

THE CABINET 15/06/21

Present-

Councillors: Dyfrig L. Siencyn, Dafydd Meurig, Craig ab Iago, Gareth Wyn Griffith, Nia Wyn Jeffreys, Dilwyn Morgan, Ioan Thomas, Catrin Elen Wager. Cemlyn Rees Williams and Dewi Roberts (Local Member)

Also present:

Dafydd Gibbard (Chief Executive), Morwena Edwards (Corporate Director), Iwan Evans (Head of Legal Services), Dafydd Edwards (Head of Finance Department), Sion Huws (Senior Solicitor) and Annes Sion (Democracy Team Leader).

Item 6: Geraint Owen (Head of Corporate Support Department) and Dewi Wyn Jones (Council Business Support Service Manager)

Item 7: Garem Jackson (Head of Education Department) and Gwern ap Rhisiart (Dwyfor / Meirionnydd Area Education Officer).

1. APOLOGIES

The Cabinet Members and Officers were welcomed to the meeting. Apologies were received from Cllr Gareth Thomas.

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declarations of personal interest were received.

3. URGENT ITEMS

There were no urgent items.

4. MATTERS ARISING FROM OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

There were no matters arising from overview and scrutiny.

5. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 18 MAY 2021

The Chair accepted the minutes of the meeting held on 15 May 2021 as a true record.

6. GWYNEDD COUNCIL PERFORMANCE REPORT 2020/21

The report was submitted by Cllr Dyfrig Siencyn.

DECISION

To approve the Gwynedd Council Performance Report 2020/21 and recommend the Full Council adopt it at its meeting on 8 July 2021.

DISCUSSION

The report was submitted, noting that it was a pleasure to present it. It was emphasised that the document was clear and easy to read and provided a clear picture of the entire Council's work. It was explained that one section at the start of the report provided a description of the work that had been done at the start of lockdown when the Council's work had been restricted due to Covid regulations. It was explained that the Council's staff had responded with ease and flexibility to address the situation and had worked to create a new way of working. All staff were thanked for their willingness to adapt and to respond very quickly and efficiently during lockdown.

It was noted that the report highlighted the Council's priorities by emphasising the need to continue to discuss the field of sustainable tourism. It was noted that the Education Department would continue to improve education provision within the county, noting that work had been done at Ysgol Godre'r Berwyn and Ysgol y Garnedd and there was a new school on its way in Cricieth.

It was expressed that in light of the housing crisis that the Housing Action Plan was in place. It was noted that this plan was ambitious and innovative and there was a commitment of £77 million for the plan term.

It was explained that some departments were not visible to the county's residents and had been affected by cuts over the years. Attention was drawn to the Public Protection Department which had dealt with a number of changes due to the Covid-19 emergency. Staff were thanked for committing to the Test, Trace and Protect procedure which had highlighted Local Government's ability to do the work without wasting money on external companies.

It was expressed that this was the last Annual Report for this term and there would be a new procedure in future. It was added that the Council's internal performance challenging system would recommence to ensure that the Council was looking at its weaknesses and improving continuously.

Observations arising from the discussion

- The staff of the Children and Supporting Families Department were thanked for their willingness and flexibility during the time. All the foster parents who had been more than willing to step in were thanked. It was

added that the department was aware of its challenges in moving forward and that the autism plan would be a priority for this year.

- The staff of the Adults, Health and Well-being Department were thanked for their perseverance during a difficult year. It was noted that this year had highlighted the strength of the staff.
- Attention was drawn to one small correction, there were now eight improvement priorities, and not seven.
- The outstanding work at the schools in response to the challenge of remote learning was acknowledged.
- The staff of the finance and information technology department were thanked for their work in supporting other departments.
- The Economy Department staff were thanked for speaking with businesses throughout the entire period and for allocating covid grants.

7. YSGOL ABERSOCH

The report was submitted by Cllr Cemlyn Williams

DECISION

The Cabinet, following consideration of the observations received during the statutory consultation period and the response of the Education Department to those observations

- i. Approved issuing a statutory proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch on 31 December 2021, and provide a place for the pupils at Ysgol Sarn Bach from 1 January 2022.
- ii. Approved the publication of statutory notices on the proposal in (i) above in accordance with the requirements of Section 48 of the Schools Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013.

DISCUSSION

The report was submitted noting that its purpose was to report back following a period of statutory consultation on the option to close Ysgol Abersoch and offer a place for the pupils at Ysgol Sarn Bach. It was expressed that the decision to bring the report to the Cabinet had not been easy but that the department was asking for approval to publish a statutory notice to close Ysgol Abersoch, in accordance with the requirements of Section 48 of the Schools Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013.

It was emphasised that it was very difficult to present this report, but there was a duty to ensure the best possible education, experiences and learning environment for children. It was expressed that full consideration had been given to all possible options for the school. All individuals, pupils, teachers and governors were thanked for giving their time to respond to the statutory consultation.

It was expressed that the need had arisen to consider the future of Ysgol

Abersoch following a reduction in the number of pupils. It was noted that Ysgol Abersoch's pupil numbers had fallen in recent years and that 76% of the school's capacity was empty and the projections for the coming years had shown that the numbers would remain low.

The Head of Education Department noted that back in May 2019, the Cabinet had agreed to support a recommendation to commence formal discussions with the School Governing Body to consider options for its future following a decline in the number of pupils at the school. Three meetings had been held which was an opportunity to explain the need to discuss options, to present and discuss the options before reaching a decision on the preferred option.

It was noted that back in September 2020, the Council had conducted a statutory consultation process on the proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch in August 2021, and to offer a place for the pupils at Ysgol Sarn Bach. The decision was confirmed by the Cabinet on 3 November 2020, after the original decision was called in and referred back to the Cabinet by the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee.

The Head of Education Department highlighted the main challenges the school was facing including the fact that pupil numbers had declined since 2016. It was expressed that there were currently eight pupils attending the school on a full-time basis and two pupils who were attending on a part-time basis. It was added that the projections noted that there would be 10 pupils in 2021, and 12 in 2022 and 2023. It was explained that the data highlighted that there were 21 children in the Abersoch catchment-area attending other schools and that three pupils from beyond the Abersoch catchment attended the school. It was added that the low numbers were placing an additional pressure on budgets. Attention was drawn to the fact that the school was receiving additional funding as a consequence of the low numbers to secure staff. It was expressed that Ysgol Abersoch received an additional £50,000 on top of their budgets which meant that the cost per pupil was approximately £17,000 per child compared to an average of £4,000 per child in the county.

It was noted that in December 2019, the Cabinet had committed to the Principles of Fit for Purpose Education which formed a basis to the department's vision of ensuring the education system. It was also said that primary schools followed the Gwynedd Education Strategy and that the principles and the strategy had been at the root of the entire process.

The Education Officer highlighted the options that had been considered which included changing the age range to 3-9 or 3-11 years old. It was expressed that there would be advantages in doing this but that it was not sustainable for the future. It was highlighted that three types of federalisation had been proposed as options to ensure a presence within the area, but it was emphasised that this did not address the challenge of the decline in pupil numbers. The option of closing the school was presented and providing a place for the pupils at Ysgol Sarn Bach which offered consistent opportunities to the pupils and an education of the highest quality along with consistency in terms of class numbers. It was added that the geographical distance was a fair distance and that parents would be able to choose a school for their children.

Following this a public consultation had been held between 12 January and 23 February. Consultative documents had been sent via e-mail and hard copies had been made available and virtual drop in sessions had been held. 154 responses had been received. It was expressed that the majority of responses objected to the option to close and the main points were outlined.

It was expressed that a number of responses had stated dissatisfaction with the consultation that had been held due to Covid-19 restrictions. It was emphasised that in terms of the regulatory requirements, it was not required to hold public meetings and therefore the procedure that had been followed was appropriate. It was highlighted that concerns had been raised in relation to the timetable and that closing on 31 August 2021 did not allow enough time for parents to determine which school to send their children to, consequently, the Education Department had pushed the date back to December 2021. Attention was drawn to the comments that Mudiad Meithrin and the Cylch Meithrin had not had an opportunity to be part of the consultation. It was expressed that the department had noticed that the e-mail had not been sent to them and the department had extended the response time for the Mudiad to 21 April, however, no response had been received.

It was noted that a number of observations had been received about the alternative options. Attention was drawn to the comment about delaying the process to give the school an opportunity to increase the numbers and it was expressed that it was not possible to commit to any delay as the numbers had fallen consistently over recent years and it was not viable for the future. In response to the observations that enquired why the whole catchment was not under review, it was explained that a catchment-area review was not part of the strategy and this decision had been made in response to specific challenges related to one school.

It was explained that a number of responses had noted that too much emphasis was being placed on the school numbers and questioned the projections. It was explained that the projections were not scientific but the department believed that the number would remain low over the next five years. It was also noted that the standard of education would fall by moving to another school, but the department emphasised that Estyn's response had highlighted that the standard at both schools was very similar and there would be no significant difference in the children's education.

Attention was drawn to the use of the school building after closure, it was expressed that the Council had a policy for the Future Use of School Buildings and that legal discussions would be held to ensure that there would be no legal obligations linked to the building.

Concerns were highlighted that the path to Ysgol Sarn Bach was not suitable for children to walk to the school, but it was noted that a school bus was currently in operation and there would be space on the bus for the additional pupils. It was explained that the responses had highlighted that the school had an influence over village life. It was noted that Ysgol Sarn Bach would be expected to treat Abersoch as part of its area and ensure that the close work with the village would

continue. It was added that a number of Abersoch pupils attended Ysgol Sarn Bach and that links between the school and the village were already established.

It was expressed that there were obvious concerns in the consultation regarding the pupil's health and well-being and it was emphasised that it had been a difficult time and the transition period would also be difficult. But it was emphasised that the department would work with both schools and would work with them on the bridging period.

A number of responses had been received highlighting the negative impact on the Welsh language and culture as the school was the most important resource within the village for the Welsh language. It was emphasised that the school was doing good work but that every school was expected to work to promote the use of the Welsh language at the school and socially and consequently Ysgol Sarn Bach would be expected to continue with the good work being done.

It was noted that responses had asked what would happen to the Cylch Meithrin and Ti a Fi if the school was to close. It was expressed that it was out of the department's hands but that it could be considered for the future use of the building. It was emphasised that on the whole, the children of Ysgol Abersoch were unhappy and were raising concerns about the experiences they could lose such as visits to the beach and the village and that the pupils of Ysgol Sarn Bach did sympathise with this but were also eager to welcome the pupils to their school.

The Education Officer drew attention to the alternative options noting that they had looked at a Multi-site school and at two types of school federations. It was explained that the options could be a successful model if the geographical distance was significant. However, it was expressed that as the distance was not extensive it was explained that they were not a solution for the future and would not meet the challenges that Ysgol Abersoch was facing.

The Local Member noted that he was very disappointed that it was not possible for the Chair and the Vice-chair to join the meeting. He expressed that the report was extensive and asked how independent the review was as it had been led by the education department. It was emphasised that the response was strongly against the decision and that the community was unanimous against closing the school. He explained that adding one academic year to include year 3 would make a significant difference to Ysgol Abersoch and he asked why the department had not taken any steps sooner to solve the capacity problem.

He added that there had been no consideration of the campaign to secure housing for local people in the village, and that closing the school before these schemes were implemented would be premature. It was explained that the Cylch Meithrin and Ti a Fi had succeeded in drawing children in and not enough time had passed yet to see whether or not it would make a difference to the numbers. It was explained that the school pupils had a close relationship with the village and that closure would also close the relationship between the school and its community. It was added that a number of families had noted that they were eager to turn their second homes into full-time homes after Covid and there was a possibility that the numbers would increase. He asked the Cabinet to defer the

decision for a year to see whether there would be any changes to the numbers.

Observations arising from the discussion

- The teachers, pupils, parents, governors and the community were thanked for being willing to respond to the consultation.
- Attention was drawn to the process that had been followed since 2019 and that it had been transparent and had followed the correct procedures. It was explained that there would be an impact on the community but that children were prepared to move to Ysgol Sarn Bach when they were 8 years old and there was a connection there already. It was expressed that the standard of education for the children of Gwynedd was the priority.
- It was expressed that the figure of £17,000 per child was striking compared with £4,000 across the county. It was highlighted that the Language Impact Assessment had been challenged in the responses and the department was asked how it responded to this. It was also asked what the department would do to ensure contact with Ysgol Sarn Bach and the village. The Education Officer noted that the basis of the concerns derived from the fact that the department did not compare like for like, but it was emphasised that the department believed that the report was correct. In terms of the practicality of the work of bringing two communities together there would be a need to look at the plan in the language charter and take hold of the strategies that had been successful at Ysgol Abersoch and continue with them at Ysgol Sarn Bach.
- It was noted that the responses had highlighted strong feelings about the schools and that they needed to be considered. Attention was drawn to the impact on the community and the language, however, it was expressed that the quality of education and children's well-being was the priority. Confirmation was sought that if the school was to close then the children's well-being at the new school would be considered. Also, in relation to the future of the site, it was explained that the resource was important to the community and the community had a strong voice over the future of the site. In terms of the move, the Education Officer noted that careful planning was needed to ensure that the pupils could have experiences at both schools before the school was closed in order for the pupils to get to know each other. It was added that specialist services would also be available to ensure the children's well-being.
- It was noted that schools had a role as hubs within their communities and as a place for parents to socialise and children to grow roots and see the value of having a school at the heart of the community. However, it was noted that the fact that a high number of children attended school outside the catchment area was striking, and it was asked whether a school with one classroom could provide a full solution to the school's problems? The department was asked to consider a safe route to Ysgol Sarn Bach to draw the community in by linking the village and the new school. It was explained that the Council would take an interdepartmental view into the possibilities of creating a footpath.
- The local member was thanked for taking advantage of every opportunity to be part of the discussion and for being a voice for the residents.

8. RESPONDING TO THE REPORT "SECOND HOMES - DEVELOPING NEW POLICIES IN WALES"

The report was submitted by Cllr Dyfrig Siencyn.

DECISION

To agree the Council's response to the report "Second Homes - Developing New Policies in Wales" as set out in section 9 of this report and in particular highlighting the need to modify recommendation number 7 - Short-term Holiday Accommodation and Business Rates.

The Leader agreed to formally communicate the response to the Welsh Government and call on it to adopt and implement the most effective recommendations as a matter of urgency in order to respond to the housing crisis facing the communities of Gwynedd.

DISCUSSION

The report was submitted noting that a need to respond to the "Second Homes - Developing New Policies in Wales" report by Dr Simon Brooks, which had been commissioned by Welsh Government and Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol. It was expressed that Dr Brooks had contacted the Council and that a number of recommendations had come from a report submitted by the Environment Department to the Cabinet back in December.

It was explained that there were twelve recommendations in the report and the Council needed to respond to the report. It was highlighted that the Council only disagreed with one of the recommendations, namely recommendation 7 - Short-term Holiday Accommodation and Business Rates. The need for every dwelling to be counted as a dwelling was stated and that they should be forced to pay Council tax and any premium that coincided with that dwelling. It was noted that the report was commendable and important and the desire to send a message to the Government with the Council's response to the report.

The Chief Executive added that the report drew on many sources and that it was crucial that the Council should respond as the second homes problem was at its worst in Gwynedd. The steps the Council had already taken to tackle the problem were highlighted including adopting the New Allocation Policy so that it prioritised local people, charged the Council Tax Premium on second homes and invested the additional funding in the Housing Action Plan. It was emphasised that the Council was doing everything within its powers regarding the situation and had also specifically commissioned work to look into the problem. There was support for Dr Simon Brooks' report and it was emphasised that a number of the recommendations by the Council in the commission work had been included in the report.

It was explained that to make the biggest difference there was a need to concentrate on the recommendations that would make a difference and three

recommendations were highlighted. The first was Recommendation 7, as it had been highlighted as one of the main problems for residents that second homes did not have to pay Council tax by moving to small business rates. The need to prevent this from happening was emphasised so that they contributed to the Council and also the premium could prevent others from purchasing a second home. The second priority was to ensure there was a specific use class to change a home from a dwelling to a second home that would also require planning permission. And the third, that in order obtain evidence for the planning applications that a licensing scheme for holiday homes was needed to be able to monitor the numbers within communities and then to refuse planning applications in communities where the numbers were high. It was explained that unless these recommendations were adopted, it would not be possible to tackle the problem.

Observations arising from the discussion

- It was noted that the Council was in a housing emergency, and the Council was looking after Gwynedd residents on a daily basis. It was emphasised that during this last extraordinary year the Council had continued to look after residents and had continued to perform especially well. It was explained that over the last two years the Council had done everything within its grasp to solve the problem but that the Council did not have the power to genuinely tackle the problems. It was expressed that this problem was not a new problem and that the Westminster Government had been aware of it since the 1970s, and although Housing had been devolved to Wales, so far the only thing they had done was this report. It was emphasised that the report contained all the answers but that it was now time for the Government to act.
- It was noted that Welsh Government had compiled reports twenty years ago but had not implemented the recommendations. Back in December, it had been expressed that the report was crying out for the Welsh Government to act. It was explained that their latest report was also a call for action.
- It was emphasised that there was a need to act as there were concerns about where people were going to live today, let alone where the children of the county would be living. It was explained that there were cases everyday which highlighted the housing crisis that was emerging across Gwynedd.
- It was explained that this was not a new problem and it was asked why the Welsh Government had not done something sooner. It was raised that the report highlighted too many recommendations and that it was possible that the Government might select one that was easy to implement, meaning that it would not make a difference.
- The report was welcomed emphasising that the time for reports had ended and that it was now time to act. Organisations were called to work with Gwynedd Council to convey the message to the Government.
- It was highlighted that there were second homes in every ward in the county and that the problem was now spreading from the traditional areas to the underprivileged areas.

- It was emphasised that there was a need to be clear that paying Council tax was crucial. It was explained that charging the premium had highlighted that the Council was doing what it could.

The meeting commenced at 1.00 pm and concluded at 3.15 pm

CHAIRMAN