

EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
23/3/23

Present:

Councillors: Beth Lawton (Chair)
Cai Larsen (Vice-chair)

Councillors:- Iwan Huws, Dawn Lynne Jones, Dewi Jones, Elwyn Jones, Gareth Tudor Jones, Gwilym Jones, Dewi Owen, Gwynfor Owen, Llio Elenid Owen, John Pughe Roberts, Richard Glyn Roberts, Huw Llwyd Rowlands, Paul Rowlinson and Rhys Tudur.

Co-opted Members: Colette Owen (The Catholic Church) and Manon Williams (Arfon Parent/Governor Representative).

Officers in attendance: Bethan Adams (Scrutiny Advisor) and Eirian Roberts (Democracy Services Officer).

Present for item 5: Councillor Dyfrig Siencyn (Council Leader), Hedd Vaughan-Evans (Operations Manager - Ambition North Wales), Henry Aron (Energy Programme Manager - Ambition North Wales) and David Mathews (Land and Property Programme Manager - Ambition North Wales).

Present for item 6: – Councillor Beca Brown (Cabinet Member for Education), Garem Jackson (Head of Education Department), Debbie Anne Jones (Assistant Head – Corporate Services) and Rhys Meredydd Glyn (Head of Gwynedd's Immersion Education System).

Present for item 7: Councillor Menna Jones (Cabinet Member for Corporate Support), Ian Jones (Head of Corporate Support Department) and Huw Eurig Williams (Human Resources Advisory Services Manager).

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Jina Gwyrfai and Sasha Williams.

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declarations of personal interest were received.

3. URGENT ITEMS

None to note.

4. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee held on 2 February, 2023 as a true record.

5. NORTH WALES GROWTH DEAL - QUARTER 3 2022/23 PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Leader and Ambition North Wales officers were welcomed to the meeting.

Submitted – the report of the Leader on the Quarter 3 2022-23 performance of the North Wales Growth Deal, following the committee's request.

The Leader outlined the context by providing a brief update on the work of the Growth Deal, some of the background of establishing the North Wales Economic Ambition Board, along with details of different schemes that were relevant to Gwynedd. The Operations Manager then provided an overview of the Growth Deal and the main highlights of 2022-23.

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

It was enquired how the Ambition Board intended to draw up a language policy for the Trawsfynydd project to ensure that the development and the workforce would not Anglicise the area. In response, it was noted:-

- That this was a project that wholly relied on UK Government investment, and that there was no certainty on that.
- In terms of a language policy, the Eginio company would soon hold a workshop to examine the social benefits, including the linguistic benefits.

It was noted that the greatest risk in terms of delivering the objectives of the Growth Deal was ensuring public and private sector investment, and it was enquired what steps it intended to take should the capacity of those sectors to invest reduce over the next few years due to the current financial situation. In response, it was noted:-

- That economic circumstances had changed immensely since the Growth Deal was agreed in 2010, and that the financial crisis was a challenge that faced us on a regular basis where there was a contribution from the private sector.
- The Business Delivery Board, which had representatives from the private sector, was meeting to discuss projects regularly, under the guidance of Askar Sheibani, who ran his own global digital business and who was very enthusiastic for the whole of north Wales.
- The only assurance that could be given at present was that this was a matter that was being addressed, and it was believed that there was a desire among the private sector to invest, provided that the circumstances were right.
- The North Wales Ambition Programme Office worked very closely with the private sector on specific projects, and that the sector was currently looking to invest.
- It was acknowledged that there was a risk that the capacity to invest could change over coming years, and the Programme Office worked very closely with both Governments on this. More public sector investment would possibly be required should the private sector investment not be there but, at present, the situation seemed quite positive.
- The Programme Office was developing a strategy with the Business Delivery Board to ensure that it was possible to bring this strategy forward, and one of the specific things that had been undertaken as part of the demand for new projects to the £30m fund was to place a strong emphasis on the ability of businesses to invest as part of this process.
- This was a large percentage of what the assessment would be so that it was possible to ensure that any projects coming forward could proceed quickly to deliver. It was hoped that this would reduce some of the risks, but the greatest risk to be able to deliver the benefits of the Growth Deal was bringing the funding forward to invest in these projects, and this would be a risk during all of the deal's period.

It was suggested that the Growth Deal seemed to be the A55 Deal and it was enquired whether Meirionnydd would benefit from any schemes, with the exception of the Trawsfynydd project.

In response, it was noted:-

- It was certainly not the A55 Deal and the fundamental aim was that any wealth generated from the Growth Deal would be shared across the whole region.
- Although some schemes were geographical and that a number of these projects were digital, and that this was essentially important to rural areas in terms of easy access to digital services.
- There were no other specific schemes in Meirionnydd under the Growth Deal, but there were other more local funds that rural areas could take advantage of, such as the Community Energy Fund.

It was noted that the Leader would certainly ensure and fight to obtain jobs for Dwyfor and Meirionnydd and best wishes were extended to every project.

Referring to the Tracker Table - Overview of delivery (December 2022) on page 32 of the agenda, a request was made for more details and more certainty regarding exactly how many jobs had been created thus far.

In response, it was noted:-

- That the table indicated the individual targets for the projects that created the new jobs towards the target of 4,200.
- The only live project so far was the Digital Signal Processing Centre, which had led to six new posts in Bangor University.

It was noted that one of the greatest risks facing the Ambition Board was that project costs increased and it was enquired how much of the additional funding to this £30m would be realised in north-west Wales. It was suggested that there was an opportunity for Gwynedd to propose innovative projects as a result of withdrawing the Bodelwyddan Key Strategic Site and the Llysfasi Net Zero Farm projects from the Growth Deal, and it was enquired whether a discussion was being held about this.

In response, it was noted:-

- After the application submission period ended on 27 March, the Programme Office Team would score the projects based on practicality, how soon they could be implemented and how many jobs would be created.
- It was already known that one or two projects would be submitted for Gwynedd and more would certainly become apparent by the closing date.
- The method of assessing applications did not refer to their geographical site. It was hoped that the projects would span all counties in north Wales, but the tension between the regional benefit and the locally specific benefit was part of a difficult discussion that the six Leaders would have to hold in order to reach some political consensus on the matter.

The fact that the Bryn Cegin Park Bangor project was finally progressing was welcomed, but as hopes had been raised so many times during the past twenty years, it was enquired whether there was now a real plan to attract good jobs to the units that would be constructed on the site. It was also enquired whether the entire plan was now at risk in light of the recent announcement about establishing a Free Port in Holyhead.

In response, it was noted:-

- It was frustrating that there had been no development at Bryn Cegin Park so far, but good progress was being made with the Welsh Government in terms of the joint venture.
- The financial risk had been mitigated with provisions in the agreement that the Welsh Government would make an additional financial contribution should the construction costs exceed a specific level.
- The Welsh Government would go out to tender within the next week to appoint a professional team to lead the work.
- It was anticipated that there would be planning permission on the site by the end of the year, with the Final Business Case on the way to be finally approved by the Board.
- It was expected that the main contractor would be on the site by the end of Quarter 1 in 2024, or possibly early in Quarter 2 of 2024, with the construction work being completed towards the end of 2024 or early in 2025.
- It was believed that there was considerable demand for this type of units by local businesses and small and medium enterprises mainly in the north-west Wales area. It was believed that there is demand from companies that wished to expand, therefore, on the whole, many of the jobs that would be created would be high value jobs.
- It was aimed to create jobs that would offer good salaries and good training opportunities, with benefits from the construction work and the jobs created on the site mainly focused in the Bangor area.
- £6m of Growth Deal funding was being invested in Bryn Cegin Park but as construction costs had been so unsettled during the past two years, and to mitigate the financial risk to all partners, it had been provided in the agreement that the Welsh Government would make an additional contribution towards capital funding.
- It was currently difficult to anticipate what impact the announcement about the Free Port would have, but it was not expected that this would be a direct threat to existing businesses in the Bangor area, as it was more likely to affect external investment.
- Although we had supported the Free Port bid, the question regarding losing businesses to Anglesey, due to the improved environment that would be there, was a clear question and a matter that needed to be monitored.

On a point of clarity, a request was made for confirmation that the total expenditure in Bryn Cegin Park was £6m, and that there was no match funding, with the exception of additions should the costs be more than expected. Also, although it had been noted that it was not believed that the Free Port would be a threat to existing businesses in Bangor, there was concern that any new investment would go to Anglesey. It was also asked whether the expenditure profile of the Growth Deal had been examined and what were the implications for councils regarding payments to serve any loans that would have to be given.

In response, it was noted:-

- That the UK Government would pay over ten years, rather than over the 15-year period originally agreed. This greatly assists the expenditure profile, and is a matter that comes up when discussing the finance of the Ambition Board.
- £6m was the contribution of the Growth Deal to the developments in Bryn Cegin Park and one of the greatest risks seen in recent years was the increase in cost. It was hoped that those costs were now beginning to settle but it had been a substantial threat to a number of projects, and this was why additional funding had to be given to three projects.
- The expenditure and loans profile of councils was reviewed annually and there was a number of factors that could affect the borrowing costs for partners.

- The costs would be divided between the councils and other partners, and also the universities and colleges.
- We were financially benefiting from the situation at present as there had been a delay in the expenditure profile. The funding that had come from both Governments was earning interest, which would help with the risk of increasing costs over the coming years. While moving from a situation where we have money in the bank to a situation of needing a loan, we would feel this in terms of higher costs but the situation was currently slightly more positive than what had been modelled at the beginning of the Growth Deal in 2020 as the funding was received sooner from the UK Government, and due to the delay and accumulated interest. The situation was being reviewed annually with the intention, if possible, to keep any borrowing costs for our partners as low as possible.

Referring to the Smart Energy Scheme, it was noted that much more investment was needed in infrastructure before being able to implement such projects.

In response, it was noted:-

- It was agreed that the restrictions in terms of the grid, or costs to connect to the grid, were one of the main obstacles to enable such schemes to be brought forward.
- In theory, the investment made here could be used to provide infrastructure to enable projects to happen in a method similar to what was being invested in the Morlais Project to support the infrastructure that enabled the tidal energy to be captured.

It was enquired to what extent it could be comfortable that the density of jobs deriving from the Growth Deal would be jobs for local people, rather than providing opportunities for a population from beyond the area. It was also suggested that training and career paths needed to be planned on a micro level, so that we almost examine the careers of individuals here.

In response, it was noted:-

- That the indigenous community were full of entrepreneurs despite the general tendency to think that rural Welsh speakers could not innovate themselves and be enterprising.
- There was a need to create the opportunities for those entrepreneurs to thrive, and from a skills' viewpoint, that this almost came down to the micro, and was being provided by people who were very local. There would be no people here to speak Welsh if opportunities were not given to people. There was a need to be confident for the future and it was hoped that our indigenous people would seize the available opportunities.

It was noted that there was no mention of the Ambition Board anywhere, e.g. Business News of the Daily Post, Golwg, Gwynedd News etc. and it was suggested that Ambition North Wales needed to do more to market itself to Gwynedd residents. It was also enquired whether there was a panel of successful business people objectively examining the Board's plans to provide a professional opinion on the viability of schemes.

In response, it was noted:-

- That the Business Delivery Board challenged the projects in detail.
- It was difficult to gather the opinions of micro businesses and that maybe more innovative ways of contacting those small businesses should be considered.

At the end of the discussion, the Leader noted:-

- That Cyngor Gwynedd accommodated the work of the Ambition Board, but the work of the Board would soon transfer to the Corporate Joint Committee, and he greatly hoped that the work of the Board would not be impaired in any way as a result of that statutory move.
- The role of Ambition Board Chair was more than chairing Board meetings only, and that he/she was seen as the representative of north Wales at regional and national meetings.

The Chair thanked the Leader and officers noting that everyone was pleased to see some of the projects beginning and coming to fruition. He also noted that it would be interesting to see what new projects would be submitted before the Programme Management Team next week, and he expressed his hope that there would be schemes of benefit to Gwynedd, and to South Meirionnydd.

RESOLVED to accept the report and to note the observations.

6. EDUCATION AND THE WELSH LANGUAGE: A NEW VISION FOR THE IMMERSION EDUCATION SYSTEM TOWARDS 2032 AND BEYOND

The Cabinet Member for Education and officers from the Education Department were welcomed to the meeting.

Submitted - the report of the Cabinet Member for Education, at the committee's request, presenting background information about the vision of the immersion education system, along with providing answers to the questions of the scrutinisers received in advance about the arrangements for the immersion education provision in Gwynedd.

The Cabinet Member set out the context by noting that the two schemes in the Bangor area, namely the Bangor Catchment Area Foundation Phase Immersion Project and the Years 5 and 6 Learners' Support Pack to encourage them to choose a Welsh-medium Education route as they transfer to secondary school in the Bangor catchment area, were important and far-reaching pieces of work for the children of that area. She expressed her admiration of the work in the language centres and officially thanked the staff for the work.

A short video was shown to the members, giving a taster of the ABERWLA Scheme.

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

It was enquired on what basis the conclusion was reached that it was beneficial not to immerse children early, and it was suggested that bringing the children who were being immersed back to the mother school for one day per week undid the immersion that took place in the language centre for the other four days.

In response, it was noted:-

- That the headteacher in the ABERWLA video mentioned the clear advantages of having children returning to the mother school for one day per week.
- The pandemic had highlighted the importance of well-being as children had gone through long periods of not being able to mix with their peers. It was concluded that it would be a good idea for the children being immersed to have an opportunity to catch up with their peers at the schools for one day per week, and the immersion occurred in a different context to an extent in the mother school, and increasingly thereafter as the child went through the system.

- Secondary school headteachers now reported that it was easier to persuade parents to send their children to immersion centres as those children maintained some contact with their peers.
- The fifth day at the mother school was a new project and, as well as advantages in the context of well-being, there were also educational advantages.
- The relationship between school staff and staff of the centres who visited the mother school on a weekly basis had strengthened further as a result of sharing immersion practices, sharing resources and discussing how to overcome any challenges the children faced back at school.
- Visits to the mother school varied with some teachers requesting staff of the centre to remain in class to support the activity. This encouraged a discussion on gathering effective immersion methods and there were also situations where children received one-to-one attention, or in a small group, and that other children also benefited from the experience.
- Despite the advantages, it was acknowledged that there were also challenges, and by nearing the end of the first term of the new system, it was intended to gather the opinions of stakeholders, by weighing up and evaluating the new system, and reviewing the arrangements if required.
- Two parents who have had children participating in the former immersion system, as well as the new system, praised the new system in the context of well-being, with one mother mentioning that her child developed confidence when returning to his peers once a week.
- The children had the scaffolding and support in the unit but, as this was not as prominent at the school, returning to school gave them an opportunity to practise what they had learnt in the unit without the scaffolding, and it was also an opportunity for the children to develop confidence and independence when becoming new speakers.
- The Service measured the progress of children at the centres and it was also intended to compare progress under the new four-day arrangement against the previous progress under the former five-day arrangement.
- In terms of the question regarding nursery-aged children, research showed that once an individual has established a pattern of communicating in one language, it was very difficult to change it afterwards. The foundation phase classes immersed children who came from multilingual, non-Welsh backgrounds, and very often non-verbal children. Therefore, immersion techniques were gathered and the system had held training for all clusters within Gwynedd based on an individual cluster with staff of the centres.
- Focus was placed on effective immersion principles in the foundation phase specifically and a follow-up to this training was being prepared as more and more traditional Welsh classes with more complexity in a linguistic context became apparent.
- The training had been held in September at the beginning of the academic year and it was intended to revisit the situation and see how things have been after that training, to see what the needs are and to tailor courses, in the hope of also extending to year 3 classes as part of that.

It was suggested that moving children back to the mother school for one day a week created challenges for the school, creating streams in the class, which could then affect the practice of Welsh within the class. It was enquired what were the criteria in terms of the ability of foundation phase teachers to immerse children, and what training was available to them.

In response, it was noted:-

- It was not accepted that moving children back to the mother school for one day created a stream within classes, and that teachers and schools praised the system.
- Immersion occurred naturally in all of the schools, except one school, throughout the foundation phase, and that children completed their education through the medium of Welsh at the end of their period in Year 2. The outcomes of the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan indicated this, and it must be borne in mind that immersing in the Welsh language was not the only task of a teacher in the early years, and that they also dealt with the Curriculum for Wales across the expanse of all subjects.
- Immersion in the mainstream occurred continuously throughout the foundation phase, and this called for an investment of time and investment of enriching cross-curricular experiences so that children acquired the Welsh language naturally.
- The ten weeks at the language centre did not fully equip children to cope with all aspects of the curriculum through the medium of Welsh. This was the beginning of the journey and the mother school had a responsibility to develop and extend the child's ability and grasp of the language.
- Every teacher at the school was a language teacher as all teachers regularly modelled language and, therefore, there was an emphasis on teachers in primary schools to do so, as the language of children developed by listening and practising the language at the school.
- It was believed that the new system excelled the former system of sending a child to the language unit for a full 10 weeks, as there was now working in partnership, developing a relationship and collaboration as everyone had an input to the children's linguistic development.
- This grading facilitated the journey and equipped the child to develop independence and confidence, and also helped the teachers to forward plan and ensure that the child remained on the journey to acquire a language.
- The training provided to foundation phase teachers on immersion methods was effective and successful, and was based on a series of principles included in a report by Estyn based on evidence throughout the whole of Wales. A specific presentation on those principles was created, illustrating each one of them, e.g. how to do it, what is the best practice to reinforce a pattern etc.
- The Head of Gwynedd's Immersion Education System was a member of a national immersion network that had recently been established by the Welsh Government, which was an opportunity for everyone involved with immersion on a national level to get together on a termly basis to share good practices.
- It was not alleged that the situation was perfect and it was noted that much could be done to empower and improve by listening and sharing good practices, holding staff meetings and planning strategically.

Support was expressed to the system of returning to the mother school on the fifth day on the grounds that the class teacher could assess the child's development over the period, and that losing contact with the class teacher for ten weeks was difficult for the children. It was also believed that the fact that staff of the immersion centre came to the school with the child on the fifth day was an opportunity for teachers at the school to share ideas and good practice. As nearly all primary schools in Gwynedd were entirely Welsh, it was also noted that immersion in the foundation phase occurred completely naturally.

In response to a question regarding the situation of Our Lady's School in Bangor, it was explained that this school was in the transitional category. An additional resource had been invested there to enhance and develop the language further and it was noted that there had been a transformation at the school as a result of this.

On a point of clarity regarding the reference to the 'non-statutory schools' term in the second paragraph of clause 4.2 of the report, it was confirmed that this referred to the Government's guide, and not to Our Lady's School.

In response to an observation regarding the reference to changing the image and culture of Our Lady's School, it was noted that it was fully accepted that this would be the responsibility of the Governors and the Diocesan Trustees.

Although it had to be accepted that image and culture would be different in a Catholic school, it was noted that this did not mean that the school could not move towards a more Welsh direction. Ysgol Santes Helen, Caernarfon had a Catholic image and culture, and also used Welsh as a medium, but it was emphasised that sensitivity was needed when using these types of terms.

It was noted that the observation was fully accepted and that the Service would act on this in future.

It was noted that ABERLWA was an excellent and very exciting scheme, and it was enquired whether there was an opportunity to extend the virtual reality technology to the rest of the curriculum, working with the animation company to attract more investment.

In response, it was noted that this could be excellent in an ideal world. It was believed that latecomers in Gwynedd were the first children in the world to use this type of technology to acquire a language, and the Welsh Government praised what had taken place in Gwynedd.

A suggestion was made that the best way of encouraging parents to choose Welsh education for their children was by asking other parents, who had already chosen that path for their children, to share in a video why the decision had been a good one, instead of having teachers or Council staff encouraging Welsh education.

In response, it was noted:-

- It was agreed that insistence and setting limitless monitoring standards was not the way to attract people, and that persuasion and highlighting the economic advantages of being multilingual in Wales worked best with children and their parents.
- It was a struggle to convince parents that their children were confident in Welsh and that the Service worked with Nyth and Cwmni'r Fran Wen in Bangor on developing a two-year project, which was based on research by Schools Without Walls, where one cohort of children during their period in years 5 and 6, acquired a language by means of enriching creative experiences.
- The Service would share information with parents about the development and the experiences children receive through the medium of Welsh, and attempt to show parents how confident their children are to be working through the medium of Welsh.
- As part of the scheme, there would also be an opportunity for parents to see their children putting on performances and presentations confidently through the medium of Welsh.
- Advantage could be taken of those opportunities to persuade parents and having other parents sharing their experiences in a video would be worthwhile and certainly persuade and influence.

It was noted that:-

- There was concern in relation to confirming linguistic practices early, and that clause 4.2 of the report referred to an exceptional scheme in the foundation phase. As demographic changes continued over a period of decades, the immersion system

would clearly have to adapt to deal with this, and it was believed that the type of scheme in question was relevant, or would be relevant, in a number of schools throughout the authority at present, and in due course.

- It was believed that the report focused too much on those who went through the immersion system and their parents, and that there was no consideration to the rest of the children and their parents.
- Clause 3.2 mentioned the blended education provision, which was recognised as an excellent practice by Estyn, but there was concern that there was a risk of creating an unintentional divide between the Welsh virtual digital world and the real-life English world, i.e. that Welsh would be the language of the computer, but English would be the language of the schoolyard, contrary to the real world where Welsh was the normal face-to-face language in society and English was the language related to electronic and digital media.

In response to the observations, it was noted:-

- That the Bangor Catchment Area Foundation Phase Immersion Project (clause 4.2 of the report) was a scheme to develop the language of the workforce in a unique situation, and that it would not be needed in other situations as our teachers spoke Welsh.
- It was not believed that the report placed the well-being of one cohort ahead of another cohort at all, and that it was all based on everyone's well-being.
- The concern about creating a division between the Welsh virtual world and the real world was not shared, and it was required to ensure an education and system that was appealing to children of the twenty first century.
- It was essentially important to ensure the goodwill of non-Welsh speaking parents as this changed lives.
- Giving children the opportunity to practise their Welsh in a safe, virtual space before stepping into the real world, was very valuable.
- In terms of the situation in Bangor, maybe more schools needed the support and provision, and the Welsh Language Team examined and analysed data in terms of the confidence of children's language regularly, and identified schools that, maybe, needed additional support.
- With the exception of Our Lady's School, three other schools in the Bangor area also received support, which was on the basis of data analysis in terms of the children's confidence in discussions with the schools.
- An attempt was made to immerse years 2 to 9, to offer after-care support to the children on bridging days and teacher training. The Service did not have the capacity to do much more than this, and although nursery-aged children could be immersed, it was not believed that anyone would recommend bringing young, foundation phase children to an immersion centre, as they were safe at their schools and being immersed in the foundation phase in every primary school.

The opinion was expressed that the new scheme excelled the former scheme in many ways, i.e. immersed more children, a more enriching and interesting provision, more locations, better governance arrangement, creating consistency and more considerations to the broader needs of the child being taught. However, the former system was effective in releasing children who could return to the mainstream and be taught through the medium of Welsh. In the report, nothing could be seen in the new provision that would make it less likely for the new system to be a success, but it was enquired whether we had a way of measuring that the new system was, at least, as good as the former system.

In response, it was noted:-

- That there were specific measures in the internal performance challenging system with regards to the success of the system. In due course, it would be possible to compare the outcome with the outcomes under the former system but it was agreed that the new system was more modern and relevant to children's lives today.
- Children's progress was currently being measured based on National Curriculum levels, but of course they would transfer to become a measure in terms of progression step 1 and progression step 2.
- Interpersonal linguistic development was examined such as the confidence of children when using the language socially in terms of communicating, and a curricular assessment was also undertaken, i.e. in terms of how children cope with the curriculum in terms of subject terminology in secondary school etc.

In response to a question regarding the flexibility of the new system in terms of accepting children, it was noted:-

- That flexibility still existed although the system was clearly more formal. Course dates and a referral form were shared with primary and secondary headteachers on a termly basis, before the admission forum considered and prioritised children. It was emphasised that no child had been refused.
- There was more demand in the Autumn term as more latecomers arrived during the summer, but at less busy times a place was offered to children who were not latecomers, but who wished to improve and regain confidence in the language.
- Consideration was also given to establishing short courses to improve and regain confidence during the last fortnight of the summer term (as the usual ten-week course was finished by then) and during September (before the ten-week course started in October) along with five-week courses for children who needed additional support.

Although every teacher was a language teacher, it was noted that whatever subject they taught, not every teacher was an immersion teacher and that special skills were needed to teach a language to a child. It was enquired whether the opinions of innovative immersion teachers had been sought about updating and modernising the provision. It was also enquired how the Service marketed and sold the scheme to parents. It was further noted that it appeared that support for the learner back at the mother school on the fifth day was inconsistent, and that there was no support scaffolding at school in terms of immersion and acquiring a language. Rather than spending four days at the language centre and one day back at school over a ten-week period, it was enquired whether it would be better for the children to be immersed less but more intensively at the language centre, say for five days over a seven-week period, as this would be less confusing for the pupil.

In response, it was noted:-

- That the new system had only been operational for a term and that the Service was still examining the provision. However, it was believed that there was no evidence at all that anything was unsatisfactory.
- Although accepting that there was a difference of opinion among members, stakeholders, whether as children, parents and teachers, praised the new four-day system. It was essentially important for children to have contact with the mother school and their peers, and it was believed that this defeated any argument about keeping them in a centre for five days.
- Gwenan Ellis Jones (Gwynedd and Anglesey Primary Schools Welsh Language Charter Coordinator) collaborated with the Service on immersion principles, and the Service would appreciate a conversation with other similar experts, and receive their input.

- In terms of marketing, pamphlets, a letter and presentation had been provided to the schools to share with parents, and it was intended to extend the provision by producing a video that conveyed the new-look system.
- In terms of the observation regarding the inconsistency of support at the schools on the fifth day, the situation varied from school to school according to what those schools would consider as the best support for the child. This did not happen at random - it had been forward planned intentionally and it occurred in consultation with staff of the language centres.

A request was made for more information on how the Service persuaded parents to choose a Welsh education route for their children when transferring to a secondary school in the Bangor catchment area (clause 4.3 of the report) and the objective of the short courses that bridged between primary and secondary (clause 5.1).

In response, it was noted:-

- In terms of persuading parents, as well as collaborating with Nyth and Cwmni'r Fran Wen, a relationship had been established with the Hunaniaith Team, which already worked in the area, and meetings had been held, e.g. at the centre in Ysgol Tryfan for parents of children who attended the centre.
- It was hoped to extend this and create a strong link with primary schools in the catchment area by collaborating with staff and Cwmni'r Fran Wen.
- The Service also worked with Sbarduno, and developed scientific opportunities for the children. Workshops had already been held for every child in years 5 and 6 in Bangor to develop the children's confidence in the Welsh language on a cross-curricular basis, especially in the sciences, and very positive feedback had been received about this.
- A Chwarae yn Gymraeg workshop had been held with the Urdd, using the Welsh Government's Late Immersion Grant to train children in years 5 and 6 in Bangor and Tywyn to develop a play project with the younger children at the schools.
- By collaborating closely with the schools and by promoting the projects, it was hoped to be able to show parents that their children had the ability and confidence to follow a Welsh education route. It was also hoped to show parents that further immersion support was available for their children if they chose a Welsh-medium route, and the language centre at Ysgol Tryfan would be a valuable resource for this.

It was noted that the statistics of the number of children who went to improve language (clause 3.6 of the report) were in percentages, and it was enquired what were the exact figures. In response, it was noted that 73 learners had attended the language units in the 2022 Summer Term, 65 in the 2022 Autumn Term and 53 in the 2023 Spring Term.

It was suggested that there was no consistency in the staffing structure of the different language centres, and that fewer specialist teachers were in the centres than in the past. There was a concern that staffing decisions were financial cuts rather than something of benefit, not only for the children being immersed but for the other children as well. It was added that clear evidence could not be seen from reports that the system was a success, and there was concern that the quality of the service was at risk of slipping.

In response, it was explained:-

- That staffing decisions were not financial decisions, and the argument that there must be two teachers in one centre was not accepted.
- The workforce and the system were flexible to go to the location where the demand was greater.

- In terms of the workforce, the new structure provided a head and deputy for the system, along with a teacher and level 4 assistant at every centre, and that the assistants had also been immersed in the principles.
- Under the former system, staff were very isolated, but under the new system there was one structure, clear guidance, a work programme, an opportunity to share good practice and to undertake continuous professional development.
- Staff at the centres now operated as a school with a strategic plan and improvement plan in place, and there were specific actions to ensure that we presented the most effective immersion methods in the system.
- The service had not been downsized and we now had more centres, which served more children. Also, as a result of reviewing the system, it was now possible to run the immersion system during three terms a year, where it had not been possible in the third term in the past.

It was noted that one looked forward to seeing the centre in Tywyn opening soon.

RESOLVED to accept the report and to note the observations.

7. WORKFORCE PLANNING

The Cabinet Member for Corporate Support and officers from the Corporate Support Department were welcomed to the meeting.

The Cabinet Member set out the context and the Human Resources Advisory Services Manager provided a summary of the content of the report, which gave an overview of the Council's situation in relation to staff recruitment and retention, referring to the challenges over the last few months and the steps already being taken to address the situation, and provided an overview of the Council's long-term objectives to plan the workforce.

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

It was asked whether priority was given to fill statutory posts over other posts. In response, it was noted:-

- That there was certainly an element of prioritisation and that this was a regular discussion between the Human Resources Service and the employing department.
- It was not believed that market price was the solution to every problem, but cost would become an inevitable part of that if there was a number of statutory posts to fill.

The member noted that he accepted that the situation was difficult but failure to employ, e.g. enforcement officers, led to a situation where the work accumulated over a period of time.

In response, it was noted:-

- That identifying priority posts also worked through the Apprenticeship Scheme, which examined where the gaps had been, and encouraged apprentices in those fields for the future.

It was noted that the report was concise, purposeful and honest, that clearly showed where the shortage was. A request was made for examples of creative methods of attracting workers, information about how many apprentices had remained with Cyngor Gwynedd, and what had worked, and not worked, in terms of the Work Experience Scheme.

In response, it was noted:-

- In terms of what had worked, and not worked, that the old way of working was thinking that there was one solution to every question and that one method could tackle each problem. It was now realised that communication was needed with different audiences in different ways, e.g. even more use of social media with some cohorts, and more use of local recruitment or using the website with other cohorts.
- The Council was currently developing a new recruitment website and that there was much more evolution in the content of the website than what was currently available, with the intention of drawing on the experiences of current staff, and seeking to use their experiences as a method to sell the Council.
- In terms of the Work Experience Scheme, the intention was to try to open the eyes of children and young people to what the Council had to offer as an employer, and provide worthwhile experiences for individuals.
- There was a lot of work to respond to and learn about different methods as every employer was looking for the best solution at the time.
- The different apprenticeship and trainee schemes were certainly creative schemes, and that considerable support was given to individuals who had registered with those schemes so that they could fully develop in their roles and develop careers with the Council.

A suggestion was made that there was an excellent opportunity to sell Gwynedd at the National Eisteddfod in Boduan, and it was assumed that information about available opportunities would be available on the Council's stall, as well as posters near the entrance to the Maes, in the car park and Maes B to raise the profile of Gwynedd as a good place to live and work.

In response, it was noted:-

- That it was agreed that the National Eisteddfod was a golden opportunity to sell Gwynedd, and that marketing and using various marketing techniques were absolutely key.
- The new recruitment website would be launched before the Eisteddfod.
- 80 young people had attended a very successful jobs fair recently, and it was intended to arrange more similar events across the county.

It was noted that the Council had commendable schemes in terms of recruitment etc. but it was enquired whether there was a strategic plan to procure posts that coordinated all this with data, and monitored how many were awarded posts etc. and that engagement was undertaken with schools on a micro level.

In response, it was noted:-

- That this was ultimately the purpose of the project, namely, to ensure a long-term strategy that drew all of these elements together, and which highlighted the objectives for the next 5-10 years based on the research mentioned throughout the report in terms of what would be the future needs in terms of skills and knowledge.
- Considerable good work was ongoing to communicate with children via some of these schemes, and one important part of all this was developing the marketing so that we had good selling points to show children. The language was a good selling point and there was a need to use this to ensure that people chose to come to work for Cyngor Gwynedd and live locally.

In response, the member noted that this plan was the Council's future, and the future of keeping young people in the county and, should funding for it be challenging, there was a need to earmark specific funding for this purpose.

In response, it was noted:-

- That the strategic plan was a priority project within the Council Plan, and that it would also be in the new plan.
- We had now come to the end of the current funding cycle of the Apprenticeships Scheme and Cynllun Yfory, and it was intended to submit a bid in the autumn to fund the next cycle.

In response to a question, it was confirmed that the Service engaged with colleges, as well as schools, and targeted students with marketing materials etc.

It was noted that exit interviews were important in order to understand why people chose to leave the Council, but it was suggested that this was too late in terms of employees who were leaving, and it was enquired if there were arrangements that allowed individuals to share concerns etc. during their employment.

In response, it was noted that staff members and managers were encouraged to hold open, honest and private discussions on a regular basis. It was understood that staff and managers in a number of departments held 1:1 conversations on a monthly basis at least, with an opportunity for a totally informal conversation at any time, and this would allow managers to respond to concerns in time.

It was noted that Cyngor Gwynedd expectations in terms of language skills could make it more challenging to recruit staff, and it was suggested that contacting the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol would be of assistance regarding this.

In response, it was noted that this was where this project would go next, and that contacts needed to be established with organisations such as the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol as the technology now offered us a labour market that was beyond the boundaries of Gwynedd, Anglesey and Conwy.

It was asked whether it was known where staff shortages within the Council were having the most impact on the service, and whether we had a strategy to respond to this.

In response, it was noted:-

- That the recruitment problem was not mainly responsible for any service continuation problems, and that the issue of absences was a factor regarding this.
- In some services, we had a good overview in terms of what was the level of absence and the level of lack of appointment. Both things would sometimes go hand in hand, and the absence element would sometimes have more of an impact.
- This was part of the work being undertaken to ensure that these projects intertwined, that the recruitment system monitored the absence element, and whether there was a correlation between both things.
- Turnover could be a healthy thing as not every post was suitable for everyone, and that a new workforce with a high level of enthusiasm for the post could be attracted.

Cynllun Yfory was praised on the grounds that it was an excellent investment to attract young people back to Gwynedd to receive work experience.

Attention was drawn to the fact that there was a number of vacant posts in the Highways, Engineering and YGC Department. It was also noted that it was understood that some private companies paid higher salaries than the Council, and it was enquired whether there was a risk that we invested in workers who leave the Council soon after receiving training / different permits etc.

In response, it was noted:-

- As part of the training agreement, anyone who was part of Cynllun Yfory was expected to remain with the Council for a specific period after qualifying, so that the Council also received value for money from the investment.
- No such agreement existed in relation to other Council employees, but the Council's employment package included 28 different benefits, which included a pension scheme, and work was being undertaken continuously to draw the attention of employees to all of the available benefits of working for Cyngor Gwynedd.

It was suggested that not holding exit interviews with the employee's former line manager was a risk that we would not be provided with the full picture, and it was enquired whether this could be done on an entirely independent basis via the Human Resources Service.

In response, it was noted:-

- That the system had to be optional, but employees leaving the Council could complete a questionnaire or have an exit interview.
- There was an option for the employee to have an interview with a member from the Human Resources Team, which had access to data deriving from the discussion to be able to hold a discussion with heads of department regarding anything that would become apparent.

Subject to resources, it was suggested that the Human Resources Team could hold informal small forums with groups of the front-line workforce to discuss the satisfaction officers get from their work, and any problems that arise, so that a relationship was developed over time where people feel comfortable about providing an honest opinion about the work.

In response, it was noted:-

- That the idea was welcomed and that the Manager would discuss it with the Team.
- Team members visited front-line teams, in residential homes for example, and although those were conversations mainly with the management teams, there was also an opportunity for conversations with staff.
- It was also possible for staff to contact the service via union officers, who worked closely with front-line service staff.
- As part of another priority project, there was an intention to engage with staff by means of a questionnaire regarding their general well-being, and this would highlight any problems.
- The Council had a team to raise the awareness of front-line staff about available benefits, including all aspects in terms of the health, well-being and financial well-being of the workforce.

It was noted that it was important to ascertain whether approximately 1,600 Council employees who were in the age ranges of 55-64 and 65+ were staff on low-level salaries, or staff on high-level salaries, as the Council could face a serious problem if the majority of them were on a higher salary and decided to retire as they knew that they would receive a generous pension from the Council.

In response, it was noted:-

- It was likely that employees in the 55+ bands were a combination of employees on high-level and low-level salaries, and that preparations had to be made for the day when we would lose those skills, experience and expertise.

- It was probably fair to say that staff in the adult care sector tended to be older in general, and that this fed into the recruitment problem that was already seen in that field.

Although the report referred to attracting and retaining staff, it was noted that we did the opposite as far as home carers were in question, as they did not know if their jobs would be with the Council for years to come, or whether the Council would externalise all services to private companies.

In response, it was noted that it was very difficult to answer this particular point, but that this was part of the work of the Domiciliary Care Project Team.

The importance of being able to attract and retain those staff on low-level salaries was emphasised. To highlight the point, it was suggested that should an employee on a high-level salary take annual leave, the public would not notice, but should an employee on a low-level salary take annual leave, and nobody replaced them, that this would have a serious effect on the public.

It was noted that the recruitment problem was much broader than what had been noted in the report as there was a shortage of education staff in general across the county, including classroom assistants and assistants in special needs' schools. Therefore, the Council needed to examine the whole matter in its entirety in terms of how to attract and award staff on the low-level salary, who provided invaluable service to the Council.

It was enquired whether figures were available in terms of how many people had managed to be recruited, who lived far from Gwynedd, but worked remotely, as well as how many Council staff had got jobs in other parts of the country while still living in Gwynedd.

In response, it was noted:-

- That there was no quantitative data available to answer the question unfortunately, but there were staff who had taken advantage of the hybrid way of working, and staff who did not live close to Gwynedd anymore, but who still worked effectively for the Council.
- The ability to work remotely worked in the Council's favour in terms of attracting new staff, as well as retaining current staff, but it was also possible that the Council had lost some staff who had gone to work virtually for bodies far away from the county as the salary was possibly higher.
- A specific piece of work could possibly be commissioned to examine this, but currently, from the experience of the Corporate Support Department in particular, it was believed that we benefited, rather than suffered, from the situation.

It was asked whether there had been progress in discussions about packaging part-time posts in different departments to be able to offer one full-time post.

In response, it was noted:-

- An attempt had been made to link different parts of the workforce together, especially in terms of education assistants and carers, so that it was possible for the post-holder to work as an assistant during term time and as a carer during school holidays.
- An attempt had been made to take steps to build on this in one specific area of the county but the work had not yet come to fruition.
- People were possibly slightly scared of change, or some teams were scared of losing people to another field within the Council if the Plan progressed and, therefore, more work needed to be completed in an attempt to make progress.

In response to a question regarding where the Council advertised jobs, it was noted:-

- That more and more use was being made of social media. There were now very good Welsh websites, such as Lleol.cymru and Swyddle and Golwg 360 was also a good medium to advertise through the medium of Welsh.
- In terms of creativity, maybe there was a need to look again for different ways, and maybe it would be possible to collaborate with members locally in specific areas in an effort to recruit in some fields.
- It was also important to use specialist and professional networks such as LinkedIn for some specific posts.
- Every job was advertised on the Council's website.

It was noted that an education assistant's job used to be a well-paid job and that schools had lost professional assistants who had gone on to work for other organisations for double the salary. In terms of the Council's image, it was also noted that there was a tendency to think that there was a need for a degree and to be middle class to work for the Council and it was asked how the Council could be sold to working class young people in our deprived areas, and not only the low salary jobs.

In response, it was noted:-

- It was fully accepted that the Council could create that type of image but there was a need for the workforce to reflect the society we lived in, and the best ambassadors in this regard, were the staff who worked for us. By supporting and equipping them with the knowledge and skills, they could be the best marketing material within our communities.
- The Council had a close relationship with communities in the county through schools etc. and that it was excellent that so many young people had recently attended the Jobs Fair.
- The officers had a responsibility to sell each post that was advertised, to describe the opportunity in a coherent manner and not to give vague titles to posts.

It was enquired whether use was made of algorithms to advertise on Facebook or Instagram in order to target people specifically.

In response, it was explained that the Council had done so in specific circumstances where it had been considered that paying a bit more to take advantage of a specific algorithm would provide value for money, but that it did not happen regularly.

It was suggested that the May/June period was a good time to attract young people to come and work for the Council, as they left school and colleges, and it was asked whether it would be possible to post a link to Council jobs on Instagram to target young people specifically.

RESOLVED to accept the report and to note the observations.

8. FINANCE PERFORMANCE CHALLENGE MEETINGS

Submitted - the report of the Scrutiny Advisor inviting the committee to nominate a representative to attend the Finance Department's performance challenge meetings in Councillor Elin Hywel's place, who had stepped down from being a committee member.

Councillor Paul Rowlinson's name was proposed. Councillor Paul Rowlinson noted that he was willing to be nominated, provided that the committee nominated another representative to attend the Corporate Support Department's performance challenge meetings in his place.

As many members had left the meeting, and others were absent, it was suggested to contact all committee members after the meeting to enquire about a representative to attend the Corporate Support Department's performance challenge meetings, and to formally nominate that member at the next meeting.

RESOLVED to nominate Councillor Paul Rowlinson to attend the Finance Department's performance challenge meetings, and to contact all committee members to enquire about a representative to attend the performance challenge meetings of the Corporate Support Department in Councillor Paul Rowlinson's place.

At the end of her period as chair, Councillor Beth Lawton thanked all members for their cooperation over the last two years.

The Vice-chair, Councillor Cai Larsen, thanked the Chair for chairing the meetings in such a positive and constructive manner, and the Chair thanked the Vice-chair for all his support.

The meeting commenced at 10:30am and concluded at 3:20pm.

Chair