
EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 21/10/21

Present: Councillor Beth Lawton (Chair)
Councillor Cai Larsen (Vice-chair)

Councillors: Steve Collings, Alwyn Gruffydd, Selwyn Griffiths, Judith Humphreys, Elwyn Jones, Gareth Tudor Morris Jones, Dewi Owen, Rheinallt Puw, Paul Rowlinson, Dewi Roberts and Mike Stevens.

Co-opted Members: Ruth Roe (Meirionnydd Parent/Governors' Representative), Manon Williams (Arfon Parent/Governors' Representative) and Dilwyn Elis Hughes (UCAC).

Officers present: Vera Jones (Democracy and Language Services Manager), Bethan Adams (Scrutiny Adviser) and Eirian Roberts (Democracy Services Officer).

Present for item 5:

Education Department Councillor Cemlyn Williams (Cabinet Member for Education), Garem Jackson (Head of Education Department), Debbie Anne Jones (Education Corporate Services Officer) and Gwern ap Rhisiart (Dwyfor/Meirion Area Education Officer).

Legal Service Iwan Evans (Monitoring Officer) and Sion Huws (Senior Solicitor - Corporate).

Present for item 6:

Sioned Williams (Head of Economy and Community Department), Dylan Griffiths (Economy Development Programmes Manager) and Colin Morris (Business Support Manager).

Present for item 7:

Education Department: Councillor Cemlyn Williams (Cabinet Member for Education), Garem Jackson (Head of Education Department), Debbie Anne Jones (Education Corporate Services Officer), Diane Jones (Arfon Area Education Officer), Gwern ap Rhisiart (Dwyfor/Meirion Area Education Officer), Rhian Parry Jones (Gwynedd Secondary Education Officer) and Ffion Edwards Ellis (Assistant Head of ALN and Inclusion).

GwE: Arwyn Thomas (Managing Director), Alwyn Lloyd Jones (Assistant Director - Standards), Elfyn Vaughan Jones (Senior Leader – Secondary), Sharon Vaughan (Core Leader - Secondary) and Geraint Evans (Core Leader - Primary).

Headteachers: Rhys Glyn (Head of Ysgol Cefn Coch and Ysgol Talsarnau), Dylan Minnice (Head of Ysgol Botwnnog) and Bethan Morris Jones (Head of Ysgol Pendalar).

The Chair noted that today was the 55th anniversary of the Aberfan disaster and the committee remained silent as a mark of respect and remembrance.

The Chair noted that Anest Gray Frazer (Church in Wales) had recently retired from the committee and she thanked her for her service and wished her well for the future.

Councillor Mike Stevens was welcomed to the meeting.

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Aled Evans and Mair Rowlands, Colette Owen (The Catholic Church) and Councillor Gareth Thomas (Cabinet Member for Economy).

2. DECLARATIONS OF PERSONAL INTEREST

Councillor Dewi Roberts declared a personal interest in item 5 - Cabinet Decision - 28-09-21 - Item 8 - Ysgol Abersoch - as he was a governor at Ysgol Abersoch; however, as he had been appointed to this role by the Authority, he was of the opinion that it was not a prejudicial interest, and he did not withdraw from the meeting during the discussion on the item.

Councillor Selwyn Griffiths declared a personal interest in item 6 - The Economy and Business Support - as his son was the author of the report to the committee. He was of the opinion that it was not a prejudicial interest, and he did not withdraw from the meeting during the discussion on the item.

3. URGENT BUSINESS

None to note.

4. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous committee meeting held on 10 June 2021 as a true record.

5. CABINET DECISION - 28-09-21 - ITEM 8 - YSGOL ABERSOCH

The report of the Head of Democracy Service was submitted noting that the following decision had been called in for scrutiny in accordance with Section 7.25 of the Council's Constitution:-

Item 8: Ysgol Abersoch, Cabinet meeting 28.9.21

"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."

The Chair explained that a request had been made to call in the decision for scrutiny, by Councillors Alwyn Gruffydd, Elwyn Jones and herself, within the necessary requirements and timeframe.

It was noted that the reasons for calling in, namely the aspects of the decision that it was considered should be scrutinised, and that were within Constitutional requirements, had been noted as follows:

"1. The Report is inaccurate and misleading in terms of the impact on the community, for example, the Welsh language and culture - it states that there is no impact on the language in the table on page 714.

2. The Report does not take into account future Housing and Employment that will take effect in the village.

(a) There is a new development to construct a new hotel that would create a minimum of 40 full-time posts in the area - employees and their families would need resources, including education for our children.

(b) Welsh Government, Gwynedd Council's Housing and Property Department and a Housing Association (which owns land in the village) are currently exploring the potential to construct more houses - Welsh Government has stated that a grant is available to develop this land to potentially construct 15 houses.

The Housing Association has confirmed that plans have already been drawn up for the Bryn Garmon site.

There is no mention in the report of the new plan by the Housing and Property Department and nothing about the developments underway in the village and therefore, by not doing so, the Education Department has not responded to the requirements of the Well-being of Future Generations Act.

3. Concern has been expressed in relation to the footpath between Abersoch and Sarn Bach; the Education Department stated that contact had been made with the Highways Department but nothing definite has been submitted in terms of resolving this risk which places pupils in danger. The Education Department mentions transport arrangements which will inevitably have an effect on climate and is a poor example to the children of how the Council considers climate impact.

4. One child is ineligible for the offer of transport due to age policies - in future, when the number of children increases as a result of (a) and (b), it is likely that other children will be refused this transport and, therefore, suffer in terms of their education.

5. The decision is to close the school in the middle of the academic year and there is no doubt that this will be confusing for the children. Again, this will have a negative impact on their education and there is no explanation as to why and what is the logic here.

In order to assist the committee to scrutinise the matter in accordance with the aspects of the decision that it was considered should be scrutinised, the following documents were presented to the scrutiny committee also:-

- Appendix 1 - the Education Department's response to the aspects of the decision that it is considered should be scrutinised
- Appendix 2 - Cabinet Decision Notice (Item 8, 28.9.21)
- Appendix 3 - Cabinet Report (Item 8, 28.9.21)

The Monitoring Officer explained the context to the Cabinet decision in September (as outlined in the first part of Appendix 2 to the report).

The Cabinet Member set out the context noting that:-

- He considered that the report presented to Cabinet on 28 September specifically addressed the objections relating to the impact on the community and the Welsh language, potential developments in the area, transport and travel and the date of implementing the proposal.
- These issues were also discussed further during the Cabinet meeting, before reaching a final decision.
- The proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch and offer the pupils a place at Ysgol Sarn Bach would not only respond to the challenges facing Ysgol Abersoch, but would also lead to more consistent opportunities for the children in the catchment area by aiming for the Council's strategic aspirations to offer education of the highest possible quality to each pupil.

In response to a question from the Chair regarding the decision to close Ysgol Abersoch in the middle of a school year, it was confirmed that there was sufficient time to prepare for the transfer of pupils to Ysgol Sarn Bach. A piece of work is to be carried out in relation to where parents chose to send their children and the second step would be to draw up a detailed transition plan with the staff of the schools concerned, to ensure support for the children throughout the transition period. It was also noted that the Department had responded to a similar situation before, such as when the new Ysgol y Garnedd was established in Bangor.

The members who had called in the decision were invited to submit their comments. It was noted that:-

- The Cabinet had followed an irreversible path to close Ysgol Abersoch, disregarding the 3,000 names that had objected, either by petition or individual comments. The new houses being built in Abersoch, and the new jobs that were about to be created in the village, were disregarded and no real consideration was given to the impact of the decision on the Welsh language in the village, or the impact on governors, parents or pupils, namely the island of Welshness in the village.
- The arguments for closing the school were ambiguous, and that words such as '*perhaps*', '*possibly*' or '*it is likely*' arose frequently in the reports.
- It was not possible to conduct a fair and comprehensive consultation in the middle of the pandemic.
- The School Organisation Act states that education authorities should presume against closing a school.
- A school's population was a matter of ebb and flow. It was accepted that the numbers had dropped at present, but there was a presumption that there would be 11-12 pupils at the school next year and the following year. More than 20 pupils in the catchment area attended other schools, which unfortunately happens when the future of a school was under threat.
- It was a shame that other options, such as federalisation, were not considered.
- There would be no advantage in moving seven children to Ysgol Sarn Bach.

In response to these observations, the Head of Education noted that:-

- The issue of holding the consultation during a pandemic had already been scrutinised by this committee, and that this was not one of the grounds for calling in the decision.
- The presumption against closing a school was specifically for schools designated as small and rural. This was not the case in Abersoch, but in order to offer support and transparency, the Department had dealt with the process as if it were a small and rural school.

Members were given an opportunity to ask questions and offer observations.

A member noted the opinion that the extensive documentation received addressed the reasons for calling in the decision.

In response to questions, it was noted that:-

- In terms of the impact on the Welsh language and on the community, impact assessments had been carried out on the potential impact on the community and the Welsh language throughout the process. As the school closure assessment

indicated that there would be an impact on community aspects of the school, and the loss of the school in the community, it was considered what the Council could do to mitigate the potential negative effects.

- The Authority was doing everything to encourage discussions between the alternative school and Ysgol Abersoch so that the good experiences that the pupils have had at Ysgol Abersoch could be transferred to the alternative school. Ysgol Abersoch had been very visible in the village, and the alternative school needed to be encouraged to ensure that the collaboration with the Abersoch community continued.
- The Welsh language situation at Ysgol Sarn Bach was strong, with 57% of the school's pupils coming from Welsh-speaking homes, compared with 33% of Ysgol Abersoch pupils. This meant that there would be more opportunities for pupils to use the Welsh language within the classroom and on the playground. Ysgol Abersoch had worked hard to develop the pupils' bilingual skills and promote the use of the Welsh language, and the expectation was just as high for Ysgol Sarn Bach.
- In terms of numbers of children, figures for September 2020 showed that 26 3-8 year-old children lived in the catchment area, with five of them (19%) choosing to attend Ysgol Abersoch and 21 (81%) choosing to attend schools outside the catchment area. In September of this year, 20 3-8 year-old children lived in the catchment area, with four of them (20%) choosing to attend Ysgol Abersoch and 16 (80%) choosing to attend schools outside the catchment area. In terms of the current situation, seven children are attending Ysgol Abersoch, four from the catchment area, and three from outside the catchment area.
- Travel was a key part of every report to Cabinet. Transport is already provided for pupils attending Ysgol Sarn Bach from Year 4 onwards, and it is not considered that providing additional transport for Ysgol Abersoch pupils would result in additional costs or adversely affect the carbon footprint.

The Local Member was invited to submit observations. He noted that:-

- He wished to thank his fellow members for calling in the decision, and also the governors of the school, who have fought so hard, the staff and children, and the parents who have continued to send their children to the school.
- There were many questions about the reasons for moving children in the middle of a school year.
- A plan to build 12-15 affordable houses in the village was going ahead, and that this would increase the number of children in the area overnight.
- It was also very likely that a plan to build a hotel in Abersoch would be going ahead and would create new jobs in the area.
- The report did not refer to the future of the catchment area or the village, and therefore disregarded the principles of the Well-being of Future Generations Act.
- It had recently been argued in the full Council that the council tax premium should be spent in the areas where the tax was collected, and that there was no reference in the report to any attempt to use the premium to attempt to fund the school.
- One nearby school was well over capacity, but no explanation was given as to why that could have happened.
- As one child would not be getting transport to Ysgol Sarn Bach due to the Council's age policy, that child would be deprived of an education for a year.
- The urgency to close the school by 31 December this year was not understood, especially as new information had come to light.
- The impact on the Welsh culture and language would be a major blow to the efforts made to keep the language alive in the village.

- It was not understood why the children needed to be moved before creating the safe path for pedestrians from Abersoch to Sarn Bach.
- Parents had the right to send their children to any school, and who was to say that Abersoch parents would send their children to Sarn Bach? No-one yet knew where the children would go, or how.
- The Cabinet's decision was disgraceful, and the reports did not answer any of the questions.
- It was not understood why Ysgol Abersoch had not been registered as a rural school. It was understood that Welsh Government decided this, but Welsh Government said that the question must be asked of the Council. In addition, it was stated at one time that the Council had not been consulted on this, but Welsh Government stated that there had been three consultations.
- Ysgol Abersoch was a very good school, and he hoped that the committee would consider sending the matter to the full Council for a decision.

In response to these observations, the Monitoring Officer explained that:

- As the Cabinet decision in June of this year to publish the statutory notice was not called in for scrutiny, this brought the consultation process to a close.
- The role of the Cabinet in September was to consider the objections to a published statutory notice, and the role of this committee is to consider the Cabinet's response to those objections, and that this is a statutory procedure involving a statutory period.
- If this committee was to take the matter back to the Cabinet with points that were not part of the objections, or were new matters, the Cabinet would not be in a position to take those into account.
- The committee was entitled to refer the matter to the full Council to continue the scrutiny process, but the rationale for doing so would have to be clear. Also, as the 16-week period to confirm the statutory notice ended in mid-November, an extraordinary meeting of the Council would have to be convened in good time to refer the matter back to the Cabinet before the statutory threshold was exceeded.

In response to the last point, the Local Member suggested that the argument that we were running out of time did not hold water, as we should have taken the statutory timetable into account throughout the process. In response, the Monitoring Officer noted that it was unusual to ask the full Council to take on the scrutiny role, and whatever the role of the full Council, the matter would have to go back to Cabinet for a decision.

On a point of accuracy, the Head of Education noted that the Local Member's comment that one pupil was not eligible for transport to Ysgol Sarn Bach was misleading, and that the report addressed transport for the nursery pupil. The Local Member replied that this was not what was said at the Cabinet meeting. In response, the Head of Education explained that following the Cabinet, the Department had reviewed the individual situation and had made an exception to the policy to ensure that the pupil was provided with transport to school.

A member noted that:–

- He admired the diligence of the local community's earnest campaign, involving the Local Member, governors, parents, pupils and former pupils, who had pleaded their case for keeping the school open for the benefit of the children and the community.

- However, the member also understood the Cabinet's argument for closing a school with seven pupils, and that this figure was not viable, despite the standard of education.
- The governors and parents felt frustrated that they had not had a face-to-face public meeting with the Authority and questioned whether the Cabinet could consider holding such a meeting in the interest of fairness for all.

In response to the last comment, the Cabinet Member explained that public meetings had been held before the pandemic.

It was proposed and seconded that the scrutiny committee refer the matter back to the Cabinet for reconsideration on the grounds that a sufficient response had not been received to the second reason for calling in, namely housing and hotel developments in the area.

An amendment was proposed and seconded, namely that the scrutiny committee refer the matter back to the full Council because the issue was much wider than Abersoch, and there was a need to give all members in the county the opportunity to respond to this. In response to the amendment, the Monitoring Officer explained that the Council could not be asked to discuss the entire school organisation process, and that the amendment was nothing more than asking the Council to fulfil the scrutiny role in the context of the specific point, namely the response to the objections. It was also noted that there was a need to be clear in relation to the rationale for asking the full Council to fulfil the scrutiny role in this case.

A member noted that he did not believe that sending the matter back to the exact people who had made the decision in the first place was democratic, and that it would be more open and transparent if the matter went before the full Council.

For clarity, it was confirmed that the amendment was that the scrutiny committee refer the matter for scrutiny at an extraordinary meeting of the Council within the next two weeks (to coincide with the statutory timetable), on the grounds that a sufficient response had not been received to the five reasons for calling in.

A vote was taken on the amendment and it fell.

A vote was taken on the original proposal to refer the matter back to the Cabinet for reconsideration on the grounds that a sufficient response had not been received to the second reason for calling in, namely housing and hotel developments in the area, and it carried.

RESOLVED that the scrutiny committee refer the matter back to the Cabinet for reconsideration on the grounds that a sufficient response had not been received to the second reason for calling in, namely:-

"2. The Report does not take into account future Housing and Employment that will take effect in the village.

(a) There is a new development to construct a new hotel that would create a minimum of 40 full-time posts in the area - employees and their families would need resources, including education for our children.

(b) Welsh Government, Gwynedd Council's Housing and Property Department and a Housing Association (which owns land in the village) are currently exploring the potential to construct more houses - Welsh Government has stated that a grant is available to develop this land to potentially construct 15 houses.

The Housing Association has confirmed that plans have already been drawn up for the Bryn Garmon site.

There is no mention in the report of the new plan by the Housing and Property Department and nothing about the developments underway in the village and therefore, by not doing so, the Education Department has not responded to the requirements of the Well-being of Future Generations Act."

6. THE ECONOMY AND BUSINESS SUPPORT

Officers from the Economy and Community Department were welcomed to the meeting.

The report of the Cabinet Member for Economy and Community was submitted, at the request of the scrutiny committee, outlining what support the Council was giving to businesses, particularly with regard to the United Kingdom leaving the European Union and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Members were given an opportunity to ask questions and offer observations.

A member noted that, for accuracy, the report in Welsh should refer to 'y Deyrnas Gyfunol', not 'y Deyrnas Unedig'.

In response to questions from members, it was noted that:-

- The increase in the number of enquiries and requests for assistance from businesses over the last 18 months had presented challenges to the service in terms of resources and in terms of redirecting and prioritising the work. In addition, the service had re-prioritised more towards supporting and sustaining businesses to continue, rather than developing and creating new jobs, as in the past. More businesses had contacted the Council during the pandemic than ever before, and one of the positives that came out of this was the establishment of the business bulletin, which was now sent out at least twice a week to more than 4,500 businesses in the county. The service had also moved towards advising on slightly wider issues of good practice and how to adopt new technology. An effort had to be put into the work of sustaining and ensuring that the information was distributed, and the service was also reorganising itself, seeking resources through the Council to enable it to continue with the work.
- There was no specific conversation with the Housing and Property Department at this time regarding assisting key workers, etc., who were moving into the area, to find somewhere to live. Discussions were ongoing with the Department regarding planning policies, etc., but more work was needed on that. It was explained that the main complaint from businesses at present was not skills shortages, but a lack of people to work for those businesses, and this was true across the sectors. Reference was made to a piece of work to try to support the unemployed into jobs in areas where there were gaps, but the scale of the problem was much wider than before, and this would need to be looked at more extensively with other partners, to meet the current level of demand. It was further noted that more than 120 people had been assisted through the Gwaith Gwynedd team, and although this did not address the demand as a whole, significant activity had taken place. Also, there was an attempt to take some small but practical steps to support businesses, e.g. by facilitating Facebook pages, so that businesses could promote their job opportunities.
- The British Government's announcement on future grant arrangements, due to the withdrawal of European funding, had been pushed back, but it was likely that there would be some announcement following next month's financial review. It was explained that the intention was to announce a Common Prosperity Fund, and

although arrangements had not yet been confirmed, it was anticipated that instead of transferring a sum of money to Welsh Government for allocation in Wales, each authority would have to apply directly for this money from London. It was expected that there would be capital and revenue funding, as previously, but it was not clear whether the money would be ring-fenced specifically for Wales, although the British Government had said that it would continue with this agreement, and that we would receive exactly the same amount of money.

- The service was quite concerned about the situation. Originally, an announcement was expected, but no discussion had taken place as to what the content of that announcement might be. It was a step forward that we had a relationship, at least, and were able to have a discussion at the moment in an attempt to exert our influence, but it was questioned how much of an influence it really was. Once the information had been announced, the service would be better placed to analyse it. There was advice to expect something along the lines of the Levelling Up Fund and the Community Recovery Fund, announced earlier this year, but if that was the case, there would be considerable cause for concern. It was suggested that a further report on this be submitted to the committee for scrutiny when more information became available.
- The support for new businesses referred to in the report was specific assistance provided by Welsh Government to support newly-established businesses when the pandemic began. Efforts were made to help start and grow businesses throughout the pandemic. Attention and resources were redirected over the past 18 months, not only by the Council, but also by Welsh Government, towards supporting the sustaining of businesses in the short term, but a shift back towards more developmental support was starting now. The demand for funding to develop or grow had remained relatively high throughout the period, and remained remarkably high.
- In terms of referring people for support, they were encouraged to contact the service and register for the business bulletin, as this was a good way to be alert to the practical support and grants, as they became available. It was noted that it was possible to register via the Council's website, and it was agreed to circulate a direct link for committee members following the meeting, so that they could encourage local businesses in their area to take advantage of the provision.
- It was explained that a number of funds were still available to help businesses grow, and people were encouraged to contact the service in the first instance. In the longer term, there was a need to build on the communication that had taken place during the COVID period, increasing the engagement and dialogue with businesses, and a priority for the service next year was to increase the capability and capacity to do so, because this had been challenging historically, due to the amount of resources available.
- The service's resources were insufficient to maintain the relationship with businesses at the same level as the last year and a half, and the experiences of this recent period had shown that the resource needed to be strengthened in order to sustain and support businesses more meticulously.
- Although the service did not have the expertise to offer support to export businesses, members could refer any business in their area to the Business Support Manager, who would find the expertise for them.

The Chair thanked the Department for the report and wished it every success with the bids.

Before casting his vote on the matter, Councillor Mike Stevens asked whether he should declare a personal interest as he had a manufacturing business in Gwynedd and was also the Chair of the Tywyn Region Chamber of Tourism and Commerce.

In response, it was explained that the opportunity to declare an interest, under item 2 on the agenda, had passed, but that the declaration of interest would be noted at this point. It was added that it was not a prejudicial interest and that the member could proceed to vote on the matter.

RESOLVED to accept the report and to look forward to receiving more information regarding grants to businesses in due course.

7. WELL-BEING AND ACHIEVEMENT GAP

The Managing Director of GwE and his fellow officers, officers from the Education Department and the Head of Ysgol Cefn Coch and Ysgol Talsarnau, the Head of Ysgol Botwnnog and the Head of Ysgol Pendalar, were welcomed to the meeting.

The report of the Cabinet Member for Education was submitted, presenting information to the scrutiny committee on the Well-being and Achievement Gap, including:-

- The impact of COVID on the education of all pupils;
- What plans schools have for the well-being of all pupils

The Cabinet Member set out the context noting that:-

- Although the well-being and achievement gap may have worsened during the pandemic, there was a need to acknowledge that these problems had existed for some years.
- The presence of GwE officers at this meeting underlined the importance of working in partnership with GwE, and that this enabled us to respond positively to this complex problem.
- He was keen for the committee to gain the views of front-line workers, and therefore he was extremely grateful that representatives from the secondary, primary and special sectors were at the meeting to share their experiences.

The Head of Education reiterated the Cabinet Member's comments, and further noted that:-

- The pandemic had been a very challenging time for the schools, and that the Authority, GwE, schools and other partners had collaborated very closely to reduce the problems as far as possible.
- Estyn's report on the extent to which the Authority had been successful in supporting learners during this period was a commendable report, and he was also aware that GwE's Managing Director and his team had also received an equally complimentary report on their work during this period, which again highlighted the collaboration between them.

GwE's Managing Director set out the context for the Renew and Reform Strategy, which supports pupils' well-being and learning across north Wales, with a specific focus on Gwynedd.

A series of presentations were then received from GwE officers, as follows:-

- Assistant Director (Standards) - main headings of the Strategy (Appendix 1)

- Senior Leader - Secondary - a taste of the engagement work with the schools to capture the progress and impact of the action taken to date (Appendix 2)
- Core Leaders - Primary/Secondary - an update on the use and impact of the Accelerated Learning Grant (Appendix 4)

A member noted that one side-effect of the COVID period was the lack of opportunities for pupils to practise oracy and speak with one another, and that the reference in the papers to 'reviving' Welsh oracy and discussion skills underlined that there had been a decline. Given that the main purpose of the Language Charter was to promote informal use of Welsh, it was asked what the role of the Language Charter would be during this period in trying to accelerate learning, and why there was no specific reference to the key work of the Language Charter in the accelerated learning report. In response, it was explained that this report specifically referred to the focus of the grant. Following GwE's presentations, the Authority's officers would elaborate on the partnership work that had taken place between the Authority and GwE, and the Gwynedd Secondary Education Officer's presentation would detail the influence of the Language Charter.

A presentation was received from the Gwynedd Secondary Education Officer on the impact of the COVID period on the Welsh language in schools. In response to the specific question raised regarding the Language Charter, she explained that:-

- The work programme of the county's Language Charter Coordinator and Secondary Language Strategy Coordinator had been looked at, and schools were supported to implement the main priorities of the Language Charter through the work programme of these coordinators.
- By redefining the roles and schemes of work of the language coordinators in each catchment area of the county, and ensuring that the Language Charter Coordinator and Language Strategy Coordinator supported them as line managers, continuity in Welsh-medium education was ensured as pupils transferred back to schools following the lockdown, and as they made the transition from primary to secondary.
- It was also ensured that all the Welsh language cluster plans, which responded to the Welsh language grant, corresponded to the outcomes of the county's Welsh in Education Strategic Plan.
- Collaboration between the primary and secondary sectors was strengthened to ensure linguistic continuity, whilst also responding to local needs which would give Gwynedd pupils more opportunities to use Welsh informally, and in doing so increase the percentage of primary and secondary school children who were confident in using Welsh in their daily lives.

GwE's Managing Director referred to the 'Ein Llais Ni' scheme, which gave schools the opportunity to work with Bangor University and GwE to promote learners' oracy skills, and stated that he would be pleased to report back to the committee on the point raised after the scheme had had a chance to take root.

A member asked whether the strategies and actions referred to in the presentations were working as they should, and making a difference, across Gwynedd. In response, it was explained that:-

- There had been a regional move quite recently in relation to this scheme, in terms of alternative support for schools, and that this had to happen as a result of lessons learned through COVID.
- The third leg was the schools, and their willingness and ability to collaborate.
- Very good work was progressing, not only at county level, but also at catchment area level, led by the Authority and GwE officers. Regular meetings were being held

on the support and quality of provision for schools, and also to assess the extent to which this in turn showed appropriate progress.

- It was thought to be early days, if not premature, to evaluate how effective this was at present, but the schools, due to local situations, and the extent to which COVID had impaired their ability to operate at some level of normality, varied depending on the context. However, overall it had been well received by the schools. The collaboration was good and the impact of this work was increasingly apparent going forward.
- Naturally, it was going to be challenging at this time for schools to fully cope with this continuation in the context of the improvement journey, but we were all required to do this. It was hoped that this would be done sensitively and reasonably, and it was believed that we were supporting our schools to the best of our ability, taking the local context into account.

A member noted that it was not possible to be certain what the impact of these schemes would be, as it was early days, and the member looked forward to receiving a report on that. The member also noted that the county's teachers had done a miraculous and heroic job over the past 18 months, putting the children's welfare before their own, and that the committee's appreciation be extended to them for all their work.

A presentation was received from the Dwyfor/Meirion Area Education Officer on the Digital Education Strategy (page 241 of the agenda).

A member noted that the schools and the Authority were to be congratulated for the way in which they had responded to the challenge by providing devices for home learning during the lockdown, and the member looked forward to receiving a further report on the Strategy in due course.

In response to a question, the Dwyfor/Meirion Area Education Officer noted that although it was technically possible for the schools to re-lend devices to children who were home from school suffering from COVID or self-isolating, it was a challenge in some homes where there was not a fast enough broadband connection, or no internet connection at all. Also, although a child who was at home would be able to access class work that falls within the blended learning model, it was not possible to do everything over the digital medium, because of the pressure this would put on the teachers. It was also noted that a supply of MiFi devices was available should the need for distance learning arise again.

A presentation was received from the Assistant Head of ALN and Inclusion on the impact of the COVID period on the ALN&I service (page 242 of the agenda).

It was noted that children were anxious about going back to school and mixing, and the importance of being alert to how the children felt on a daily basis was emphasised.

The Head of Education noted that presentations had been invited from three headteachers, representing the profession as a whole, so that committee members could hear from the front line about the challenges that the schools had, and continued, to face. He thanked the three for giving of their valuable time to address the members, and thanked all the county's headteachers for the work they had done, and continued to do, under extremely challenging circumstances.

Presentations were received from the following:-

- Head of Ysgol Cefn Coch and Ysgol Talsarnau (primary)
- Head of Ysgol Botwnnog (secondary)
- Head of Ysgol Pendalar (special)

The Chair thanked the headteachers for their presentations, noting that hearing from the front line had been an eye-opener for members, and had highlighted the importance of listening to the voices of people from outside. She added that the committee could look at scrutinising some of the issues raised as the years progressed. She also suggested that it would have been beneficial for the committee to have received these presentations at the beginning rather than at the end of the meeting. She further stated that she was pleased to hear that the headteachers received the support of the Authority, and thanked all the schools' staff for all their work for the benefit of the county's children.

During the discussion after the presentations, the following observations were submitted by members:-

- The headteachers were thanked for being so honest about the challenges.
- The Authority and GwE were thanked for the evident collaboration, and for the clear and shrewd guidance given to schools during this difficult time.
- It was suggested that the full Council should hear the presentations of the three headteachers in the near future, so that all councillors understood what had been happening, how the staff had worked so hard through this, and what were the challenges facing schools in the future. In response, the Chair noted that the possibility of giving the presentations to all councillors could be explored.
- Concern was expressed about what financial support would be available to schools in the future, and the need to work together to ensure that schools received the support they deserved for the future was emphasised.
- It was noted that the group most affected by the pandemic was the young people, and that they had been deprived of a key part of their upbringing and their relationships with other people.
- It was noted that although the internet had been a blessing to connect with the pupils, and for the pupils to communicate with their peers, connecting via the internet was not always a pleasant experience, and it was asked if there had been a significant increase in these issues since lockdown. In response, it was noted that no increase had been witnessed in social network problems, and that the problem had calmed down a little in recent years as everyone became more proficient in how to use it wisely. In terms of its use for learning, Hwb created a fairly safe situation for the pupils in terms of online learning and the collaboration between teachers and pupils, and between pupils.
- It was noted that the efforts of the education providers and staff could not be overstated, and that it would be necessary to continue to support them in the future, as the pandemic was not over.

In his closing remarks, the Cabinet Member noted that inviting front-line representatives to address the scrutinisers had been a new development in this committee, and he was keen to extend this, taking into account that the presentations should perhaps come at the beginning rather than at the end of the meeting in future.

RESOLVED to accept the report and record our thanks to the workforce for its contribution during the last 18 months.

8. REVISED SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The revised scrutiny work programme for 2021-22 was presented.

RESOLVED to approve the work programme for the 9 December meeting, and to discuss the rest of the agenda at the informal meeting to follow the committee.

The meeting commenced at 10.30 am and concluded at 2.30 pm

CHAIR