

THE CABINET 28/09/21

Present-

Councillors: Dyfrig L. Siencyn, Dafydd Meurig, Craig ab Iago, Gareth Wyn Griffith, Nia Wyn Jeffreys, Dilwyn Morgan, Gareth Thomas, Ioan Thomas and Cemlyn Rees Williams

Also in attendance-

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

Item 6: Geraint Owen (Head of Corporate Support Department) and Catrin Love (Health, Safety and Well-being Advisory Services Manager).

Item 7: Geraint Owen (Head of Corporate Support Department) and Eurig Williams (Human Resources Advisory Services Manager).

Item 8: Garem Jackson (Head of Education Department) and Gwern ap Rhisiart (Dwyfor Area Education Officer).

Item 9: Garem Jackson (Head of Education Department) and Debbie Anne Jones (Education Corporate Services Manager).

1. APOLOGIES

The Cabinet Members and Officers were welcomed to the meeting. Apologies were received from Cllr Catrin Wager.

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 7 SEPTEMBER

The Chair signed the minutes of the Cabinet meeting held on 7 September 2021, a true record.

6. HEALTH, SAFETY AND WELLBEING ANNUAL REPORT

The item was submitted by Cllr Nia Jeffreys

RESOLVED

The Annual Report was accepted.

DISCUSSION

The report was submitted, noting that 2021 had been very challenging in terms of Health, Safety and Well-being. The pandemic had highlighted, overnight, that every decision was made to ensure the safety of residents and staff in response to the pandemic. Attention was drawn to the work that had been done during the period, such as risk assessments, guidance and training for staff, along with health assessments. It was noted that a few Covid cases at work had occurred during 2020/21, but it was explained that this could not be confirmed definitively but that there was a requirement to report when there were reasonable grounds that they may have caught it at work.

It was explained that accidents continued, despite the pandemic over the past year. It was expressed that the department had been looking at the increase in injuries in the Waste Collection Service over the past years, and it was highlighted that stress was one of the main reasons for absences within the Council. It was explained that counselling had been available for staff as per usual.

It was noted that despite the difficult year, good work had been achieved to look after staff's health and well-being, and it was highlighted that the Council had retained the gold standard in the National Health Quality Framework.

Observations arising from the discussion

- The staff of the Department were thanked for their work and for their full commitment over the past year.
- It was highlighted that a great deal of work had been done to deal with staff well-being over the past year and staff were thanked for their work. However, with a high number of staff continuing to work from home, it was asked how they would continue to deal with staff well-being. It was noted that plans were in place to build on the good work that had been done.
- Pride was expressed as the department was continuing to look at the accidents that were happening specifically in the waste field.

7. ANNUAL REPORT - EMPLOYMENT

The item was submitted by Cllr Nia Jeffreys.

RESOLVED

To note and accept the information in the report.

DISCUSSION

The report was submitted for the first time since 2019. It was noted that the pandemic had interrupted the last report but that it was now timely for the Cabinet to receive an employment report. It was expressed that the report looked at the profile of the workforce and highlighted the main challenges facing the Council in the medium and long term.

It was highlighted that the Council's situation had changed since the beginning of the pandemic, with adapted working practices and the implications of these. It was added that as a consequence of home working, that the recruitment market had adapted and that it was now possible to recruit from broader locations. It was explained that statistics showed that the Council's age profile had increased and that this highlighted the need to prioritise the workforce plan to maintain services in the future.

Attention was drawn to the carers recruitment problems that were present in the Adults Department, noting that this was a national problem. It was explained that the Human Resources service was working with the department to see how the situation could be improved.

It was expressed that staff well-being remained a priority and was all important and the scheme had continued throughout the pandemic. When looking to the future, it was noted that the home working arrangements were here to stay in some guise or another, and there was a need to think how to adapt long-term working arrangements. It was expressed that there were advantages from home working, but that there was a need to continue to ensure that the needs of residents were the priority.

Observations arising from the discussion:

- The Head of Department added that the past year had been considerably different. It was highlighted that sickness levels had reduced and that staff turnover levels had also reduced. Despite this, it was explained that the level was increasing gradually and the Council needed to continue to plan the workforce to retain and recruit staff.
- It was emphasised that there were substantial pressures on the workforce and there were national concerns about service continuity. In response to a question about the Council's position, it was noted that an increase in work pressure and the impact of staff turnover could be seen in some fields in particular, and that there was a risk of losing more staff.
- Attention was drawn to carer recruitment and that it was a concerning situation as individuals were being forced to stay in Hospital for a long period of time before they could come home, due to the lack of carers. It was noted that the workforce was key to the county and that there was a need to highlight to the public that these jobs were as important as jobs in the health field.

8. YSGOL ABERSOCH

The report was submitted by Cllr Cemlyn Williams.

RESOLVED

To finally confirm the proposal issued through statutory notice to close Ysgol Abersoch on 31 December 2021, and to provide a place for the pupils at Ysgol Sarn Bach from 1 January 2022 in accordance with Section 53 of the School Standards and Organisation Act (Wales) 2013 and the requirements of the School Organisation Code 011/2018.

DISCUSSION

The report was submitted and it was expressed that this report was the peak of a process that had taken some years. It was highlighted that two years had passed since the Cabinet had agreed to enter into discussions with the governing body. It was explained that low, consistent and vulnerable numbers at the school were the grounds of the concerns that had led to this report. It was explained today that the purpose of the report was for the Cabinet to consider the objections that had been received before deciding whether the school would need to be closed and for a place to be provided for the pupils at Ysgol Sarn Bach.

It was emphasised that the decision being discussed was not an easy one and it was highlighted that it had been a difficult time for everyone associated with the school and gratitude was expressed to everyone who had contributed to the discussion. It was explained that the Cabinet Member had received a request to visit the school but that he had attended the school previously as a part of the initial discussions, however, it was not the building that was behind the recommendation, but rather the challenges facing the school. Reference was made to some objections that questioned the Council's decision and whether a fair hearing had been offered. It was emphasised that there were no grounds to these concerns and that matters had been weighed up objectively before any decision had been made.

The Head of Department provided some background to the item. It was expressed that a decision had been made on the Statutory Notice to close the school in June 2021, but that the discussions had commenced after September 2019. It was explained that three meetings had been held with the governing body between October and January 2020, discussing the potential options for the school. In September 2020, the Cabinet resolved to undertake a statutory consultation process on the proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch. The decision was confirmed on 3 November after the original decision was called in and referred back to the Cabinet by the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee.

The main challenges facing the school, which led to the review, were highlighted. It was explained that pupil numbers had reduced consistently since 2016 and was now in a vulnerable position. It was expressed that the school, as a result,

faced increasing budgetary pressures. It was highlighted that all of the children were taught in one classroom, and that 21 children from within the catchment area attended other schools, with 5 pupils attending the school from outside the catchment area. It was noted that the cost per pupil at Ysgol Abersoch was £17,404, which was much higher than the little over £4000 level that was seen across the county. It was emphasised throughout the period that the Principles for an Education System that is Fit for Purpose and the Excellent Primary Education for the Children of Gwynedd Strategy had been at the core of any decision.

The Education Officer guided members through the objections and 2 petitions received during the statutory objection period. Everyone was thanked for all their observations, not only throughout the objection period, but throughout the whole two-year period. It was noted that 211 objections had been received, along with 2 petitions. It was expressed that a number of the observations submitted had been submitted previously and therefore the themes were similar to what had been previously discussed. However, it was emphasised that each response had been given due attention.

Attention was drawn to the main themes.

- Impact on the community - It was noted that the school was seen as the heart of the village and that closing it would have a negative impact on the sense of community. It was explained that the department had carried out a further impact assessment and it was noted that a number of children went to Ysgol Sarn Bach and therefore there was a link between the alternative school and the community. It was added that if the decision would be made, Abersoch would be a part of the Ysgol Sarn Bach catchment area and there would be a requirement for the school to include Abersoch as a part of the school's life.
- Educational - a number of observations were received, highlighting the potential increase in numbers at the school. It was explained that numbers had been reducing since 2016 and had been fragile for some time. It was noted that the projections anticipated that numbers would remain low over the next five years and there would not be a major impact on the numbers. Attention was drawn to the fact that this uncertain time had obviously impacted numbers.
- Class Sizes at Ysgol Sarn Bach - attention was drawn to class sizes at Ysgol Sarn Bach and the department noted that if the decision was made, then the Headteacher and Governing Body would need to adapt and look at options for class sizes and staffing.
- Quality of Education - observations were received noting that the quality of education at Ysgol Abersoch was particularly good but it was emphasised that the level of quality at Ysgol Sarn Bach was the same and this had been highlighted in Estyn's response to the consultation.
- Language - Attention was drawn to the responses that highlighted that there would be a negative impact on culture and language from closing the school. The good work being done by the School to develop the language at the school and within the community was acknowledged. It was explained that there was an expectation for each school to do work to develop the Welsh language and that the alternative school would need to continue with the good work that was being done.

- Cylch Meithrin Ti a Fi - it was noted that the number of responses noted that the school was more sustainable as a result of opening the Cylch. It was explained that this was positive, but considering the size of the increase, the challenges would continue. The desire to discuss the possibility of using the current location in the future with the Cylch, was expressed.
- Statutory Process - discontent was expressed regarding the statutory process specifically throughout the pandemic period, virtual meetings and the lack of public meetings. The department noted that the Code did not note the requirement to hold public meetings and that the procedure was completely acceptable.
- Route to school - it was highlighted that the route to the alternative school was unsuitable for pedestrians, but that the department was prepared to offer free transport to Ysgol Sarn Bach and there would be room on the bus for the other pupils. Discontent was expressed as no bus would be available for nursery children but attention was drawn to the county's Transportation Policy which noted that it was the parents' responsibility to transport nursery age children.
- Impact on Pupils - it was noted that this period of uncertainty for Ysgol Abersoch pupils could lead to stress. It was explained that the department would offer every possible support to the pupils.
- Impact on Staff - it was explained that if a decision was made to close, the staff would lose their jobs, but measures would be put in place by the Human Resources Department.
- Building - It was explained that the department would follow the county's post-use policy if a decision was made to close, and this would give full consideration to the post-use of the building.
- Closure Date - it was noted that discontent had been expressed regarding closure in the middle of a school year. It was explained that the department believed that this gave the department sufficient time to work with both schools and provided effective time to prepare the pupils for starting at the alternative school in January.

The Local Member noted that there would be a serious impact on the village as a result of losing the school, in terms of culture and language. Pride was expressed in the fact that officers had acknowledged the good work done by the Governing Body in opening a Cylch Meithrin and Ti a Fi. Attention was drawn to the numbers at the school, which had remained the same throughout the period, and this highlighted the parents' confidence in the School.

Attention was drawn to Abersoch's contribution to Wales and the county, with a large amount of tax paid via the Land Transaction Tax and Council Tax Premium - and a question was asked about what they got in return. It was noted that the premium money was available to obtain housing for Gwynedd residents and that Abersoch was in dire need of houses. It was explained that the member was collaborating with the Housing and Property Department and that houses would be built in the area, as well as the possibility of additional houses on land in the ownership of a Social Housing Provider. It was emphasised that if houses were built, there was a need to ensure that education facilities were available in the same area, and with one school in the catchment area over capacity, the members were urged to act with caution before making the decision.

It was noted that a hotel would be built in Abersoch, which was a £15m investment, and would create jobs for over 40 people. It was emphasised that if jobs were available to local people, and new houses, that this was a new development, and these developments had not been mentioned in the report.

Discontent was expressed about the process by the Local Member as he had been required to respond to reports often at short notice. In addition, it was expressed that this had been a challenge during Covid, and it had been impossible to hold public meetings and this had been unfair on the community. It was expressed that there had been no changes since the first meeting and the Local Member believed that the decision may have been possibly made some time ago, and therefore, the discussion had been unfair.

It was highlighted, with plans for housing and jobs in the pipeline for the area, a request was made to defer the decision to consider this new information to ensure that the facilities were good enough, or to push the closure date forward to the end of the educational year, in fairness to the pupils.

In response to the Local Member, the member's observations were acknowledged, along with the respect that had been highlighted during the collaboration over this time. It was emphasised that the department had followed the Standards Act and the Code in full. The Education Officer added that the size of the reports showed the detail in which the department had gone into to ensure that a fair discussion took place.

Observations arising from the discussion

- It was expressed that the journey had been long and that no decision had been made beforehand. It was noted that no additional aspect had been highlighted today to change the decision to close the school. It was expressed that closing the school would cause an impact but that everything possible needed to be done to ensure that the Cylch Meithrin and Ti a Fi remained on the site.
- Attention was drawn to the Linguistic aspect, highlighting the work that Ysgol Abersoch had done to develop the pupils' bilingual skills, as well as gaining the Language Charter's gold award; a question was asked about the support available to ensure that this work continued. It was expressed that particularly good work had been done and that it was unusual with such young children, but that the scheme had worked. It was noted that there was an expectation for the alternative school to continue with the good work.
- It was noted in terms of the impact on the community that the school was a prominent feature and that the community would expand and there would be a need to mitigate these adaptations. It was emphasised that the role of the Local Member would be critical to secure the community in the future.
- It was stated that the report was the peak of the process, and no decision had been made previously. It was highlighted that all Abersoch pupils were educated in one classroom, with 10 pupils, and that this caused concern. It was explained that there was a need to ask why parents sent their children to other schools outside the catchment area. It was asked

whether there would be an impact from moving the children in the middle of a school year. The Head of Education noted that there was no evidence that there was a detrimental impact on pupils if they moved in the middle of an educational year.

- He stated that the Cabinet Member had listened to the discussion and had read all the information and was of the opinion that nothing had changed in this matter since June, and therefore, he asked for confirmation to close the school.

9. PERFORMANCE REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR EDUCATION

The report was submitted by Cllr Cemlyn Williams.

DECISION

To note and accept the information in the report.

DISCUSSION

The report was submitted, noting that it was a pleasure to present the department's performance report. Attention was drawn to the Estyn thematic report on the Authority's work throughout the report, emphasising that it provided an independent view of the department's work. It was emphasised that the report was very positive.

It was explained that the department had confirmed savings for 2021/22, however, the department had underspent £100k at the end of the 2020/21 financial year. It was noted that an initial review anticipated an underspend by the Department by the end of the year, which was a combination of underspending on a number of headings, reduced by an overspend on headings such as Transport.

The department was thanked for its hard work and the Cabinet Member noted that he was completely happy with the work done by the department over a difficult time.

Observations arising from the discussion:

- Gratitude was expressed for the cameos throughout the Estyn report, noting that this gave a taste of the plans and that it was being seen through the eyes of the citizen.
- Pride was expressed that new schools had been built or that better facilities were being obtained in Bangor and Cricieth, and this highlighted the Council's investment in its schools.
- Staff were thanked for the regular communication and support of the department, as well as in the schools.

10. PERFORMANCE REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE

The report was submitted by Cllr Ioan Thomas

DECISION

To note and accept the information in the report.

DISCUSSION

The report was submitted, and staff were thanked for working so hard over this difficult period. The Scrutiny Members were thanked for their input into the performance challenging discussion. Attention was drawn to projects in the Council Plan, noting that a consultation was currently underway by the Government for the transfer of holiday units from Council Tax to Business Rates. It was explained that the Department coordinated the Council's response.

In terms of achieving savings, it was noted in general that the schemes were doing well, but concerns were expressed about the future in relation to savings. It was emphasised that a further report would come to the Cabinet at the beginning of October.

It was expressed that Covid continued to affect the Department's arrangements, with non-domestic rate collection rates being lower than previous years, but that the situation was improving. It was noted that although the value of various arrears had dropped, the levels continued to be high. It was emphasised that senior officers were attempting to resolve the arrears and there was a need to consider an alternative way to move forward.

Observations arising from the discussion:

- The department was thanked for its work over this difficult time in ensuring that grants were awarded promptly to individuals and businesses.

11. 2022/23 BUDGET STRATEGY

The report was submitted by Cllr Ioan Thomas

DECISION

- i. The procedure and timetable to draw up the 2022/2023 Budget was approved.
- ii. If there was a funding gap in balancing the 2022/23 budget, it was noted that the Council would use contingency budgets and reserves to mitigate resource losses in the short-term, and carefully identify any additional savings required during the summer of 2022.
- iii. The contents of the report were accepted as the Council's Medium-Term Financial Plan, whilst noting that, in the current context, financial planning was extremely challenging.

DISCUSSION

The report was submitted and it was highlighted that the Council had been prudent over the years and this had placed it in a better position than many other authorities. It was explained that the report gave an outline of the annual report to draw up a budget, as well as a Medium-Term Financial Plan.

It was expressed that there would be many bids for additional resources this year as a result of different pressures on departments and the bids process would be submitted to the Cabinet members. Members were reminded that the Council's main financial source was the Welsh Government Grant and that they would present their draft settlement in December, before presenting the settlement at the beginning of March. It was explained that the timetable was very challenging and that there was financial uncertainty as a result of the pandemic.

The Head of Department guided members through the report, noting that the accountants had started to prepare the estimate expenditure of the departments for 2022/23. It was emphasised that bids would be submitted to the Cabinet over the coming months in order to address the additional pressures on departments.

It was noted that the timetable was very challenging in a period when Covid continued, but that the Council's robust financial situation and healthy reserves meant that more risk could be taken. Attention was drawn to the challenges facing the Council, which included Covid recovery, an increase in salaries, as well as an increase in inflation. It was explained that the settlement had included inflation last year, but this had not been guaranteed yet for this year.

Attention was drawn to the projections that had been created which highlighted three potential scenarios. It was emphasised that it was difficult to foresee the future, but that it may be possible that there would be a need to plan for savings in the future. It was stated that if there was a financial gap next year, the Council could bridge the gap in 2022/23.

The meeting commenced at 1pm and concluded at 3:20pm

CHAIRMAN