

NAME OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	Services Scrutiny Committee
DATE OF MEETING	12 February 2015
TITLE OF REPORT	School Organisation Programme Update
CABINET MEMBER	Councillor Gareth Thomas

1. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

1.1. The strategy 'Excellent Primary Education for Children in Gwynedd' was adopted unanimously by the Council in April 2009. The vision of the strategy is to *"provide education of the best possible quality that will provide the county's children with the experiences, skills and confidence to develop into bilingual, successful and well-rounded citizens"* and the aims of the strategy are to:

- Provide the County's children with the best possible experiences and opportunities by ensuring **classes of appropriate size and high quality school leadership;**
- Aim to **promote and strengthen the Welsh language** – as an educational and social medium – by presenting new proposals for primary education within the County;
- Respond **pro-actively and creatively** to the needs and opportunities provided by the current education system through fostering a collaborative, sustainable and practical **long term plan;**
- Ensure that children gain the greatest positive from education spending within the county by **fully utilising all available resources** - whether human, technological or financial;
- Improve resources and buildings to **create a learning environment of the best possible quality.**
- Develop our schools into **establishments that are central to community activity.**

1.2. In its meeting on 9 October 2012, the Cabinet decided on the '*Priorities Plan - Reorganisation of Education Provision*' which set out a specific work programme based on the strategy.

1.3. The following are core sections of the work:

- Undertaking background work and developing models for providing education,
- Ensuring that the relevant statutory processes are undertaken by means of communication and consultation, and
- Attracting capital resources by compiling business cases and through contributions from the Government.

In keeping with the strategy, we hope to create a strong and sustainable education system by securing the proper type and number of schools in the appropriate places in order to maintain and improve standards for today and into the future.

2. THE PROGRAMME TO DATE

2.1. The school organisation programme is one of the biggest programmes of change undertaken by Gwynedd Council – here is a summary of the steps taken so far:

- Investment valued at **£18 million** already made to improve the learning environment
- 900 primary pupils have benefited from the investment
- **Over £430,000 annual revenue savings already achieved**
- Closure of Ysgol Rhydyclafdy April 2009
- Closure of Ysgol Llawr y Betws August 2009
- Closure of Ysgol Croesor August 2009
- Closure of Ysgol Abergynolwyn March 2011

- Construction of a new school building for Ysgol Yr Hendre September 2012 with an investment of **£9.326 million**
- Federation of Ysgol Glanadda and Ysgol Coed Mawr, Bangor, September 2012
- Entry age extension at Ysgol Penybryn, Tywyn to accept 3 year old pupils from September 2012
- Federation of Ysgol Pennal and Ysgol Dyffryn Dulas (Corris) September 2012
- Closure of Ysgol Coed Menai, Bangor in December 2012
- Upgrading of Ysgol Pennal and Ysgol Dyffryn Dulas federation with an investment of **£990,000**
- Closure of Ysgol Llidiardau August 2013
- Closure of Ysgol Aberdyfi August 2013
- Upgrading of Ysgol Penybryn, Tywyn with an investment of **£1.47 million**
- Closure of Ysgol Brynchrug, Ysgol Llanegryn and Ysgol Llwyngwriol September 2013
- Opening of Ysgol Craig y Deryn September 2013 following an investment of **£5.42 million**
- Closure of Ysgol Parc September 2013
- Upgrading of Ysgol OM Edwards with an investment of **£1 million**

2.2 Although in some cases it is still early days, we can note some educational benefits from implementing these plans:

- **Leadership**
There are problems regarding the recruitment of Head Teachers in some areas and this has led to uncertainty over leadership at a number of schools. Historically there was a need for 8 Primary Head Teachers in the Tywyn catchment area but now there are only 3 primary sector Head Teachers in the area – this has reduced the recruitment problem in the catchment area. Because the schools are bigger, these Head Teachers have more non-contact time for leadership and management purposes at their schools – with a view to improve pupils’ standards and educational experiences. In the areas in question, the improved conditions allow the Head Teachers time to effectively lead and manage their schools into the future. The number of Head Teachers who used to spend most of their time teaching has been reduced, which means that there is more capacity for leadership and school management – and to concentrate on aspects such as raising standards.
- **Classes**
In the areas where reorganisation has taken place, the age range of pupils taught together is much smaller and this means that pupils are taught in groups of the same age. Following reorganisation, there are considerably fewer classes made up of 4 different age groups in the Tywyn catchment area. This makes it easier for teachers to concentrate on improving standards instead of trying to ensure provision for a wide age range.
- **Sustainability**
Where reorganisation has been undertaken, the education system is more sustainable and stronger for the future. Ten small establishments have been reorganised, all of which were receiving additional funding under the staffing safety net. In terms of numbers, rural schools such as Ysgol Craig y Deryn and Ysgol OM Edwards are strong and will ensure sustainable education provision within their areas into the future. In terms of parent choice, these schools are popular and comfortably full in terms of numbers. Reorganisation aims at ensuring the best possible use of resources and ensuring a strong provision for the future.
- **Pupils’ Experience**
A review was undertaken with the pupils of Ysgol Craig y Deryn in order to make an assessment of the pupils’ impressions.

In the review, undertaken jointly with the school after the end of the first term of the new provision, these are the main positive aspects noted by the pupils:

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|----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| - New friends, | - Good computers and technology, |
| - Kind teachers and staff, | - Good food, |

- Pleasant classrooms and

- Plenty of play areas

The matters which caused concern were the number of toilets on the site and their location, and the fact that the grass had not grown and that they could not play on it.

- Learning Environment

By undertaking school reorganisation an opportunity arose to upgrade resources and equipment in order to ensure a teaching and learning environment fit for the twenty first century. Four schools have been upgraded or rebuilt to category A standards (the best category) and thus meeting twenty first century schools standards. This means that the pupils and staff at these schools have access to the best possible resources, which – according to Estyn – can have *“a very beneficial effect on the standard of teaching and on staff morale which positively impacts the performance of the pupils.”*

- Standards of Education

A number of the new plans came into force in September 2013, and as yet no formal assessments have been undertaken by Estyn on some of the new establishments, or newly refurbished establishments. But a combination of factors noted here indicate that - in terms of improving standards - conditions now are much more favourable than in the past.

3. WORK BEING UNDERTAKEN

3.1. The work is being monitored under the PRINCE2 programme management structure, which means that Project Boards and a Programme Board have been established in order to ensure that the programme is being successfully led and managed. Forums which ensure a voice for local representatives and Local Members are also part of the programme in individual districts and catchment areas.

3.2. In accordance with the Schools Standards and Organisation Act (Wales) 2013 and the School Organisation Code (006/2013), there is a statutory framework which details the relevant requirements of the statutory processes. This means that there are statutory and very specific procedures and processes involved in the reorganisation of schools.

3.3. It is necessary to follow specific processes in order to attract funding from the Welsh Government, and as part of this process the entire programme had to be reviewed by a process referred to as the *‘Gateway Review’*. This is an independent review of the school reorganisation programme which the Government commissions as a means of reviewing the way this revolutionary programme is implemented, and the predictions in terms of its achievement.

3.4. The Gateway Review assessment of Gwynedd Council’s school reorganisation programme was the second best under five categories, and it notes:

“The Review Team finds that the Programme has made excellent progress towards meeting their vision for schools reorganisation in Gwynedd.

Successful delivery at this stage appears probable because of a clear vision, good political backing, strong direction provided by the Senior Responsible Owner (SRO), Iwan Trefor Jones, and the enthusiasm of a committed team.

The Programme has shown that it is willing and able to take on board lessons learned from earlier projects and resulting in excellent and wide-ranging stakeholder engagement. However, constant attention will be needed to ensure risks do not materialise into major issues threatening delivery. This will require consideration of such things as leadership, benefits realisation, programme assurance, market conditions and handover to business as usual.

There is currently good momentum around the programme which, if maintained, provides a strong basis for delivery.”

3.5. Plans included in the Twenty First Century Schools Programme are being achieved and the grant sources timetables are very tight. At present, work is being undertaken on the following:

3.5.1. Establishing **Ysgol Bro Llifon** in Groeslon – school to open in September 2015 with an investment of just under £5 million

3.5.2. **Y Gader Catchment Area** , Dolgellau

- Closure of 10 schools and the establishment of a new school on 6 sites – a very innovative and challenging model
- Investment worth £4.3 million
- Revenue saving valued at £255,000
- Subject to statutory processes and Cabinet decisions, the aim is to open the new school in September 2017

3.5.3. Completion of the reorganisation process in **Y Berwyn catchment area** - consultation process to be completed and an investment of more than £9 million to be ensured in order to establish a Lifelong Campus.

3.5.4. Establishing **Meirion Dwyfor Special School** – A special school for 100 pupils with residential provision for 6 pupils, to open in September 2016 with an investment of more than £12 million.

3.5.5. Construction of a New Building for **Ysgol Glancegin**, in Maesgeirchen Bangor

- Investment of over £5 million in a new building for the school
- Aiming to complete the school building by September 2017

4. ACHIEVING THE PROGRAMME

4.1. The Welsh Government approved a budget for plans worth **£36 million** as part of a twenty first century schools programme. This money has been approved in principle and in order to obtain the funding from the Welsh Government there are specific requirements; it is necessary to complete business cases in accordance with the Treasury's *'Five Case Business Model'* procedure. This involves the compilation of a Strategic Outline Case (SOC), an Outline Business Case (OBC) and a Final Business Case (FBC) for each project. These steps involve more than compiling documents, it is necessary to work in collaboration with government representatives in order to ensure understanding of what it is we are trying to achieve and to ensure that explanation and information is presented in response to any request or challenge received.

4.2. These capital developments are important from an educational point of view, but also we have to be aware of the contribution to the local economy – during a difficult time in general. On some of these capital projects the direct expenditure for local providers (within 20 miles) can be as high as 70% with opportunities also for businesses (shops, restaurants etc) to benefit from the presence of such large developments. In addition to this, there is an opportunity to create apprenticeships as part of the development – this has already been undertaken in conjunction with some of the plans already completed.

4.3. As part of the school organisation plans, **permanent revenue savings worth £430,000** have already been achieved – and the plans in hand, but yet to be achieved (see above) will lead to at least **£345,000 of further permanent revenue savings.**

- 4.4. There is a team of 6 officers employed within the structure of the unit at a current cost of £246,000. These posts vary in order to ensure that there is sufficient ability, expertise and experience to enable all aspects of the programme to be fulfilled, including the completion of the statutory processes, the business cases and programme management. Specialist roles are commissioned according to the need for this corporate cross departmental programme.
- 4.5. In addition to this work, the team contributes to other duties as well. One specific example is the completion of the work of reviewing the capacity at the schools within the County. By undertaking this task, the Council was able to respond to the challenge of reducing empty places – this challenge was set by the Education Minister and later supported by Estyn when the Education Department underwent an inspection. Estyn recently returned on a post inspection visit in order to monitor the specific recommendation made to the County of reducing empty places. The positive conclusion by Estyn as a result of this visit was that the Council was meeting the challenge “*to a great extent*”.

5. FUTURE TASKS

- 5.1. As part of the discussions held by the Working Group established to identify £4.3m savings from the schools budget, school reorganisation has been identified as a means of contributing towards the challenge. During the 2014/15 financial year, 21 schools were protected by the safety net, receiving more than £600,000 of additional support. It is forecast that there will be 23 schools under the safety net in the 2015/16 financial year and the likelihood is that these schools will not contribute towards the cut which is imposed on the budgets of other schools within the County.
- 5.2. The Working Group issued a clear message that the process of reorganisation needs to be accelerated. The Working Group states that there is now an opportunity to look at reorganisation plans which can contribute approximately £200,000 of further savings in the future.
- 5.3. Therefore, considering what has already been achieved, the plans in hand and the message from the Working Group, it is possible that the entire reorganisation project will save around £1 million of revenue funding per year.
- 5.4. The suggestion therefore is that in the next few years it will become necessary to ensure the capacity to achieve the aims of school reorganisation, in order to reduce the burden on every individual school in the County.
- 5.5. Also, the Government is embarking on background work and planning for Band B – the next funding window in the Twenty First Century Schools Programme for the period 2019 to 2024. Of course, the exact figure for the County will depend on plans for the future and the amount of local government contribution expected as part of the programme. But we will have to take advantage of these opportunities in order to ensure improvements to our schools, and also for the sake of the indirect benefits to the local economy. It will be necessary to ensure that the Council will have the capacity, the understanding and also experience of the government’s funding systems in order to ensure the best investment for Gwynedd into the future.
- 5.6. Of course, although achieving savings is essential in view of the financial situation, and an opportunity to attract capital investment is one which should be grasped with both hands, we have to remember and emphasise that the vision of the strategy is to “*provide education of the best possible quality that will provide the county’s children with the experiences, skills and confidence to develop into bilingual, successful and well-rounded citizens*”. The vision, and the aims, will be at the heart of the discussions as we proceed with the work into the future.