

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 Anne Williams Jones
Date of meeting:	23 January 2024

1. 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 progress against the recommendations of the Estyn report on the Authority's Education services, 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 the savings and cuts scheme.

Firstly, however, I would like to congratulate Gwern ap Rhisiart on his recent appointment as Gwynedd's Head of Education. Gwern has already started in his post, and I'm looking forward to this new period for the Education Department and the schools under his leadership. As the Cabinet Member for Education, I have previously worked closely with Gwern, and I look forward to continuing to collaborate and plan with the aim of facing future opportunities and challenges for the benefit of the children and young people of Gwynedd.

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

We are implementing the Council Plan for 2023-28, and I herein report on progress to the end of December 2023, whilst acknowledging that it is early days in the context of some of the new pledges included in the document since April last year. Nevertheless,

all matters have been the subject of discussion and have been scrutinised by myself at a performance challenge meeting, and I am satisfied 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

Transforming 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, as well as holding specific engagement sessions with the public as well as workshops with partners on the language and oracy elements, and communication arrangements which will assist to shape the 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 2023, I am very proud that every primary age learner from Reception to Year 6 in Gwynedd can 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. In light of completing the installation of equipment in school kitchens, the catering and cleaning services are now concentrating on promoting the scheme amongst children and families, to understand what barriers are facing some families which stops them from benefiting from the proposal, as well as implementing pilot schemes in some schools where the percentage of children that benefit from the proposal of free school meals was lower than what we would wish. I look forward to reporting further to you on these elements in my next report, but before then, I welcome the fact that scrutineers will also give attention to this important field in a meeting of the Education and Scrutiny Committee in March 2024.

Modernising buildings and the learning environment

As a result of the poor condition of the building and existing learning environment at Ysgol Trefferthyr, we will build a new school in Cricieth to improve the learning environment and ensure the best resources for learners to thrive. The building work is proceeding well at 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. In light of confirming the final construction costs for building the new school, we have submitted the final part of the business case to the Welsh Government at the start of January this year in order to release the funding.

It is also proposed to make improvements to Ysgol Hirael, as well as substantial modifications to Ysgol Tryfan in Bangor, and I'm pleased to have the support of the Cabinet to re-direct part of the Arfon post-16 education project funding to realise these improvements due to increased costs. A Business Case for releasing the money to realise the improvements at Ysgol Hirael has been submitted to Welsh Government at the start of January, and the initial discussions have been held with the Headteacher at Ysgol Tryfan to identify the school's aspirations for the improvements in order to consider if it is possible to meet all those aspirations with the budget available as well as the restrictions of the site. Currently, we are aiming to submit the first part of the business case for Ysgol Tryfan to the Welsh Government before the end of the spring term 2024 to ensure the best possible learning environment for learners.

Ysgol y Faenol has also had a significant extension, however, legal matters regarding land transfers are ongoing, and therefore I would like to note my appreciation for the work that has been underway recently by the Educational Department and the Housing and Property Department with Pentir Community Council and Penrhosgarnedd Community Centre Committee to try and ensure a temporary answer to facilitate parking during peak hours for parents that bring and collect their children from Ysgol y Faenol daily. I am aware of the local concerns and frustration about the situation, but I am confident that the matter will be resolved soon in order to 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 to ensure that they are fit for purpose and make the best use of the space available. The work has already commenced at some of the schools, and work in the remaining schools

will be programmed over the next few months, with significant work at some schools programmed for this year's summer holidays.

During the summer term, we held two working groups with the Arfon secondary school headteachers to discuss and revisit the original case for change for the post-16 education project in Arfon. The Department reported back to the headteachers in September 2023 following the working groups held, and following this a report was submitted to the Cabinet in November 2023 on the conclusions of the discussion. I'm pleased to have the support of the Cabinet to re-direct part of the Arfon post-16 education project funding to other modernising projects due to the fact that the case for changing the post-16 education in Arfon was not as strong by today. Despite this, I'm looking forward to hearing the outcomes of the discussions with the Gwynedd and Anglesey Post-16 Education Consortium regarding opportunities to further strengthen the collaboration between all partners.

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 and distributed to governors, staff, parents and the children of schools in Gwynedd. Following analysing these questionnaires, it will be possible to identify the actual cost of attending the school and the financial challenges associated with attending the school facing families. This information will be the grounds to consider in what way schools, the education department and other Council departments can collaborate to reduce costs and reduce the financial burden on families of sending their children to school. A template of an Equality Plan will be presented to schools soon, considering the findings and main messages from the consultation held on the Authority's Equality Plan. Draft objectives have been designed as a starting point for schools to adapt them for their local needs. I am looking forward to report further next time on the progress of this project of key importance.

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

A task and finish group has been established to identify measures to measure the outcomes that the Youth Service is achieving for young people, Also, more recently, work has been ongoing to collect data and information on the provisions the service provides via an opinion survey, as well as questionnaires to stakeholders. I look forward to seeing the findings of these questionnaires later this month. Following the previous performance challenge meeting held in December, we will collaborate with the Highways and Municipal Department in relation to the play equipment for children and young people.

Modernising and extending 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, and improvements have already been made at the Eifionydd site, as well as establishing a new immersion education sites in Bangor. A planning application has also been accepted for establishing a new immersion education site in Tywyn, and I look forward to seeing this site welcoming newcomers for the first time by September 2024. I am also very pleased that the Welsh Government has approved our business case for a further £1.1m in order to invest and improve the learning environment in the three primary immersion education sites located in Caernarfon, Pwllheli and Dolgellau.

The Welsh Government's Late Immersion revenue grant also enables us to modernise the immersion provision in our centres. By now, the Aberwla immersion scheme has been developed, which is a differential scheme that bridges the primary and secondary sectors. To accompany the scheme, we have the innovative digital project which places the Aberwla scheme and its characters on the VR stage. During the autumn term 2023, the Animated Technologies company completed the Museum setting, and they are currently working on developing the Puw Paned Cafe, The Woodland, and the Building Site by the end of the Summer 2024 Term.

I am also very pleased that the Immersion System staff have held several training sessions for Foundation Phase teachers and assistants in September 2023, and also responded to requests from individual schools for training or support in terms of immersion principles. In addition, the headteacher is in the process of establishing a Users Group for the Immersion System to share experiences, information and gain a shared understanding between the Immersion System and schools, and I look forward to receiving feedback from this very important Users Group.

A recent exciting development in Gwynedd is that we have several schools now part of the *Say Something in Welsh* pilot scheme and the Welsh Government. In the secondary sector in particular, we consider this scheme as a pilot to address the gap in terms of support for learners in Year 10 and 11 of the schools who need support to learn Welsh, as the normal provision of the Immersion System does not extend to learners of those years, although the immersion staff are always ready to support and offer guidance to schools in order to support learners to acquire the Welsh language. I look forward to reporting further to you on the development of this scheme and its result in a future report.

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. 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 myself and the department have started implementing some of the recommendations, and one of those was to update the Education Language Policy, and I look forward to reporting further to you on the fruits of this labour before the end of the academic year.

Work is ongoing to develop a Community Campus and environmentally friendly Campus in Bontnewydd, worth £12m from the Welsh Government. Jointly with the learners of Ysgol Bontnewydd, who were part of the interview panel, we have appointed an architect company, TACP Architects from Wrexham, to design the new building, and the work is ongoing to try and get a suitable design for the school and the community space on the site. I am looking forward to reporting further on the progress of this very exciting project next time.

One of the fields that have received considerable attention during performance challenging this year, and is one of the Estyn recommendations from Cyngor Gwynedd's education services 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. However, through the efforts of the Department and schools, the authority's attendance percentage has increased to 90.51%, with the primary sector making good progress to reach 92.74%, whilst the attendance in the secondary sector is 87.91%.

I am delighted to be able to declare that we have been able to add capacity to the Welfare Team to be able to respond and support learners and their families where consistent absence levels are relatively high. In addition, it is pleasing to report that the levels of permanent exclusions have generally reduced during the second half of the autumn term 2023. A continuous work programme is already in place, which reviews the service and provision with the aim of increasing attendance and reducing the number of exclusions in the county, and this work programme seems currently to be coming to fruition.

With sadness, the Cabinet approved the proposal to close Ysgol Felinwnda on 31 December 2023, and for the existing pupils to transfer to a nearby alternative school, namely Ysgol Llandwrog or Ysgol Bontnewydd, in accordance with parents' choice. I wish every single one of the learners well as they settle in their new school, and over the next few months, the Department will prepare to hold a consultation on the Felinwnda

catchment area, and I look forward to considering the observations received following this consultation.

To conclude, the Department has been working on designing a 10-year Education Strategy for Gwynedd. An initial draft was submitted to the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee on 14 September 2023, and following this there was engagement with the Headteachers of our schools through strategic groups, as well as engaging with young people in a Youth Forum in Botwnnog. Arrangements are underway to engage further with learners via the medium of 6 School Councils across the county, and I look forward to receiving and considering their feedback. Further attention will be given to the Education Strategy during this term, before submitting this before the Cabinet to seek permission for us to carry out a public consultation. I am looking forward to report further on the progress of this Education Strategy 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.

The Department's financial performance is reported upon in a separate item to this meeting of the Cabinet, with forecasts that the Department would overspend by the end of 2023/24 financial year. This overspend was mostly on transport for pupils, with forecasts of a £1.5m overspend in this field, with school transport subject to a strategic review to try and manage the increase in expenditure as well as identify opportunities to realise savings where possible. The combination of underspend on other headings as well as use of funds in reserve reduces the overspend reported to £77k.

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."