project, which includes a new community centre.

I am delighted to be able to declare that we have secured a further £4.9m to improve the Condition and Suitability of 11 primary and secondary schools in Gwynedd, which are included in the final phase of the project. The purpose of this project is to improve the condition of our schools' existing buildings, and make alterations to the buildings in order to ensure that they are fit for purpose and make the best use of the space available. Work will start at the schools over the coming months.

During the Summer Term, we held two working groups with the Arfon headteachers in order to discuss and revisit the case for a gradual change for the post-16 education project in Arfon. The Department has reported back to the headteachers following the working groups held, and I will be submitting a report to the Cabinet soon based on the conclusions of the discussion.

Promote the well-being of children and young people and reduce the cost of sending children to school

This project is new to the Council Plan and is one of my main priorities as the Cabinet Member for Education. Since its establishment, questionnaires have been drawn up for school staff, parents and learners in order to gather information on the actual cost of attending school. This research will be the grounds to consider in what way schools, the Department and the Council can reduce costs and reduce the financial burden on

families from sending their children to school. Work is also progressing to develop an Equality Plan as a template for schools, taking into account the findings and main messages from the consultation held on the Authority's Equality Plan. I am looking forwards to report further on the progress of this project of key importance next time.

Extend opportunities for play and socialising for the county's children and young people

Over the summer, the Youth Service provided fun and well-being activities in the community for young people aged 11-25 as a part of the Summer of Fun project. The team managed to provide sessions at 18 locations across Gwynedd, with over 550 young people attending these sessions.

In addition, over 200 young people from Gwynedd attended the Llŷn ac Eifionydd National Eisteddfod as a part of partnership work between the Youth Service and the Eisteddfod. This initiative enabled young people from all parts of Gwynedd to have the experience of attending the National Eisteddfod free of charge.

In the Youth Work Excellence Awards 2022/23, the Well-being Festival held by the Service won the award for *'Showing excellence when planning and delivering in partnership on a local level'*, and Andrew Owen from the Service was named *'Outstanding Youth Worker'*. Jeremy Miles MS, Minister for the Welsh Language and Education, Welsh Government, visited the Cyngor Gwynedd tent at the Eisteddfod to chat with the young people and to congratulate Andrew on his success and for the excellent work he achieves with young people in Gwynedd, and as the Cabinet Member with responsibility for this incredibly important field, I also wish to take this opportunity to congratulate the service.

Modernise and extend the immersion provision to teach Welsh to children

On 6 July 2021, the Cabinet approved a new vision for a modern Immersion Education System in Gwynedd. This new vision also includes a capital investment of £1.1 million from the Welsh Government for the purpose of establishing new immersion education sites in Bangor and Tywyn, as well as improving existing facilities at the Eifionydd site, Porthmadog.

The work has already been completed on the Eifionydd and Bangor sites, and we have just obtained planning permission for the Tywyn immersion education site. In June this year, we also submitted a business case for the second phase of capital funding to the value of a further £1.1m in order to invest in the three primary immersion education sites located in Caernarfon, Pwllheli and Dolgellau. We are currently waiting to hear about the success of this business case from Welsh Government.

The Welsh Government's Late Immersion revenue grant also enables us to modernise the immersion provision in our centres. Now, the Aberwla immersion plan has been developed, which is a differential scheme which bridges between the primary and

secondary. To accompany the scheme, we have the innovative digital project which places the Aberwla scheme and its characters on the VR stage. On 7 July, training was held at the request of Welsh Government in order to share this innovative resource nationally. As a result of the training, other authorities are expected to trial the resource and offer feedback in order to further develop and empower the project. A successful launch of the resource was held on the Gwynedd stall on the afternoon of Tuesday 8 August, at the Llŷn ac Eifionydd National Eisteddfod site. I would also like to take this opportunity to quote from Estyn's report regarding our provision for latecomers: *"The immersion centres are especially successful in terms of enabling latecomers to the language to procure Welsh. Staff at these centres also provide beneficial training to staff within schools and mainstream locations on how to support these pupils."*

The Department's day-to-day work

I am very proud of the recognition that Estyn have given in their report to the commitment of the Education Department and this Council to the Welsh language, it states: *"Promoting the Welsh language is a clear priority for the authority and education service. The authority invests heavily to ensure access to Welsh-medium and bilingual education and experiences for all children and young people in the county."* I am also very grateful to the members of the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee for their work in conducting the Gwynedd Category 3 Secondary Schools Scrutiny Investigation, and I look forward to hold discussions with my fellow Cabinet members on the recommendations of this report.

Also, the Department has been working over the past months on drawing up a 10-year Education Strategy for Gwynedd. An initial draft was submitted before the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee on 14 September 2023, and I look forward to continuing with the engagement and informal discussions on the content of the Strategy, before submitting this before the Cabinet to seek permission to carry out a public consultation on this before the end of the year.

One of the fields that have received considerable attention at performance challenging this year is the attendance of learners at our schools. We are aware that since the pandemic, the attendance levels of learners have not returned to what it was in pre-pandemic times, and the situation in Gwynedd reflects the national pattern. Attendance across the county indicates a general trend of reduction with illness highlighted as the main reason for this, along with the fact that continuous absence levels continue to be relatively high. In addition, levels of permanent exclusions and fixed-term exclusions are on the rise, particularly in secondary schools, and specifically in five schools in the county. A continuous work programme is in place, which reviews the service and provision with the aim of increasing attendance and reducing the number of exclusions

in the county. Estyn also acknowledged that the attendance rates of Gwynedd are not as robust as they were in the past, and noted that the rates do not compare favourably with the national rates at present. Consequently, the attendance of learners is one of the recommendations from the Estyn inspection of the Authority's Education services that will be afforded even more focus over the coming months.

To close, I wish to note that I am very excited about the success of the bid to the Sustainable Schools Challenge, Welsh Government, which means that we will build a new school that will be a community, environmentally friendly and sustainable campus, to the value of £12m in Bontnewydd, near Caernarfon. Jointly with the learners of Ysgol Bontnewydd, who were a part of the interview panel, we have appointed an architect company, TACP Architects from Wrexham, to design the new building. Although no change can be seen on the site at present, a vast number of alterations have been done on the site over the summer period. I am looking forwards to report further on the progress of this very exciting project next time.

3.3 The Savings Situation

The total of Savings Schemes 2023-24 for the department is £835,030, all of which has been realised. The Department's current savings target for 2024/25 is £111,880, all of which is on track to deliver on time.

4. Views of the Statutory Officers

4.1 Chief Finance Officer

I am satisfied that the report is a fair reflection of the financial situation of the Education Department.

4.2 Monitoring Officer

No observations to add in relation to propriety.