

NAME OF SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	Services Scrutiny Committee
DATE OF MEETING	31 July 2012
TITLE OF REPORT	Monitoring the Progress of the Primary Education Reorganisation Strategy
CABINET MEMBER	Cllr. Siân Gwenllian

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Cabinet Member for Education and Children and Young People welcomes the interest shown in this transition programme. The Scrutiny Committee has underlined the important connection between the reorganisation process and the quality of education. Of course it is this connection which drives the need to change the educational structure and ensure that we have a sustainable system to maintain and improve the quality of education in the County.
- 1.2 As we have seen here in Gwynedd, it takes a number of years to achieve these transition plans. This means therefore that it is premature to measure the true effect of the reorganisation plans in full until the new plans become operational. Having said that, some plans are already operational and others are still being developed.

2. Background

2.1 The Reorganisation Strategy – “*Excellent Primary Education for Children in Gwynedd*” was developed by an all party Working Group. In April 2009, the strategy was unanimously supported by the Full Council and has been operational ever since.

2.2 Very briefly – these are the outcomes of the reorganisation plans so far:

- Discussions on school organisation have been held in the catchment areas of Tywyn, Y Berwyn and Y Gader and to date have involved **21 schools**.
- The Council has **ensured that rural education will be maintained** in the Tywyn, Dolgellau and Bala areas in schools which will be viable and sustainable to the future.
- Both **rural and urban schools** in these areas **will be upgraded**.
- Innovative plans have been established that **break new ground** (lifelong education establishments will be developed in Bala and Dolgellau, and also Rural Area Schools – one of these on two sites).
- Investments Attracted:
The plans will lead to an **investment of £22million for improving and developing schools**. Every effort to keep the benefits locally through acquisition processes in order to give local contractors an opportunity to profit from the investment.
- Surplus Places:
Surplus places were reduced by up to 900 as a result of the plans and could reduce the percentage of surplus places throughout the County to 23.9%

- School Sites:
The plans will lead to **9 fewer school sites**. This means that the Council will be able to redirect the maintenance funds for these 9 sites and spend them on improving the education provision elsewhere in the County.
- Savings Achieved:
The plans already decided upon could **lead to approximately half a million pounds (£500k) of annual revenue savings**.
Approximately £300k of money which is currently being spent on surplus places will be used much more efficiently, within the education budget.

3. Give examples of places where the Strategy has improved the educational provision for KSI and KS2 pupils.

3.0.1. As stated above – it is too early at the moment to measure in full the success of plans in the strategy, but there are some situations where pupils have moved to other schools and where some schools have been placed in a federal arrangement. But, from looking at the criteria in the strategy an assessment could be made of the plans thus far.

3.1 Class Sizes

- 3.1.1. According to the strategy our expectations are that the primary schools in Gwynedd will have classes of suitable sizes so that the children of the County will be offered the best possible experiences and opportunities.
- 3.1.2. Proposed plans will lead to a situation where class sizes will be consistent, more specifically where there were very small classes. The classes were small at Ysgol Abergynolwyn and other schools in Bro Dysynni (Bryncrug, Llanegryn and Llwyngwriil) Croesor, Rhydyclafdy and Llawrybetws. There are also small classes at Y Parc, Machreth and Ieuan Gwynedd schools.
- 3.1.3. In the case of pupils of Abergynolwyn, Croesor, Rhydyclafdy and Llawrybetws schools, the pupils who used to attend these schools have now been moved to other schools where they are part of larger sized classes. This means that there is an opportunity for pupils to be in groups with peers of their own ages and benefit from the same educational and social experiences. As revealed by recent research¹, this means that the teachers teach a smaller age range and thus can concentrate on introducing the curriculum to a reasonable age range.

3.2 Population and Pupil Numbers

- 3.2.1. Pupil numbers have fallen more sharply in some school catchment areas than in others. There are approximately 28% fewer primary school pupils in Meirionnydd now than there were in 1975. This reduction means that there is a very high number of surplus places in some of our schools. According to Estyn²:

¹ Classes, Groups and Transitions: structures for teaching and learning / Peter Blatchford, Susan Hallam, Judith Ireson and Peter Kutnick, with Andrea Creech Institute of Education and King's College University of London / Published by Cambridge University 2008

²Estyn Report, May 2012 – How do surplus places affect the resources available for expenditure on improving outcomes for pupils?

“Where there is a higher than necessary level of school places, resources are being deployed inefficiently that could be better used to improve the quality of education for all learners.”

3.2.2. As a result of the proposed plans - around 350 surplus places at schools in the Tywyn area can be abolished, together with a **reduction of up to 900 surplus places across the County** as a result of other plans.

3.2.3. Also, as a result of plans in the Tywyn, Y Gader and Y Berwyn catchment areas, the education provision will be stabilised to ensure sustainable education provision, in both rural and urban areas of those catchment areas.

3.3 Leadership

3.3.1. The Strategy notes the wish to ensure the appropriate environment in which Headteachers can lead their schools – in terms of physical environment and the capacity to lead and manage an educational establishment – but reference is also made to the problems of recruiting Headteachers. In a paper developed by the Gwynedd Headteachers Federation: *“The role of the Headteacher at a school and the leadership offered is essential...”*. It also added...

*“At the moment we do not believe that the Headteacher’s role as the **leader of the school** is given due attention and the deserved priority. Achieving developmental work is increasingly difficult.”*

The importance of the leadership role to the success of a school is underlined in a recent study³ and the research reaches the conclusion that:

“The head is the main source of leadership in a school and plays the lead role in promoting change for improvement”.

3.3.2. But, what is concluded from the Gwynedd Headteachers Federation paper is that we have to work towards creating the right environment so that Headteachers within the County can lead their schools effectively and efficiently into the future.

3.3.3. As a result of creating sustainable establishments in the areas of Tywyn, Bala and Dolgellau - we can be certain that the schools are led by the best individuals, and that these individuals lead institutions of the correct size to ensure the capacity to lead and to manage.

3.4 Learning Environment

3.4.1. As a result of the plans discussed thus far, in excess of **£20million will be invested** in our schools. These investments will ensure the best learning and teaching environment possible for pupils and staff of the schools which will benefit from the investment. According to research by Estyn⁴ - “...improvements in the quality of the buildings have a very worthwhile effect on the quality of the teaching and on staff morale which in turn have a positive effect on pupil performance.” Also, larger schools which have been adapted, upgraded and reorganised are likely to be more attractive when staff appointment becomes an issue.

³ ‘10 strong claims about successful school leadership’ / National College for Leadership of Schools and Children’s Services / 2010

⁴ Estyn Report 2007: Appraisal of schools performance before and after moving into new buildings or property which has been substantially renovated

- 3.4.2. A modern, purpose built school fit for the twenty first century will be built in Bro Dysynni and substantial improvements will be made on the buildings and sites of Brithdir and O.M. Edwards schools together with improvements at Penybryn, Tywyn, Dyffryn Dulas a Pennal, Ffridd y Llyn and Bro Tryweryn schools and on the Dinas Mawddwy site. In addition to this, there is an innovative plan to develop a Lifelong Campus in Bala.
- 3.4.3. These plans mean substantial capital investments in the educational establishments, and we will be able to see these plans being developed in the next few years. For example, the groundwork on developing the new Area School in Bro Dysynni will commence in the next few weeks.

3.5 Financial Resources

- 3.5.1. The Strategy notes the presumption that Gwynedd will make the best possible use of the financial resources available for primary education within the County.
- 3.5.2. Based on the proposed plans, **there will be an annual revenue savings of up to £500k.**
- 3.5.3. Based on data held by Estyn every surplus place at a primary school on average costs around £260 and every surplus place at a secondary school costs around £510. The plans can get rid of up to 900 surplus places which in turn means that around £300,000 can be spent more effectively each year within the education system.
- 3.5.4. In addition, these plans will rationalise 9 sites. This means that, after some time, there will be no need to maintain all these sites – and this in turn means that some of this money can be directed towards education in the future.

4. Give any examples of occasions where it was not possible to work more efficiently and effectively. What were the obstacles and what steps were taken to overcome these obstacles?

- 4.1 Of course, Gwynedd Council had not undertaken the task of reorganising schools in the County for a period of 30 years until this strategy became operational. Obviously, in implementing such a process, lessons will be learnt – and the task of achieving or ‘catching up’ is going to be challenging.
- 4.2 It is possible that the process had been made too complicated at the start, and that too much time and energy had been spent in discussing models that would in reality never have seen light of day. But, it is difficult to achieve the balance between ensuring room for discussion and not becoming engaged in unrealistic options. Therefore, as a result of feedback from the catchment areas where discussions have already been held, and the observations of the Headteachers Federation, we are trying to hold more streamlined discussions as we implement the strategy – this method was seen in action during discussions in the eastern part of Dolgellau.
- 4.3 The process of reorganisation often has to follow statutory guidelines, especially if there are substantial changes to the situation at the schools. These statutory processes take time. Even if the situation is fairly simple - it will take a year to complete all the steps. Because of this obstacle, Members, officers and other authorities lobbied the Government to try and persuade it to change the system. Now they have published a white paper on amending the system and are in the process of issuing a statute which will simplify the process. We predict that the new statute will be operational after September 2013.

- 4.4 Of course, if the plans involve any construction work, the planning processes have to be undertaken as well. Some plans can be held back through complications with the planning process.
- 4.5 One lesson learned through the Tywyn area discussions was the need to ensure that a site was agreed upon as part of the proposed plan. Advance decision over a site meant that the statutory consultation was much more definite and gave people a better picture as the consultation went ahead.
- 4.6 There are further matters which will need to be discussed by the Cabinet Member in the near future – namely the need for the implementation of the Strategy to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate emergency situations. There must also be further consideration of the importance of including the secondary sector pertaining to school reorganisation.

5. Show how you identified the outcomes in the first place? Are you comfortable that these are the correct outcomes for the people of Gwynedd?

- 5.1 An Improvement Working Group was established by the Council in June 2008 to discuss the reorganisation of schools within the County into the future. The Working Group was asked to consider:
- A new system which would ensure formal collaboration between schools;
 - The propriety of closing schools, in accordance with clear and firm criteria;
 - Introducing proposals for developing area schools in some catchment areas;
 - Dealing with any other matter which the Working Group considered as relevant.
- 5.2 The Gwynedd Primary Schools Reorganisation Improvement Working Group was established by the Full Council in June 2008 and the Group sat 14 times during the months that followed.
- 5.3 The Improvement Working Group included members from all political parties, namely – Councillors Dyfrig Siencyn, Seimon Glyn, Siân Gwenllian, Brian Jones, June Marshall and Dewi Owen. The then Schools Portfolio Leader, Cllr. Liz Saville Roberts, sat as an observer.
- 5.4 The Working Group received presentations from a number of bodies and individuals, including the following:
- ESTYN and the Wales Audit Office
 - The Welsh Government
 - Representatives from small, medium and large Gwynedd primary schools
 - Schools Alliance and Supporters
 - Welsh Language Society
 - Gwynedd Council Officers
 - National Association of Small Schools (NASS)
- 5.5 The Working Group received a wide range of statistical evidence on the situation regarding schools in Gwynedd. The factual information has been approved as a fair, transparent, correct and unprejudiced analysis by every member of the Working Group.
- 5.6 A report was presented to the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee in November 2008 by the Working Group, outlining its responsibilities and putting forward initial suggestions.

- 5.7 The Working Group presented initial findings to the Gwynedd Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee in November 2008:
- Change is inevitable in some areas for various reasons;
 - The rate, nature and timescale of the change can vary from area to area;
 - The change needs to be planned area by area in consultation with local representatives;
 - In some areas it will be possible to discuss a number of options and to consider any suggestions for change which arise from the local discussions;
 - The change needs to be planned in stages and priority given to the areas where the need for change is most obvious and clear.
- 5.8 The “*Excellent Primary Education for Children in Gwynedd*” strategy was submitted to the Gwynedd Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 5 February 2009.
- 5.9 The report was approved, subject to some amendments, mainly the following:
- Note the proposal to consult with the pupils and staff of the schools;
 - Outline the role and responsibilities of the Catchment-area Review Panel;
 - Tie the process closer to the statutory process.
- 5.10 An amended version of the “*Excellent Primary Education for Children in Gwynedd*” strategy was submitted to the Council Board on 10 March 2009.
- 5.11 The report was approved subject to some amendments, mainly the following:
- Reconcile the status of the Welsh language in the review framework to include an explanation of the Council’s vision and its commitment to the language;
 - Explain and elaborate upon the process of reviewing the catchment areas and include representation (Headteacher and member of the governing body) from each school in the catchment area on the Catchment-area Review Panels if that is the wish of the local people;
 - Adapt the document to include the names of the Secondary School Headteachers in the area;
 - Confirm that any savings made from closure or change are brought into the education system;
 - Aim at ensuring buildings of quality within the County through a meaningful plan.
- 5.12 The strategy was submitted to the Full Council in April 2009 and unanimously approved. Agreement was reached on the following:
- Offer the County’s children the best experiences and opportunities possible by ensuring suitable class sizes and high quality leadership at our schools;
 - Aim at promoting and strengthening the Welsh language – as an educational and social medium – by putting in place new proposals for primary education within the County;
 - Respond to needs and opportunities in the present primary education system by being proactive and creative, and working in collaboration with others towards a sustainable and practical long term plan;
 - Make the best use of the available resources – human, technical and financial – so that children receive maximum benefit from the expenditure made by the County on education;
 - Create a first class teaching and learning environment for the teachers and children of the County by improving resources and buildings;
 - Develop our schools to be institutions which are central to community activities.

5.13 During the Summer of 2010 - Gwynedd Headteachers Federation developed a concise paper giving their views on the strategy (Appendix 1). It became apparent through that paper that the County's Headteachers confirmed that the outcomes aimed towards realising were shared by them as well.

6. Give clear evidence of the way progress on the main targets in the Strategy has made a difference to the children and young people of Gwynedd.

6.0 Here are some of the main targets noted in the strategy and the proposed plans which aim towards them;

6.1 Offer the County's children the best experiences and opportunities possible by ensuring suitable class sizes and high quality leadership at our schools

6.1.1. There are situations in the Tywyn, Berwyn and Gader catchment areas where pupils who were/are in small sized schools - as a result of the plans, they are being moved into larger classes. This will mean that they will be taught in groups of smaller age range which will enrich their education and their social relationship with other pupils.

6.1.2. A number of the plans will also lead to an improvement in the Headteachers situation regarding leadership and management of their schools. By creating schools which are more sustainable the Headteachers can be released from teaching duties and spend more time on leadership and management of the school. Federal plans have also been achieved – this will also lead to the same benefits.

6.1.3. Also, by creating stronger educational institutions - individuals will have a more definite career track and recruitment problems will be eased – especially in rural areas.

6.2 Respond to needs and opportunities in the present primary education system by being proactive and creative, and working in collaboration with others towards a sustainable and practical long term plan;

6.2.1. These discussions have thus far involved 21 schools in the Tywyn, Y Berwyn and Y Gader catchment areas.

6.2.2. As part of these plans the Council has been discussing innovative proposals. The Council has planned to establish a Lifelong Campus in Bala, and will possibly establish a Multi Site Lifelong Learning Community in Dolgellau.

6.2.3. Of course, these plans also ensure education provision in rural areas in the catchment areas already mentioned. But these will be more sustainable and stronger than they would be had the strategy not been implemented. There are plans in place to establish an Area School in Bro Dysynni and to establish a Multi-Site Area School in Brithdir and Dinas Mawddwy – brand new ideas and plans by Gwynedd Council.

6.2.4. Gwynedd Council is also at the forefront in developing federal models. Two of the Government's six federal pilot schemes have been held in Gwynedd – (1) Pennal and Dyffryn Dulas, (2) Glanadda and Coed Mawr.

6.3 Make the best use of the available resources – human, technical and financial – so that children receive maximum benefit from the County’s expenditure on education;

- 6.3.1. Pupil numbers have fallen throughout Gwynedd over the last decade, with some areas suffering a more severe reduction than others. Indeed – evidence of this was of key importance when the strategy was first developed. Reduction in pupil numbers leads to an increase in surplus places at the schools – with resources being used ineffectively to maintain systems and processes rather than to develop the pupils’ education.
- 6.3.2. As a result of the proposed plans - up to 900 surplus places could be abolished from the County’s schools. We hope that the money used at the moment will be put to better use in the future and will be directly steered towards education and improving the quality of education.
- 6.3.3. Also, the plans will move towards ensuring that schools of the appropriate size are positioned in the right locations i.e. balancing the location of schools with the need for places in the local area.

6.4 Create a first class teaching and learning environment for the children and teachers of the County by improving resources and buildings;

- 6.4.1. The plans already decided upon will lead to an investment (of more than £20 million) in the teaching and learning environment for teachers and pupils. The Council has attracted investment from the Government to establish its plans for reorganising schools in the County. The plans at Tywyn have been funded on the basis of a 70% contribution from the Welsh Government and 30% from Gwynedd Council. The remainder of the investment is on the basis of 50% from the Welsh Government and 50% from Gwynedd Council.
- 6.4.2. These improvements vary from a brand new school in Bro Dysynni – to substantial developments on the Brithdir site and on the Berwyn site in Bala – with notable improvements in Ysgol OM Edwards; Ysgol Penybryn, Tywyn and a number of others.
- 6.4.3. The details of the plans vary – but they improve the condition of school classrooms, provide preparation areas for teachers, improve the information technology provision and improve the outdoor teaching and play facilities – as well as improve the parking areas. According to the research carried out by Estyn⁵ on schools which have new buildings or renovated buildings: “...pupils’ attainment and achievement levels have improved. In some cases, there has been a substantial improvement in attainment.”

6.5 Aim at promoting and strengthening the Welsh language – as an educational and social medium – by putting new proposals in place for primary education within the County;

- 6.5.1. Language impact assessments studies have been undertaken on every proposal discussed thus far. These assessments have weighed and measured the status of the Welsh language in each situation and as a result of these plans the provision of education through the medium of Welsh will remain the same or will be placed in a stronger position.

⁵ Estyn 2007 Report: An evaluation of performance of schools before and after moving into new buildings or significantly refurbished premises

6.6 Develop our schools to be institutions which are central to community activities.

- 6.6.1. As part of improvements to buildings, provision for the community is being developed. These provisions will be useful for community groups, training and adult/community courses.
- 6.6.2. But in addition to the physical provision - some schools will provide education for a wider community than they do at present. A community impact assessment was included as part of the process of developing proposals – and it was clearly stated that schools would have to encompass the wider community when schools are merged. The Council is proactive in terms of the community element – and a Regeneration officer is already working with some of these communities to discuss after use of buildings when schools close, as well as being available to discuss the role of any new school within the wider community.

7. Note what lessons were learned, and briefly describe your plans for the future, paying specific attention to the following:

7.1 Nature and implications of comparatively low cost per head for Gwynedd pupils

- 7.1.1 In 2012-13 – the cost per head in Gwynedd schools was as follows in comparison with the Wales average:

Primary:

Gwynedd average: £4,517

All Wales average: £4,114

Secondary:

Gwynedd average: £4,800

All Wales average: £4,589

- 7.1.2 The latest information⁶ includes the pupil by pupil comparison of the **Education budget relevant to Schools – gross** per pupil, across every sector. This shows a level of gross expenditure of £5,901 per pupil in Gwynedd, namely the third highest throughout Wales and almost 7% higher than the all Welsh average of £5,520. Detailed figures for Gwynedd and other rural councils are shown below.

Table 1
Education Budget Relevant to Schools - Gross

	£ Per Pupil	Position (throughout Wales)
Cardigan	6,354	1
Conwy	5,907	2
Gwynedd	5,901	3
Powys	5,858	5
Ynys Môn	5,854	6
Pembrokeshire	5,796	7
Monmouth	5,662	8
Denbighshire	5,620	9
Carmarthenshire	5,543	11
All Wales Average	5,520	

⁶ Statistical Bulletin – Statistics for Wales 27 June 2012

- 7.1.3 Therefore, in view of the above information – the expenditure per pupil is higher in Gwynedd than the average throughout Wales. Having said that, the expenditure per pupil varies within individual schools in Gwynedd.
- 7.1.4 There is considerable difference in the expenditure per pupil from school to school within the County, with the smallest primary school spending in excess of £7,000 per head and the largest primary schools spending around £2,700 per head (the largest secondary school spends £3,942 and the smallest secondary school spends £5,098).
- 7.1.5 Also, a large number of schools in the County are designed for a much larger number of pupils than the attendance numbers over the past years. Now, we have to be aware of the effect and implications of considerable expense on schools which have a large percentage of surplus places – and in particular the effect and implications this will have on the budget and on other schools.
- 7.1.6 31 of our primary schools have fewer than 43 pupils and between them they receive £595,000 (2012/13) additional funding through the ‘minimum staffing level’ allowance which allows them to employ a Headteacher and teacher. Although the circumstances at these schools vary greatly we have to consider them when we discuss in detail the use of resources.
- 7.1.7 It has already been noted that a considerable percentage of the education budget at present is spent on the maintenance of very costly infrastructure, in both the primary and secondary sectors, and this is not sustainable into the future. **There is substantial expenditure on schools with a high number of surplus places.** Considering that the number of surplus places is in excess of 6,000 or 28% in Gwynedd schools – the highest percentage in Wales – this means that around £2.5 million is being spent each year on maintaining the system (which involves administrative and managerial duplications, and building and systems maintenance costs etc), rather than directly on education.
- 7.1.8 The plans already decided upon will contribute towards reconciling these variations in expenditure per pupil. But we need to give further consideration to methods of further reconciling this figure in the primary sector – together with embarking on the process of reviewing the situation in the secondary sector.
- 7.1.9 Another question which often arises in this context is the difference in education funding levels between England and Wales. The latest set of data on this matter was published in January 2011, and showed that education expenditure in England was £605 per pupil higher – this was based on 2009/10 expenditure.
- 7.1.10 There is no doubt that expenditure in England is generally higher per pupil and it could be asked how meaningful is the comparison in a situation where the distribution of population is so different in the two countries and where it seems that there are specific factors in the cities of England which call for considerably higher levels of expenditure.

7.2 Result and implications of the review of buildings at Gwynedd schools

- 7.2.1 There is provision for improvements to the schools buildings within the Council's Asset Management Plan as agreed in the Full Council meeting – March 1st 2012. Of course, before Christmas 2011 it was announced that the Council had managed to achieve the first step in the process of attracting investment to the value of more than £36million from the Welsh Government Twenty First Century Schools Programme. As a result, the Asset Management Plan was amended to ensure that the Council could provide the necessary equal funding in accordance with the conditions of the programme. The property service has a rolling programme to respond to school maintenance issues.
- 7.2.2 Therefore, in terms of improvements to the condition of the school buildings in the County, further consideration will have to be given to the size of the estate and also to the use made of these buildings as assets. It has already been noted that Gwynedd has the highest percentage of surplus places throughout Wales – and these figures suggest that we are not at the moment making the most effective use of all the education resources – which include the buildings and assets for teaching and learning.
- 7.2.3 Although capital resources have been identified - those resources are scarce. It has been suggested that further opportunities for attracting additional resources might emerge - but plans must be at hand when those opportunities arise. In view of the restrictions, innovative options will need to be considered, and also we have to be ready to face difficult decisions as we make changes which will create a much more sustainable system to the future.

8 Conclusion

- 8.1 So, in conclusion – it is premature to measure the success of the reorganisation strategy in detail, but there are signs that the plans are taking the education system in the right direction in terms of some factors; class sizes, population, pupil numbers, leadership, learning environment and financial resources etc. We have to admit that this programme of change is not easy for those affected by it. We also note that some lessons have been learned through the reorganisation process.
- 8.2 This strategy has been based on the need to ensure a quality education provision, and also education which will be sustainable to the future. The programme for the next phase will be driven with that in view.