



Arolygiaeth Ei Fawrhydi dros Addysg a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru
His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales



A report on education services in

Cyngor Gwynedd

**Council Offices
Shirehall Street
Caernarfon
LL55 1SH**

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by

**Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and
Training in Wales**

This report is also available in Welsh

About Cyngor Gwynedd

Cyngor Gwynedd in north-west Wales has a total population of around 117,000. The local authority maintains 95 mainstream schools. There are 79 primary schools, 12 secondary schools and two all-age schools. The local authority also maintains two special schools. The Chief Executive took up the post in April 2021 and the Head of Education was appointed in November 2017. The Leader of the Council has been in post since May 2017 and the Cabinet Member for Education took up this role in May 2022.

The local authority's last inspection was conducted in 2013. Cyngor Gwynedd is one of six local authorities within the north Wales regional school effectiveness and improvement service (GwE). In 2022-2023, the local authority's net education budget is around £121,488,000. The delegated school budget per pupil in 2022-2023 is £5,277, which is higher than the Welsh average of £5,032.

Inspectors take account of a wide range of information about the local population when evaluating outcomes and the quality of education services. They consider this information alongside information about the national population. Some of the most useful information about children and young people in Gwynedd is noted below:

- Over a three-year-period, 13.5% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have been eligible for free school meals, which is lower than the Welsh average of 23%. Eight point two per cent (8.2%) of pupils aged 5 to 15 come from ethnic minorities, which is lower than the Welsh average of 13.3%
- A total of 275 children are looked after by the local authority
- Eight point two per cent (8.2%) of pupils aged 5 to 15 have additional learning needs or special educational needs (School Action)
- Eight point eight per cent (8.8%) of pupils aged 5 to 15 have additional learning needs or special educational needs (School Action Plus)
- Two point seven per cent (2.7%) of pupils aged 5 to 15 have additional learning needs or special educational needs (Statemented)
- One point one per cent (1.1%) of pupils aged 5 to 15 have additional learning needs or special educational needs (Individual Development Plan)
- One point four per cent (1.4%) of pupils aged 5 to 15 have English as an additional language (A, B or C)
- Sixty-two point 3 per cent (63.4%) of pupils aged 5 or over are fluent in Welsh, which is higher than the national average of 15.6%

Summary

The aim of the leaders of Cyngor Gwynedd is to ensure the best start for the county's children and young people. Education is a clear priority in the Council's plans and putting the needs of the county's residents at the heart of the authority's work is a core part of the 'Gwynedd Way' of working. The authority's staff embrace the principles of the 'Gwynedd Way' and strive to embed these principles in their day-to-day work.

On the whole and over time, the inspection outcomes of Cyngor Gwynedd's schools and other education settings are strong. The authority works productively with the north Wales regional school effectiveness and improvement service (GwE) to support providers and authority and GwE officers have a good knowledge of them. They have recently strengthened their systems for gathering and sharing information and this has improved the quality of discussions about individual providers. GwE's priorities are based on the priorities of schools in the region. This helps the service to respond suitably to the needs of providers and ensures that professional development provision is appropriate. Overall, intervention to support schools that are a cause of concern is very effective, but in a very few cases, it has not been timely enough.

The well-being of children and young people in Gwynedd benefits from the support provided by the Youth Service. This is especially true for vulnerable pupils who are at risk of not being in education, employment or training after they leave school. Historically, Gwynedd's school attendance rates have been strong, but they do not currently compare favourably with national rates. This is partly because there is not enough of a strategic focus on monitoring or promoting attendance, particularly the attendance of groups such as pupils who are eligible for free school meals.

Provision for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural needs has strengthened over recent years. There is now more capacity to support these pupils and management arrangements are clearer. However, neither the status of, nor the steps for accessing the behaviour support hubs, are wholly clear. Senior leaders also do not have a strategic overview of the outcomes or nature and quality of this provision.

Promoting the Welsh language is a clear priority for the authority and the education service. The authority is investing heavily to ensure access to Welsh-medium and bilingual education and experiences for all children and young people in the county. The immersion centres are particularly successful in enabling latecomers to the language to acquire Welsh. The staff in these centres also provide beneficial training for staff within schools and mainstream settings on how to support these pupils.

A strong feature of the authority's work with regard to the Welsh language is the range of valuable Welsh-medium resources that the authority's staff have developed. In response to the general shortage in this area, they have developed Welsh language resources for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) and their families. This includes developing or adapting resources that are appropriate to the authority's context, as well as securing translation rights for international resources. The staff of the immersion system have developed an innovative virtual resource to practise language patterns and vocabulary and dedicated podcasts on the benefits of learning Welsh.

The authority provides a wide range of post-16 courses that respond to the linguistic and economic needs of the county. The Gwynedd and Anglesey Post-16 Education Consortium works together effectively to provide a range of courses for pupils across a variety of locations. This can cause travel challenges for pupils and the authority provides a free travel pass to mitigate this. The authority has been reviewing Arfon's post-16 education arrangements for some years, but this process has been slow.

There are positive examples of leaders implementing beneficial strategies that have led to improvements. These include the authority's digital strategy, work on modernising schools and strengthening immersion provision. However, leaders have not been strategic enough in addressing all aspects of their work. In particular, their improvement work has not been effective enough in terms of provision for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, improving attendance and reviewing the post-16 provision in Arfon.

Safeguarding arrangements within the education service are generally sound. Officers understand their roles and responsibilities in this area and work effectively with children's services officers. Providers are given valuable support in terms of safeguarding and the quality of implementation of Part 5 of the Welsh Safeguarding Procedures is very thorough.

The local authority has a good understanding of the financial situation within the education service. Historically, the authority has succeeded in protecting the service from cuts, but this has proved to be more challenging in light of the current financial challenges.

Recommendations

- R1 Ensure that leaders act strategically on all aspects of their work and that they have suitable oversight and full consideration of risk regarding important aspects that have arisen during the inspection
- R2 Improve arrangements for monitoring, evaluating and promoting pupils' attendance
- R3 Strengthen provision to respond to the needs of pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and ensure arrangements for monitoring and improving the quality of that provision

What happens next

Following the publication of the inspection report, the local authority should update its plans to address the recommendations and to take account of shortcomings identified through the inspection process. The local authority should update its plans within three months of the publication of the inspection report.

Estyn will invite the provider to prepare case studies in relation to its work on developing Welsh-medium resources for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) and their families, and for Welsh language immersion. The study will be shared on Estyn's website.

Main findings

Outcomes

We were unable to provide a full evaluation of outcomes. This is as a result of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused the inspections of schools and most other education providers to be suspended since March 2020. It is also a result of the lack of data on outcomes that can be compared over time because the pandemic caused changes to the way that qualifications were awarded. This also affected most of the other data that we consider when making evaluations, such as school attendance, school exclusions and post-16 learner destinations, but we have recently begun to receive this type of data again. Any evaluations that follow provide context by reporting pre-pandemic outcomes or relate to more recent outcomes where the evidence base is valid and reliable.

On the whole and over time, the inspection outcomes of schools in Gwynedd are strong. Between September 2017 and March 2020, we inspected 46 settings. This included 35 primary schools, nine secondary schools, one all-age school and one special school. On the whole, inspection outcomes were positive, particularly in primary schools. Of the primary schools, follow-up activity was judged to be needed in only three of them. Of the secondary and all-age schools, follow-up activity was judged to be needed in four of them, including statutory follow-up in two of these schools. One school was judged to be in need of special measures, another school was judged to be in need of significant improvement and two schools were judged to be in need of Estyn review. Following improvements, none of these schools are now in need of follow-up activity. From September 2019 (when the procedure for inspecting the sector was changed), we inspected 11 non-maintained settings, but none were placed in a follow-up category.

Since February 2022, when we resumed school inspections following the pandemic, 25 settings have been inspected. This includes nine primary schools, one secondary school and 15 non-maintained settings. Overall, outcomes are positive and no settings were judged to be in need of statutory follow-up activity. There was no follow-up for the nurseries or seven primary schools. Two primary schools and the secondary school were judged to be in need of Estyn review.

Between 2017 and 2019, the performance of a majority of secondary schools in Gwynedd was better than, or similar to, what is expected in many of the performance indicators in key stage 4. The performance of a minority of secondary schools was lower or significantly lower than expected. Pupils in Gwynedd who are eligible for free school meals performed consistently better than the Welsh average in many key performance indicators between 2017 and 2019. The performance of this group of pupils in the indicator for 5 A*-A grades at GCSE or equivalent was slightly lower than the Welsh average over the same period.

The judgement on well-being and attitudes to learning was good or better in most Gwynedd inspections during the inspection cycle from September 2017 to March 2020. Of the 46 schools inspected during this period, well-being and attitudes to learning were good or better in nearly all schools.

Historically and before the pandemic, school attendance rates in Gwynedd were strong. However, the current attendance rates, particularly in most of the authority's secondary schools, do not compare favourably with national rates. This is partly because there is insufficient focus by the authority on the tight and clear processes that were in place to promote attendance prior to the pandemic. The authority has recognised the need to re-establish the strategic work to promote attendance. Overall, leadership has been slow to recognise the need to re-prioritise this work. Officers analyse and report on attendance per school, but they do not analyse or monitor attendance data forensically enough. For example, they do not analyse the attendance of specific groups of learners and, as such, they do not have a secure grasp of the trends and patterns of attendance of groups, such as pupils who are eligible for free school meals.

In three of the five years up to 2021, the rate of permanent exclusions was lower than, or similar to, the national rate. Over the same period, the rate of exclusions for five days or fewer increased gradually from being significantly below the national rate to being very similar in 2021. The rate of exclusions over five days was higher than the national average in three of the five years during this period.

There are occasional opportunities for pupils to contribute to corporate decisions. For example, children were consulted in the recent review of education and children's services. The youth service also seeks the views of young people on their needs and provision that is available to them and adapts and develops the services as a result. The authority's officers have begun to develop more formal and regular methods of seeking the views of children and young people.

The youth service promotes and supports pupils' well-being through a variety of beneficial activities. Through this work, young people make positive contributions to their local communities and their peers. For example, they organised a 'Well-being Festival' to promote the mental health and well-being of young people.

Cameo – The Well-being Festival

In response to the wishes of young people, youth workers supported them to lead on planning a well-being festival to promote the mental health and well-being of young people and provide access to information and support from a range of services. The festival developed to become a week-long event across the county. There were 31 organisations involved with the festival and 49 varied sessions were held during the week. More than 700 well-being boxes were also distributed to young people.

Youth workers are based in each secondary school for specific periods each week. They work with other agencies to identify and support vulnerable pupils by providing access to activities and valuable advice. They support these young people by providing access to more intensive and personal support. Their work contributes to ensuring that pupils in Year 11 progress appropriately to the next steps in terms of their education, employment or training. The number of young people who are not in

education, employment or training at the end of Year 11 has been below the national average in 4 of the last 5 years.

Education services

How thoroughly does the local authority challenge the performance of schools and ensure that they receive appropriate and timely support to help them improve?

Gwynedd education department works closely and effectively with the north Wales regional school effectiveness and improvement service (GwE) to improve provision offered by the authority's schools. There is a shared understanding of everyone's roles and officers work together closely and productively as one team.

Officers from the education department and GwE have a positive mindset based on supporting schools to improve by working alongside their leaders to evaluate provision and plan for improvement. They make effective use of activities that derive from first-hand evidence, such as scrutiny of books and lesson observations to form a view about the quality of provision and identify successes and areas for improvement.

Over time, the authority's officers have received useful information about the performance of schools and, on the whole, have used this information suitably. GwE officers have recently strengthened information-sharing processes by using specific software. This has enabled the authority's officers to have easy access to a comprehensive range of up-to-date information about all schools. As a result, the authority's education officers have a good knowledge of the authority's schools. They identify schools' main strengths and areas for improvement accurately. GwE provides a comprehensive range of relevant support for schools in Gwynedd and there is an individual support plan for each school that draws on this offer. It also organises additional intervention as necessary.

Authority officers and GwE officers meet regularly to discuss individual schools, clusters and overarching themes. They discuss the needs of schools at different tiers during meetings of the Needs Identification Board, the School Support Board and the County Quality Board. They make effective use of specific thresholds and triggers to escalate schools where concerns are increasing. Through the County Quality Board, senior officers and the cabinet member for education contribute to these discussions and challenge officers on the effect of their work to support schools. The new information-sharing arrangements have contributed to a recent improvement in the quality and incisiveness of discussions at these meetings. However, in a very few cases, intervention to support schools that are causing concern has not been timely enough. In addition, authority officers do not always make strategic enough use of information about pupils' attendance, including groups of pupils, to challenge schools to improve this aspect.

GwE identifies suitable high-level priorities through its Regional Business Plan, which is based on its identification of the needs of individual schools. This plan is approved annually by the Joint Committee, which includes the Gwynedd Local Authority

Cabinet Member for Education and the Management Board, which includes the authority's Head of Education. As a result, the authority can ensure that what GwE offers responds closely to the authority's local requirements.

In a very few cases, the authority identifies additional local priorities, which are aspects where it requires additional support beyond what is available through GwE's central offer. In the case of Gwynedd, the authority has identified that the difficulties in recruiting leaders means that it is necessary to identify potential future leaders sooner and plan succession in leadership at all levels and across the sectors. Recently, GwE has planned appropriate actions to support this area, which go beyond the wide range of training for leaders that is already in place.

GwE has a comprehensive professional learning offer for the teaching workforce. It also promotes school-to-school collaboration effectively, for example as primary schools work closely together in clusters and as secondary schools and special schools work together with others across the region in 'alliances' of schools that have a similar context. They have established useful partnerships to develop leaders' evaluation skills, for example as they scrutinise pupils' work jointly with colleagues from other schools.

The authority holds the region to account appropriately for the quality and effect of its work through the Management Board and the Joint Committee. Elected members challenge GwE officers suitably through scrutiny meetings.

How well does the authority support young people to receive suitable post-16 education or training?

The local authority's aspiration is to ensure high quality post-16 education where there is a wide choice of courses and qualifications that respond to the needs of the local, regional and national economy for all learners in Gwynedd. The Gwynedd and Anglesey Post-16 Education Consortium was established to implement this vision. The consortium includes schools with a sixth form, a further education college that has sites in Bangor, Glynllifon, Pwllheli, Dolgellau and Llangefni, and Gwynedd and Anglesey local authorities. This valuable partnership work means that a wide range of courses are available to learners. Suitable work training is also provided through the work of the further education college to facilitate apprenticeships and job growth schemes. The two special schools work with a range of partners, such as Antur Waunfawr, to meet the needs of their post-16 learners. They organise visits and experiences to support learners to access a range of opportunities, such as opportunities to develop social skills and life skills. In 2018, Cyngor Gwynedd began a consultation process on post-16 education in the Arfon area. Although the authority has resumed this process after the pandemic, the next steps in terms of Arfon's post-16 education systems remain unclear and the process has been slow.

The way in which post-16 education is provided within the consortium varies. Most schools in the Meirion and Dwyfor areas do not have a sixth form. Academic and vocational courses are provided at all levels by the further education college. Ysgol Godre's Berwyn has a small sixth form. It works with 'Esgol' and further education colleges to provide A-level courses and vocational subjects, such as agriculture. All secondary schools in Arfon have a sixth form where A-level courses are provided, in the main. There is valuable partnership work between these schools, the further

education college and Anglesey schools to expand the level 3 offer for their learners. Learners in Arfon who want to study access, level 1 or level 2 courses transfer to the further education college. The variations in provision and the geographical size of the authority mean that some learners have to travel a considerable distance to access their chosen courses. The authority ensures a free travel pass for post-16 learners to facilitate this.

The consortium has a comprehensive management structure. It includes a manager on behalf of the local authority, a lead board which includes representatives from the authorities and the further education college, a strategic group of secondary headteachers and the Arfon, Dwyfor and Meirionnydd curriculum delegate groups. Information is shared effectively between partners by using the consortium's website. For example, once schools have identified the names of pupils for partnership courses, the authority's transport department uses this information to organise transport. The lead board and strategic group evaluate the quality of the courses that are provided through the partnership appropriately. They produce reports that consider learners' outcomes, completion measures and qualitative descriptions of the provision. In the few best examples, reports include comments about the quality of teaching and learning from lesson observations. This information is used appropriately to decide whether a course should be offered or not. However, the consortium does not seek the views of post-16 learners about the quality of provision and their experiences specifically enough.

The authority's schools have appropriate arrangements to help pupils choose their post-16 pathways. They work jointly with partners, including the post-16 education consortium and Careers Wales, to provide independent advice. In the best examples, schools and the college hold a range of valuable activities, such as careers fairs and opportunities to sample courses through visits for the further education college. The consortium also produces a useful prospectus for partnership courses. The authority has recognised that it is difficult to view the complete offer in one place and is working to develop a website to address this.

There is valuable partnership work between the consortium and the youth service's post-16 team to support vulnerable learners to transition to post-16 education. The authority invested money to ensure the continuation of a plan to support young people who are at risk of becoming disengaged from education, training or employment which was originally funded by the European Social Fund. As a result, the youth service's post-16 education team provides dedicated support to help young people move on to education, training or employment. A multi-agency panel meets regularly to broker support for these learners. For example, they ensure practical support to visit the sites of the further education college and well-being and mental health support. As a result, the number who are not in education, training or employment is low.

The authority appointed a post-16 additional learning needs (ALN) quality officer to establish and develop processes to support the implementation of the new ALN Act. The officer works productively with the secondary schools and the further education college to plan support for the first pupils who will transfer to post-16 education within the new procedure in September 2023. Information is shared easily with the college through the authority's dedicated digital platform. This means that any arrangements for supporting post-16 ALN pupils are developing appropriately.

How effectively does the authority meet the needs of learners with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD)?

Over time, the strategic and operational processes of Gwynedd education services to respond to the needs of pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties have improved significantly. The vision of leaders to strengthen provision for these vulnerable pupils is now clear and suitable.

Senior managers have re-organised the additional learning needs (ALN) and inclusion service appropriately. They have identified the need to provide more specifically for supporting vulnerable pupils and to identify relevant managers to lead different aspects of the service. This includes appointing an inclusion manager and increasing the role of ALN quality officers to support pupils with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties. The authority has also increased capacity within the outreach behaviour support service to support mainstream schools with pupils from reception age up to Year 11. These changes contribute well to ensuring that the number of pupils who are in education other than at school (EOTAS) is low.

The authority has a range of purposeful procedures to plan provision and review the progress of pupils with ALN. These include the ALN and inclusion panel, the profound panel, the review panel and the ALN and inclusion moderation forum. On the whole, the purpose and remit of many of these procedures, together with the access to services protocol, are clear to schools. However, the steps that should be followed at school or the interventions that should be put in place before applying for a pupil to access the behaviour support hubs are not as clear.

Valuable information about pupils with ALN across the county is freely available to relevant stakeholders through a dedicated digital platform. This enables schools, experts, parents and pupils to play an active role in planning provision, monitoring and reporting on progress.

The ALN and inclusion service provides appropriate professional development opportunities for teachers and learning assistants to support them to provide beneficial interventions for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. This includes training on attachment and the effect of trauma on children and young people. A range of relevant resources and intervention programmes are provided for schools to support the well-being of pupils across the age range. For example, the education psychology service has prepared valuable resources, such as beneficial mindfulness resources, to try to have a positive influence on pupils' well-being. The authority has also invested significantly to ensure that Welsh-medium resources are available to schools and this is a strong feature.

The authority's 'managed moves' protocol and arrangements are appropriate and lead to positive outcomes for pupils in a majority of cases. Arrangements for supporting pupils with serious medical needs are strong.

Suitable support is provided for most pupils with social, emotional and behavioural needs within mainstream schools. The local authority provides specific support to meet the social, emotional and behavioural needs of a few pupils in four alternative settings. The status of these settings is unclear as they are not registered as pupil referral units, although that is how they operate. The 'Llechan Lân' Centre in

Penygroes is a short-term education setting for pupils in Years 5-8. Provision at Llechan Lân is purposeful and support for pupils when they return to their schools is very effective. This is because the specialist staff there share their expertise successfully with staff in the mainstream schools to strengthen their ability to support pupils with behavioural difficulties. As a result, pupils who have attended this resource re-engage successfully in their mother school in most cases.

Since September 2021, the authority has improved its provision for older pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties by commissioning two secondary schools to run hubs in three areas across Gwynedd. There are now three alternative education hubs for Year 9-11 pupils in Bangor, Caernarfon and Blaenau Ffestiniog. Overall, pupils who attend the hubs are happy and engage positively with their learning. Staff at the hubs take pride in their work and in the provision offered. They commit themselves to the responsibilities with great purpose and goodwill to provide pupils with positive learning experiences. They foster a positive and supportive relationship with pupils and their parents and this is an excellent feature. They work creatively to try to provide curricular experiences that are of interest to pupils and work purposefully with a wide range of relevant external agencies. This includes Careers Wales officers, youth workers, school nurses and police officers to support pupils and plan carefully for the next steps in their life. Suitable provision is offered, under the guidance of the subject teachers at the commissioning schools, for pupils to continue with their examination courses in Welsh, English, mathematics and some elements of science and a few other subjects or areas. Nearly all pupils in Year 11 sit a GCSE or other suitable qualification in the core subjects and a very few other subjects.

The social, emotional and behavioural needs of pupils who attend the individual hubs vary. As a result, tailoring provision to meet the specific needs of individual pupils within these hubs is challenging. Staff strive to create an appropriate supportive environment for learning and to support pupils to thrive emotionally at the hubs. However, there is too much variation in the suitability of the accommodation and the range of learning resources in the hubs to provide specialist education that supports the well-being and behaviour of vulnerable pupils.

Although a range of relevant officers are part of the initial arrangements for placing pupils in the hubs, there is insufficient contact between them and the hub managers to support their work and provide them with the necessary guidance. This includes inconsistency in monitoring, quality assurance and risk assessment arrangements. As a result, senior officers in Gwynedd education services do not have a strategic overview of the outcomes or the nature or quality of provision at the hubs.

How effective is the authority's Welsh language provision in terms of meeting the needs of learners and in terms of realising the WG vision of a million Welsh speakers by 2050?

The authority has a clear vision in terms of ensuring access to Welsh-medium education for pupils and young people in Gwynedd throughout their time in education. This is based on establishing a 'Welsh and bilingual education system which puts the needs of all of our learners at the heart of our provision'. Gwynedd's Welsh Language Policy, along with a range of other relevant policies, is a cornerstone of all of the authority's work and ensures opportunities for pupils and

young people to be confident bilingual learners. For example, the priorities of the 'Gwynedd Gymraeg' plan and the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) reflect suitable key aspirations and targets over the medium and long term.

The Education Welsh Language Forum meets on a termly basis to monitor progress against the priorities and targets in the WESP and plan for improvement. This helps to ensure that leaders in the education department and elected members have a sound understanding of the priorities. The WESP sets a clear direction for developing the Welsh language across all sectors, which includes providing more opportunities for pupils and young people to learn and use the language confidently and as a normal part of everyday life. The plan identifies appropriate targets for this, which includes identifying challenges for the future. For example, it identifies the need to maintain and develop the Welsh language skills of the workforce by collaborating with a variety of strategic partners and external agencies.

The authority has a good working relationship with external agencies and umbrella organisations such as Mudiad Meithrin. They work together to promote the Welsh language in the early years by ensuring access to education and care. 'Gwynedd Yfory' projects state the importance of working with stakeholders to ensure that best start for all children in the county. For example, the authority has established Welsh-medium Flying Start centres in specific areas to support children and families. Successful co-operation with partners helps to ensure that nearly all children who attend non-maintained settings transfer to Welsh-medium education in schools.

Leaders and officers prioritise developing the Welsh language by investing in improving learning facilities. For example, they use the Gwynedd Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme to invest in new school buildings to provide early education and childcare through the medium of Welsh. They also use Welsh Government capital grants effectively to improve the quality of the Welsh language immersion centre buildings, in addition to building new settings to support primary and secondary pupils who are newcomers to the Welsh language. This also reduces the distance between pupils' homes and these centres and provides them with a good range of resources and facilities.

Fairly recently, the authority revised its Immersion Education system to ensure that the language policy is inclusive and supports latecomers, including pupils who have English as an additional language, to acquire the Welsh language. Under the purposeful guidance of new leaders, the service offers beneficial provision for primary and secondary pupils in six settings across the authority. The intensive ten-week course supports pupils to acquire beneficial linguistic skills that enable them to join their peers in their local schools and use the language formally and informally within their communities. The service also provides useful support and guidance for teachers and teaching assistants to develop pupils' Welsh language skills. For example, it has trained nearly all teachers and teaching assistants who work in foundation learning classes on good practice in terms of immersion methods.

A very positive element of the Gwynedd Immersion Education System's work is the effective use of digital technology to enrich pupils' experiences and motivate them to learn Welsh in a fun way.

Cameo – Using digital technology to encourage use of the Welsh language

Leaders and teachers are working with a local commercial company to create an innovative virtual resource based on their new Welsh language immersion scheme. The scheme is based on the imaginary village of Aberwla and the virtual equipment provides an excellent experience for pupils to practise language patterns and vocabulary. They also make effective use of promoting the benefits of learning Welsh and share good practice through dedicated podcasts, for example by interviewing former pupils from language centres and their families to share their experiences of learning the language.

A clear priority is given to ensuring that provision and services for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) and their families are available through the medium of Welsh. All members of staff within the Additional Learning Needs and Inclusion Service are fluent Welsh speakers and are able to provide bilingually. The authority also works effectively with other agencies, such as the Local Health Board, to ensure that specialist support is available in Welsh to meet the needs of ALN pupils and their families.

The use of the Welsh language in informal situations in primary and secondary schools is encouraged appropriately through Welsh Language Charter activities. This contributes to improving pupils' Welsh language skills and Welshness, in addition to supporting cooperation between primary and secondary schools. The regional project, 'Ein Llais Ni', in cooperation with external partners such as Bangor University, helps to develop skills in teaching and learning oracy skills.

Schools provide many GCSE subjects through the medium of Welsh and a large number of pupils sit an examination in GCSE Welsh first language. This reflects the authority's vision and policy to develop pupils who are fully bilingual and promotes the advantages of studying through the medium of Welsh.

The authority has robust procedures to identify the linguistic skills of the workforce. This ensures that it identifies training needs and provides support as necessary. The partnership between the authority and other stakeholders, such as Bangor University and GwE, supports this work by providing specific courses for the full range of staff including teachers, learning assistants and administrative and catering staff.

Leadership and management

The authority's leaders have a clear vision for education in Gwynedd, with the aim of ensuring the best possible start for the county's children and young people. This vision includes a firm focus on ensuring that children and young people have equal access to education through the medium of Welsh.

The Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Member for Education are keen to mitigate the effects of poverty and promote equality in terms of access to education. This is highlighted clearly in the Council's Plan (2023-2028) with priorities which, for example, focus on reducing the cost of sending children to school, extending opportunities for children and young people to play and socialise and expanding the

availability of free school meals for pupils. Leaders are also trying to promote young people's access to post-16 education. For example, after considering the views of young people, the authority ensured travel passes for them so that they could reasonably reach their places of learning.

The Chief Executive believes strongly in the principle of continuous improvement. He has been central to the work of establishing a culture and ways of working that place residents at the heart of the authority's work, namely 'Ffordd Gwynedd'. The vision of 'Ffordd Gwynedd' has been shared effectively with the authority's officers and they strive to uphold 'Ffordd Gwynedd' in all aspects of their work. The Chief Executive promotes and maintains an effective working relationship with officers and staff across the authority and holds regular sessions to welcome their views and listen to their ideas. He also has a beneficial overview of the strengths and areas for improvement in different aspects of the Council's work and has established clear purposes for the work of departments and teams across the authority. Through this, he gives a clear direction to the work of leaders, teams and individuals within the education service.

The Head of Education and other leaders, such as the assistant heads, understand their roles and are aware of what they are aiming for in order to achieve their specific purposes within the education service. They set high expectations for their teams, by modelling and promoting professional values and behaviours that contribute positively to supporting schools and facilitate effective co-operation with other providers and partners. Stakeholders, such as school headteachers and relevant external partners, appreciate the open communication between leaders and officers of the education service. They appreciate the fact that they listen to their ideas and opinions, for example in different forums.

The authority continues to strengthen the alignment between the education service's plans and the revised Council Plan. The alignment is not currently wholly coherent. For example, there is a clear priority in the Council Plan in terms of mitigating the effects of poverty, but the authority does not monitor the attendance of pupils who are eligible for free school meals. Plans with partners, such as the regional school improvement service, are sound and support Gwynedd's ambition for education of the highest standard for its learners.

When planning for improvement, the authority's leaders weigh up the strengths and areas for improvement and identify clear 'purposes' for the education service's main areas of work. These purposes focus partly on the council's corporate priorities and partly on the normal activities of the education service. Metrics that accompany these are set sensibly, on the whole, and reflect the most important areas for improvement, although not all are incisive enough or focus clearly enough on learners' outcomes, where applicable. In some improvement plans, there are productive strategic actions to address priorities, for example as within the school modernisation programme, but they are less prominent in other improvement plans and areas. Leaders have recently provided additional resources in a timely manner to meet the needs of learners in a few areas, for example ALN and the Welsh language. However, the focus on improving learner attendance outcomes across Gwynedd is not firm enough.

On the whole, the authority has a strong track record of implementing beneficial strategies that have a positive influence on learners and improve provision for them. The digital strategies of the education services are a good example of an improvement that resulted from officers responding purposefully to the voice of school practitioners and leaders. The Council has planned purposefully and thoroughly to introduce modern school facilities in Bangor and Bala. There is also successful strategic planning to maintain and extend immersion provision to promote the Welsh language across Gwynedd. Recently, the education service has planned purposefully to agree on intervention thresholds with the regional school improvement service. Leaders have also thought flexibly to offer solutions to challenging situations within the authority. For example, the authority is facing recruitment challenges in different areas of the county and has begun to consider how more attractive jobs could be created.

Despite these positive examples of effective strategic planning, leaders have not been strategic enough in approaching all aspects of their work. They have not been strategic enough in ensuring consistency in provision to meet the needs of learners with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties or ensured sufficient supervision or oversight of the quality of the existing provision. Although the authority has conducted a number of reviews on suitable post-16 education or training, leaders have not yet set a clear enough strategic direction for transforming this provision. In addition, leaders have not resumed the work of promoting and monitoring better attendance in schools purposefully enough.

The authority has recently reinforced its systems for monitoring and challenging performance, by setting firm principles within its self-evaluation system. For example, there are valuable sessions for ensuring timely progress, which include the Cabinet Member. A healthy culture of challenging performance is developing and beginning to lead to further action.

The Council considers risks regularly. Risk assessments cover detailed considerations across a number of services in the education department. Overall, leaders mitigate risks promptly and sensibly. However, the department has not tackled some risks relating to the well-being and success of learners wholly successfully.

Within its work programme, the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee considers a range of relevant issues that face the education service, such as the developments of the new curriculum and the strategy to promote the Welsh language. Joint planning between the Cabinet and the scrutiny committees to co-ordinate work programmes that support decisions is now improving. There is a productive relationship between the authority's leaders and officers and the Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee and the information that is prepared and shared with the committee is now more manageable and clearer. However, the scrutiny committee's consideration of the work of the projects within the Council Plan is currently limited.

The Council has consistent procedures and policies for managing staff performance internally. These include the principle of personal responsibility on individuals to develop professionally in a supportive environment. The Council provides a good range of internal training, internal secondments and opportunities to benefit from

leadership development offers and coaching and mentoring programmes from Academi Wales. The authority has introduced a valuable training offer to develop the workforce in relation to Additional Learning Needs (ALN). The regional school improvement service provides well for the professional development of practitioners and leaders in Gwynedd's schools.

The head of education and his senior management team undertake their statutory role to protect and safeguard children robustly and effectively and relevant leaders at all levels understand their roles and responsibilities. There is a robust procedure for strategic and operational meetings in relation to safeguarding issues. The representation of the education services in these processes and as part of the Corporate Parenting Panel is consistent and influential. Leaders at all levels have developed a mutual understanding with corresponding officers in children's services. As a result, they work together intelligently and productively for the benefit of the authority's children.

The corporate safeguarding policy is appropriate and the Education Services department provides a beneficial standardised safeguarding policy for schools, together with a large number of other relevant policies and guidelines. Clear guidance and valuable and beneficial support are given to headteachers and designated persons in schools by relevant officers, such as the designated safeguarding officer for education. Training arrangements for school staff at all levels, including governors, are robust. School headteachers welcome recent developments where the designated officer visits to check the quality and challenge the safeguarding arrangements of their schools. This has had a positive effect on strengthening the culture of safeguarding across schools in Gwynedd.

The quality of implementation of Section 5 of the Wales Safeguarding Procedures, when there are allegations against professional staff, is extremely robust and very thorough. The support and challenge given to schools by other departments in the authority on safeguarding and health and safety issues is valuable and effective. This includes clear guidance from the property and personnel departments on specific issues and risk assessments. However, the authority has not considered risk carefully enough for the inclusion hubs. Safe recruitment arrangements are robust and consistent.

The authority has a good understanding of the financial situation within the education service and officers are aware of the financial risks. The Council has a clear understanding of budgetary challenges but is not using the information sufficiently well to guide the use of its resources in the medium and long term. The local authority does not make full use of comparative data to compare the costs of its education services with other authorities.

The authority has funded the salary settlements of school staff in full, except in 2022-23, when electricity costs and the salaries of support and administrative staff were higher than expected when the budget was initially set. These additional costs were funded from school balances.

In the past, school budgets were protected from cuts compared with other services within the authority, but due to the current financial challenges, schools have been

asked to make a total of £1.966 million in savings during 2023-24 and 2024-25, which corresponds to 2.25% of the annual budget.

The net education budget per pupil was in the highest quartile of authorities in Wales in 2020/21, which is the last year for which data is available. In the same year, the budget per pupil in special schools was in the lowest quartile in Wales. Despite the Council's expenditure being above the Standard Expenditure Assessment, the budgeting of the education services was slightly below the baseline assessment for the education service.

School balances, as in other authorities, increased significantly from £4.3 million in 2019-20 to £16.7 million at the end of 2021-22. Four point eight million pounds (£4.8 million) of balances were used in 2022-23, reducing the balances to £11.9 million. At the end of 2022-23, three of the 96 schools have a deficit in their financial balances compared with the situation in the previous year, when all of the authority's schools had a surplus. Plans are underway to review and respond to the deficit. The authority has arrangements to accept plans from schools for using the surplus balances and recovering deficits.

The authority provides good support for the management and financial planning of schools and schools are positive about the support given. The School Finance Forum considers relevant issues, including setting the authority's annual budget. However, the forum has not discussed funding formulae recently and these have not been reviewed comprehensively since 2014. The authority has a range of service level agreements and, overall, a large number of schools take advantage of these. Service level agreements and contracts are reviewed periodically.

Appendix 1 – Cyngor Gwynedd case study

Cyngor Gwynedd's work in developing Welsh medium resources for pupils with additional education needs and their families, and for language immersion.

Information about the Local Education Authority

Gwynedd Local Education Authority has a clear vision in the context of Welsh-medium education for learners throughout their time in education. Gwynedd's Welsh Language Policy aims to develop confident bilingual learners and citizens. In Gwynedd, the Welsh language belongs to everyone, and the policy sets a direction and clear accountability for all schools.

Cyngor Gwynedd's Education Department is committed to contributing to national strategies and legislation in terms of promoting and increasing the use of the Welsh language. To this end, the department has prepared and introduced a Welsh in Education Strategic Plan, which outlines the vision for Welsh-medium education within the authority over the next ten years. In line with the statutory requirement, under section 44 of the Welsh Language Measure (Wales) 2011, the Council has produced and published county-wide strategies which outline how they will contribute to the national aim set in the Welsh Government's Welsh Language Strategy, Cymraeg 2050, to increase the number of Welsh speakers across Wales and increase the opportunities for people to use the Welsh language on a daily basis. Gwynedd's county-wide Welsh Language Strategy (Welsh Language Promotion Plan for Gwynedd 2018-23) sets the commitment and vision for the whole county, and the work of the Education Department and the aims of the WESP contribute to the objectives of that county-wide strategy.

Developing Welsh-medium resources for learners with additional learning needs and inclusion

The Authority in partnership with Cyngor Ynys Môn have invested in a central Additional Learning Needs and Inclusion (ALN&I) service. This service is available to all education providers within the county to provide support and advice for learners with ALN&I needs or to prevent these needs from developing. This is by providing resources, training and direct input for schools and learners.

The ALN&I service provides a fully bilingual service, with all members of staff within the service being able to provide through the medium of Welsh. The need for provision through the medium of Welsh is emphasised within the recruitment process.

Developing resources through the medium of Welsh is an integral part of this work and the training provided by the team is available through the medium of Welsh. There is a wide range of appropriate resources that are developed continuously to correspond to the identified need and to align with the provision that is offered. This includes areas of behaviour, well-being and mental health support, specific learning needs (literacy and numeracy), communication and interaction, and sensory, medical and physical needs. A specific website has been set up to be used by parents and

carers, and a specific website for school staff which enables them to download resources, in addition to an online classroom for specific learning needs resources. Everything on the website is available bilingually: www.adyach.cymru. The online Individual Development Plan is also fully bilingual so that it can be completed in the family's preferred language.

The above means that ALN&I provision aligns with the ethos and teaching provision within the county and promotes learners' skills and bilingualism from the outset. It also means that parents and carers can contribute to their children's person-centred discussions through the medium of Welsh or English with staff who are able to speak both languages.

The immersion education system

In order for the authority's Welsh language policy to be inclusive, a specialist service is provided within the county, namely the Immersion Education System. Since being established in its new form in January 2023, there are six strategic settings across the county, which provide a service for latecomers to acquire the Welsh language.

To ensure modern and up-to-date opportunities for learners to practise vocabulary and language patterns in our immersion centres, staff at the Immersion Education System have worked with Anni Llŷn and Animated Technologies to create an innovative virtual village. This project has been developed with Welsh Government revenue grant funding. This new scheme is based on an imaginary village called Aberwla and it incorporates specific language patterns within the language continuum in the Curriculum for Wales. It is a scheme that is relevant to the twenty-first century and reflects modern day Wales. The project enables latecomers to step into Aberwla on a virtual platform to practise language patterns in various locations around the village. On this digital platform, learners are given an opportunity to play games with each other e.g., when filling their basket in the supermarket or by reading instructions and following a shopping list. They also meet different characters and creatures from the usual at Tyddyn Swnllyd Farm and stay at the Glamping Ground for a couple of nights. They can also spend time at the leisure centre, the museum or help Ceri the mechanic at the garage. It is also possible to borrow a drone from the gadget shop to fly above the village to practise command patterns and directions e.g., right and left, forwards and backwards.

Welsh Government officials are very keen for Gwynedd to share this resource nationally and have released funding to facilitate this. The local authority is proud of the opportunity to share the resource for the benefit of learners and to support the Government's aim in Cymraeg 2050 across Wales. All authorities in Wales are welcome to use the resource by contacting canolfaniaith@gwynedd.llyw.cymru

Multimedia resources to reinforce language patterns and vocabulary are valuable, particularly virtual digital resources that appeal to children and young people. This resource is a means to reinforce the skills necessary to enable learners to use the Welsh language in a formal and informal context.

What is becoming clear is the interest learners have in the resource. It is very appealing to latecomers from primary to secondary schools. The virtual element is a means of enabling learners to immerse themselves in the activity and, when they

step onto the platform, they are happy to try to communicate through the medium of Welsh. The element of fun and enjoyment attached to the resource certainly has a positive influence on their development and is a means of normalising the Welsh language and making it contemporary in the virtual and digital arena.

Another innovative resource that is worth sharing nationally in the context of Welsh-medium education is the podcast 'Am filiwn', which deals with aspects of the world of a teacher that leads to increasing and developing pupils to become Welsh speakers and aims to create a million Welsh speakers. This podcast goes under the skin of immersion education and what happens in our language centres within our Immersion Education System. In the podcast, some learners and their parents share their experiences of attending the Welsh language immersion units in Gwynedd to learn Welsh. In addition, an experienced teacher also talks about the main immersion principles that have proved successful within the Immersion Education System in Gwynedd. This is a valuable resource for students following a teacher training course, for newly qualified teachers or for teachers at the beginning of their career to raise awareness and learn about effective immersion principles and strategies. The Am Filiwn Podcast (ypod.cymru) was developed in a series of podcasts for ITE, Bangor University in collaboration with Initial Teacher Education institutions in Wales, sponsored by Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol.

Evidence base of the report

Before the inspection, inspectors:

- consulted the local authority on the local inspection questions to be used during the inspection, based on the authority's self-evaluation, strategic plans and relevant data held by Estyn
- analysed the outcomes from open questionnaires, including the views of learners, parents, school staff and governors, local authority staff, regional consortium staff, elected members and general public
- carried out a preliminary visit to the local authority to meet with a range of relevant partners to education services, such as learner representatives, headteachers and governors, and leaders from statutory and third sector agencies working with children and young people

During the inspection, inspectors:

- met with the leader of the council, elected members responsible for education services, elected members responsible for the scrutiny of education services, the chief executive, the director of education, other leaders and managers in education services, other relevant staff in the local authority, the managing director of the regional consortium for school improvement and other relevant staff from the regional consortium
- looked closely at the local authority's self-evaluation processes
- considered the local authority's strategic and operational plans for improvement
- scrutinised a variety of documents, including information on learner outcomes, information on the performance of schools and other education settings, including information from the regional consortium for school improvement, minutes from a range of meetings, reports presented to council or scrutiny, information relating to the safeguarding of learners and other information relevant to the local authority's education services held by Estyn

After the on-site inspection and before the publication of the report, Estyn:

- reviewed the findings of the inspection alongside the supporting evidence from the inspection team in order to validate, standardise and ensure the quality of the inspection
- provided a draft copy of the report for the local authority to note any concerns with factual accuracy, and made amendments where necessary

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the local authority and from the Estyn website (www.estyn.gov.wales)

The report was produced in accordance with Section 38 of the Education Act 1997, the Children Act 2004 and the Learning and Skills Act 2000.

Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of publication. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

Publications Section
Estyn
Anchor Court, Keen Road
Cardiff
CF24 5JW or by email to publications@estyn.gov.wales

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