

EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
9/11/23

Present:

Councillors: Elwyn Jones (Chair)
Paul Rowlinson (Vice-chair)

Councillors:- Jina Gwyrfai, Iwan Huws, Dawn Lynne Jones, Dewi Jones, Gareth Tudor Jones, Gwilym Jones, Cai Larsen, Beth Lawton, Dewi Owen, Llio Elenid Owen, John Pughe Roberts, Huw Llwyd Rowlands and Rhys Tudur.

Co-opted Members: Colette Owen (The Catholic Church), Manon Williams (Parent / Governor Representative Arfon), Elise Poulter (NEU) and Gwilym Jones (NASUWT).

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

Present for item 5:- Councillor Beca Brown (Cabinet Member for Education).

Education Department:- Debbie Anne Jones (Assistant Head: Corporate Services), Ffion Edwards Ellis (Assistant Head: Special Educational Needs and Inclusion), Gwern ap Rhisiart (Assistant Head: Primary), Gwyn Tudur (Assistant Head: Secondary), Llion Williams (Assistant Head: Well-being and Equality) and Rhys Glyn (Head of Gwynedd Immersion Education System).

GwE:- Elfyn Vaughan Jones (Senior Regional Leader - Secondary Schools and Pupil Referral Units) and Euros Davies (Senior Regional Leader - Primary and Special Schools).

Present for item 6:- Councillor Nia Jeffreys (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Operational Economy Matters), Amanda Davies (Byw'n Iach Managing Director), and Sioned Williams (Head of Economy and Community).

Present for item 7: Councillor Nia Jeffreys (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Operational Economy Matters), Llyr Jones (Assistant Head of Economy and Community) and Bryn Pritchard-Jones (Maritime Service Manager).

Gwilym Jones, NASUWT, was welcomed as the new representative of the teachers' unions on the committee.

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Gwynfor Owen, Richard Glyn Roberts and Sasha Williams and also from Elise Poulter (NEU).

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

Councillors Beth Lawton, Llio Elenid Owen and Gareth Tudor Jones declared a personal interest in item 6 as they were Directors of Byw'n Iach.

The members were not of the opinion that it was a prejudicial interest, but although they did not leave the meeting during the discussion, they did not participate in the discussion and did not vote. In accordance with Section 7.6 of the Constitution, no member may be involved in scrutinising decisions in which they had been directly involved.

Councillor Dewi Jones declared a personal interest in item 6 as he was a member of Byw'n Iach.

The member was not of the opinion that it was a prejudicial interest, and he did not leave the meeting during the discussion.

3. URGENT ITEMS

None to note.

4. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this Committee, held on 14 September 2023 as a true record.

5. ESTYN REPORT ON EDUCATION SERVICES IN CYNGOR GWYNEDD

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

The Cabinet Member's report on the Estyn report on education services in Cyngor Gwynedd was submitted requesting the committee to provide observations on the content of the report and to consider any scrutiny arrangements on the progress against the recommendations in the report in a timely manner.

The Cabinet Member set out the context and thanked the Education Department and GwE for their thorough work supporting schools over the years, especially during the challenging post-Covid period. She also paid a tribute to the work of teachers and staff in schools, and to the children and young people for all their efforts despite the pandemic and its intense side-effects.

Members were then given an opportunity to ask questions and submit observations.

It was noted that the report was very strong and authority officers and GwE officers were thanked for all their support.

It was asked how the Authority intended to act on the Estyn recommendations in terms of improving monitoring, evaluating and promoting pupil attendance and strengthening provision to respond to the needs of pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and ensuring monitoring arrangements and improving the quality of that provision. The following was noted in response:-

- That the decline in pupil attendance was a trend seen nationally.
- The accompanying grant for this field was used to appoint 3 officers in the Welfare Team to look at continuous absences, more frequent absences or significant attendance difficulties in school, freeing up the usual welfare officers attached to schools to target absences such as taking holidays during school term or missing the same day over a period of time along with looking at the codes schools use in terms of the registers.
- That detailed reports were provided in terms of monthly attendance, and that there was also weekly data that looked at the trends, targeting specific schools and working with families in a bid to increase attendance.
- That attendance was a duty for everyone, and not just the welfare officers, and an attendance campaign was planned over the year to raise awareness about the importance of attending school regularly and how not attending had an impact on school and pupil outcomes.

- In terms of inclusion, Mrs Caroline Rees, who produced a report on the service in 2019-20, would conduct another inspection in December, specifically on inclusion, and make recommendations on how to strengthen provision.
- That steps had already been put in place to strengthen monitoring processes around the secondary hubs, etc.

It was noted that the report recognised that the multimedia resources used in the immersion centres to reinforce language and vocabulary patterns were valuable and questioned whether there was a proactive all-Wales effort to promote and disseminate them. In response, it was noted that this was certainly something to consider.

It was noted that a comment had been made in the Audit Wales Report that the scrutiny committees did not scrutinise items/projects in the Council's Plan, but it was thought to have changed this year, and it was hoped that the committee would respond to that recommendation in going forward.

It was noted that it was not understood how some schools needed more intervention or support, having already received support from GwE, and it was asked whether there was something that could be done through GwE to ensure that we never get to this situation. In response, it was stated:

- That all schools receive intensive support from the School Support Service, but very often there were circumstances where the challenges were outside the control of the Authority and GwE.
- That those situations very often arose from human resources problems, and specifically the performance of individuals. In those circumstances, GwE provided support to the headteachers where appropriate.
- That a situation can never be reached where no school needs support nor can it be guaranteed that no school will go into intensive support.
- That GwE supports the schools and identifies any weaknesses and puts in the time and support in a timely manner to fill the gap.

The Estyn report noted that the intervention for schools that cause concern was effective, but not always timely, and it was asked whether there were future steps that could be taken in that regard. In response, it was stated:-

- That responding to school challenges was multidimensional and that the challenge itself could come from different directions, be it human resources, fiscal, property or anything else that contributes to a school's success.
- The report was believed to address the steps that had been taken over the past few terms to sharpen the system of supporting schools by identifying the schools much better than in the past, having an open discussion with them regarding the areas needing attention and putting solid support in place to do everything to avoid a school reaching a point of receiving a less favourable opinion from Estyn.
- It was not thought possible for the Authority or GwE, even working together in the most effective manner, to give a guarantee that no school, in one way or the other, would not reach a position where that final opinion was unfavourable, but at times Estyn's views on a school could also help that school to progress.

Reference was made to recent training held at Arfon Leisure Centre on Autism Speculative Disorder and it was asked whether it was intended for that training to be offered to all school staff. The following was noted in response:-

- That the Department had quite a large team specifically targeting this area to offer whole school training where staff could work towards a certain standard in terms of

Autism Spectrum Disorder, and that there were also webinars available to the schools.

- If there was a child known to the team, training was offered to the staff of the school in question.

It was enquired whether there had been any development in appointing more educational psychologists. In response, it was noted:-

- That there were significant staffing difficulties in the service, and that the Cabinet Member and the Chief Executive had sent a letter of concern to the Welsh Government about the training method, which remained unchanged.
- That the core training was provided in Cardiff and it was difficult to promote local people to go on the training.
- That the Council employed assistant psychologists to work with the team in the hope that those employees would apply for a place on the course in due course.
- Over the last two years, following lockdown, they had experimented with different approaches, bringing schools together to discuss with a psychologist, and although reaction to this model of working had been mixed, the model had evolved again to try and incorporate more school visits.

It was welcomed that the report praised the Council for ensuring the continuation of the hubs after European funding had ceased, and emphasised the importance of protecting these funds during the challenging times we face. However, some concern was raised that the report indicated that the provision varied and that there was not adequate contact between the hubs and department officers. It was asked whether work would be undertaken to identify what needs improvement, and what would happen to improve contact with the department. The following was noted in response:-

- The Additional Learning Needs and Inclusion Quality Officers element was strengthened and much more contact was arranged between the officers and the hubs, with one officer working with the hub in Meirion Dwyfor and another officer working with the hub in Arfon.
- That the Department was looking at extending the membership of the Hub Management Board to include input from other headteachers.
- As a result of receiving recommendations for further improvement from Caroline Rees, the external expert, that it was hoped that there would be an action plan in place by January in terms of strengthening provision.
- That the Service was also looking at improving the space used for the hubs, along with young people's ownership of them.

They pointed to the significant change in pupil behaviour since lockdown and questioned whether the diversity in terms of what was being maintained and resources, etc. was indicative of that. The following was noted in response:-

- That the challenge on the inclusion side was significant in terms of exclusions and the challenges that schools faced in this regard, and that Caroline Rees, the external expert, would look at the provision in the schools as well in terms of the use of inclusion funding the secondary sector receives and the provision map we have as a county.
- That the Council would receive a sum of money from the Shared Prosperity Fund for commissioning providers in the schools to extend the curriculum available to those with behavioural difficulties, as traditional methods did not work for many of these learners.

- Following the grant period, it was possible to see what had worked, and perhaps a long-term action plan needed to be formed in this field.

The Estyn report was noted as being very complimentary of the provision of Welsh-medium education in Gwynedd, e.g., praising the fact that we have 6 specialist immersion centres and that there were a high number undertaking their GCSE subjects through the medium of Welsh, but these were factors that had existed for some time. It was felt that the report was superficial, e.g., it did not consider if there had been a drop in the number undertaking GCSE subjects in accord with the Welsh Education Strategic Plan (WESP), although that was the case. It was thought that Estyn looked at Gwynedd in comparison with other counties in Wales, and saw Gwynedd as a huge success, but there was a risk of us becoming self-satisfied. It was noted that it would be good if Estyn had higher expectations of Gwynedd and looked at Welsh language provision in the county more insightfully. In response, it was noted:-

- That the member could be assured that the Education Department was not resting on its laurels.
- That the Department was looking at the WESP's priorities to increase and empower Welsh language provision, to empower the transition arrangements in a linguistic context and to seek to empower bilingual provision and education in the primary and secondary sectors and to increase the number of learners studying subjects through the medium of Welsh.
- That the Department was also committed to reviewing and updating the Education Language Policy.
- It was accepted that the report was complimentary, and that although the inspectors did not visit all the schools, all schools were inspected by Estyn, and therefore a detailed, intensive, and thorough review was undertaken in all schools within a 6-year cycle.
- The inspectors attended two immersion centres. It was not a paper exercise; it was an exercise where the inspectors observed lessons and spent a day between the two centres.
- That there was more work to be done and that the Service wished to empower and improve further so that it could be a practice that is rolled-out nationally.

It was noted that the Council had fewer immersion teachers than in the past, as each centre now had 1 teacher rather than 2, and it was questioned whether the Education Department maintained a register of teachers with experience and expertise in the immersion field, as such a register would be a step forward towards cultivating a team of people with the necessary experience and expertise for carrying out the work. The following was noted in response:-

- That there were currently 6 immersion teachers within the immersion education system, and that, like all other teachers, they possessed a qualification and a teaching certificate.
- That there was no qualification per se for immersion and these were teachers who has learned their craft by working alongside other experienced teachers.
- The immersion teachers were members of a national immersion network and attended meetings and conferences to share good practice, and also sought to attend training to empower and update their skills.
- That the immersion teachers also spent a great deal of time looking at studies and research in the immersion field, which were extremely rare.
- That, as an organisation, we had undertaken our own research and had delivered 6 teacher training webinars across the county, which had been recognised as good practice.

- There was also an effort to try and train school staff as immersion was now an area that applied to virtually all schools, sharing with them the immersion principles that had been identified by Estyn.

It was asked whether the Education Department had a register of qualified and experienced immersion teachers in reserve. In response, it was noted:-

- That the immersion system, like all primary schools, was dependent on the pool of supply teachers, and that the Department did not have the funding to obtain dedicated supply teachers for the immersion units.
- However, there was a group of teachers, at least 1 per centre, who had been identified as practitioners who were well versed in the methods and principles of immersion and had visited the units and could be contacted directly.
- If those individuals were not available, they would then have to go and ask the less experienced teachers in the immersion field, and that would be an opportunity for those teachers to gain experience and expertise so that they, in turn, begin to get used to the immersion methods and principles.

Disappointment was expressed that the open questionnaire prior to the inspection had closed early and members were unable to make comments on the closing date. It was asked how many headteachers and governors had been involved in the discussions with Estyn during the preliminary visit and also how many members of this committee had met Estyn. The following was noted in response:-

- The comment that the open questionnaire had closed early would be passed to the Estyn's Link Inspector.
- Estyn inspectors asked to see a certain number of headteachers representing the range in terms of different sectors and school sizes, and it was believed that GwE had also been involved in the preliminary visit.
- That Councillor Beth Lawton, as former chair of this committee, had met Estyn inspectors.

It was asked on what basis Estyn claimed that the joint planning between the Cabinet and the scrutiny committees to co-ordinate decision-supporting work programmes was improving. It was also questioned on what basis it was claimed that the scrutiny committee's consideration of the work of the projects within the Council's Plan was currently limited. It was noted that the comment was not disputed and it backed up what many members of the scrutiny committee were constantly asking, namely what difference does scrutiny make? In response, it was noted:-

- In terms of improving co-ordination between the Cabinet and scrutiny, there had been a shift to confirm a fuller Cabinet agenda in relation to forthcoming items, and that the Chair and Vice-Chair of the scrutiny committee hold regular meetings with the relevant head and cabinet member to identify issues that need scrutiny.
- That members prioritise items for the coming year in the scrutiny workshops and that many of the items on the 2023-24 forward programme were from the Council's Plan.
- That the impact of scrutiny was something to look at as part of the scrutiny review that was currently taking place.

It was noted that a sentence cited in the Estyn report '*Schools provide many GCSE subjects through the medium of Welsh and a large number of pupils sit an examination in GCSE Welsh first language*' was a completely vague and unsubstantiated comment that was unjustified. In response, it was noted that Estyn had a writing guide where the terms used across their reviews correspond to certain percentages, and that '*many*' and '*very many*' equate to 80%+ or 90%.

It was asked what the intention was in moving forward with the Post-16 Education Project in Arfon. In response, it was noted:-

- That it could be interpreted there had been some slowness, or delay, with the project, and perhaps an element of it, at least, reflected the complexity of the field, along with the fact that we have had a pandemic in the middle of this period and several national and local elections as well.
- A report on post-16 education was submitted to the Cabinet in March this year seeking permission to undertake further work with key stakeholders of post-16 education in Arfon.
- Workshops were held with the headteachers over the summer, reporting back to them in early September on the conclusions of those workshops.
- It was hoped to provide a further update to the Cabinet before Christmas, and the item was programmed for the January meeting of this committee.

The committee was asked to consider when it would be timely to scrutinise progress against the recommendations of the Estyn report. It was agreed to receive a further report in 9 months' time which would allow a sufficient period to implement the recommendations and to prepare a comprehensive progress report.

RESOLVED to accept the report and to note the observations and receive a progress report on the response to the recommendations in 9 months' time.

6. BYW'N IACH

The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Operational Economy Matters, the Managing Director of Byw'n Iach and the Head of Economy and Community were welcomed to the meeting.

The report of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Operational Economy Matters was submitted inviting the committee to scrutinise the arrangements of Cyngor Gwynedd and Cwmni Byw'n Iach to provide leisure services in Gwynedd following the issue being placed on Cyngor Gwynedd's Corporate Risk Register due to the risk of Cwmni Byw'n Iach being unable to continue to provide services in Gwynedd leisure centres as a result of the side-effects of Covid-19 and the increase in the cost of living on their income

The Cabinet Member and Head of Economy and Community set out the context and thanked the officers for the report and to the Byw'n Iach Team and Council representatives on the Byw'n Iach Board for their work. The Managing Director of Byw'n Iach then detailed the company's performance during the year.

Members were then given an opportunity to ask questions and submit observations.

Officers were asked to elaborate on the collaboration between Cwmni Byw'n Iach and Alliance Leisure to prioritise the plans to create additional income streams. In response, it was noted:-

- That Alliance Leisure was a specialist company that supported local authorities and commercial companies in the leisure field, and that the Council had also worked with them in the past.
- That the main focus of discussions with the company over the past year has been focused on Bangor, largely due to the challenge facing the more traditional income streams to Byw'n Iach facilities in Bangor in light of competition from the private sector, and also the fact that Bangor was a very significant population centre.

- The facilities in Bangor were not among the strongest, and there was a lack of dry side provision for sport. Also, the situation in Bangor was complicated due to the presence of the University and their respective facilities.
- Bangor residents wished to see a broader offer, but currently holiday services could not be provided for children and young people in Bangor due to the lack of dry facilities, etc.
- That there was a commercial opportunity in Bangor due to the size of the population, and that the discussions with Alliance Leisure were looking at two potential projects, one relating to a play facility as an extension to the existing building and the other looking at adapting the fitness offer in Bangor not to compete head-to-head with some of the private competitors, but rather to look more at the well-being sector, looking to collaborate more within the exercise referral programme, working with health partners and targeting older people and people interested in low intensity exercise.
- Grant applications had been submitted to the Welsh Government for funding to make these schemes a reality and there were Lottery Fund applications also pending.

It was asked how Cwmni Byw'n Iach saw the risks in the future, i.e., in terms of the number of users reaching a plateau and the income not increasing further, the need to invest in fitness equipment so as not to lose users, RAAC or long-term investment in the buildings. In response, it was noted:-

- That the plateau was bound to come as it was not possible for the income to continue to increase forever based on the resources or population in Gwynedd.
- Looking at the county as a whole, some of Byw'n Iach facilities only had catchment areas of around 5,000 people, and looking at Gwynedd's population in an urban context, we would probably only have 2-3 centres.
- However, it was believed that by receiving investment and obtaining additional resources, there were opportunities for growth, although these were not limitless.
- That the company was looking at some of the centres further to the South of the county and the opportunities there were of using income from visitors to the area in the summer as a subsidy for the facility throughout the year.
- That after RAAC had been found in the roof of Arfon Leisure Centre Swimming Pool, the pool was closed for a period while the investigation was underway. Subsequently, the Council's Property Department received a report, shared with Cwmni Byw'n Iach, highlighting that there was no immediate risk to users, and based on that, the pool was reopened. Further monitoring would take place over the next few years. It was also confirmed that RAAC had not been found at any of the company's other sites in the county.

Officers were asked to elaborate on how the centres in Meirionnydd and Dwyfor were performing. The following was noted in response:-

- That the number of visitors and the amount of income was much lower at some of the dry centres, such as Y Pafiliwn, Barmouth and Glan Wnion, Dolgellau, compared to, for example, the Arfon site, but that the costs were also significantly lower, with a significantly smaller number of staff in those centres.
- That the challenge was trying to offer a balanced service across all of those communities based on such varying population levels, and it could be difficult for customers to understand why they weren't offered as much, for example, as someone in Caernarfon.

It was asked what plans Byw'n Iach had in terms of supporting people on a lower income, and children specifically. In response, it was noted:-

- That this was very much alive in the consciousness of the Byw'n Iach Management Team and came up regularly in discussions with the Council.
- That there was a link between deprivation and being active. The pandemic had exacerbated that link and ensuring that all Gwynedd residents were active and receiving the resulting health benefits was a priority for Byw'n Iach.
- That children's swimming ability levels at the end of Key Stage 2 are clearly linked to deprivation, and that the percentage of children able to swim had fallen from 80%-90% before the pandemic to around 50% now, and lower for some groups of children in the county.
- That our ability to change the situation at this time was quite limited as the Free Swimming Grant was halved some 5 years ago.
- As part of the provision, Sport Wales required that children and the over 60s had to be offered a free swim session every week at each pool, but it was quite expensive to do so as we had 7 swimming pools. We tried to make the case that it would be better for Byw'n Iach to have the right to use the money in a more targeted way, e.g., swimming lessons and targeting specific families or schools, as many schools struggle to meet transport costs to bring children to swimming lessons. There had been no positive response to date in terms of our ability to do so.
- They had sought to extend the funding available to offer a free swim to the holders of the Cerdyn Max, a national card for foster families and families with children with a disability. A scheme had also been developed in conjunction with the Council's Children's Service to provide free swimming to all young people with a Young Carer card, along with one friend/family member, and in recent years free family swimming tickets had been shared with the county's food banks.
- There had been very good support through the Children's Service in terms of Government play schemes in recent years, with the majority of holiday programmes having been available free of charge. We also secured a grant from the Police Commissioner with support from the Youth Service for the launch of an outdoors play scheme over the past year, which involved opening all courts and synthetic pitches during all school holidays free of charge to children and young people for informal game play.
- That the Partnerships Unit Team does innovative referral work with people like the Children's Service and the Team Around the Family and the young carers charities and accepts referrals for families or individual children and young people and they work at a very intensive level with those who, for whatever reason, do not currently participate in sport.
- That a great deal of work was being undertaken around young people's mental health, such as one-to-one sessions with the young person to find out what would motivate them to become active.

It was asked to what extent was exercise prescribing being undertaken in Gwynedd and whether there was potential for more marketing for this to get more doctors to make referrals. In response, it was noted:-

- That the grant for the NERS (National Exercise Referral Scheme) had remained frozen for a decade and 99% of the money was now spent on salaries. As such, the team was dwindling in real terms every year.
- That the staff employed on the scheme were on one-year contracts only, and although some of them had been in post for a decade, they faced the same situation of uncertainty every year as confirmation of grant money for the coming year was not received until the last minute.

- That these were staff with very high skill levels and qualification and losing them would mean having to train someone all over again.
- Byw'n lach does not market the programme as there are waiting lists that cannot be coped with, and the number of residents receiving the support could be doubled or even tripled if the team were larger.
- That the situation was extremely frustrating as the evidence of the benefits of the programme were very clear.

It was suggested that the fact that the income was based on a fixed grant, rather than on the number of patients referred, was a weakness of the scheme and a matter to be followed up at a political level. In response, the Cabinet Member noted that she and the Chair of Byw'n lach had corresponded with the then Health Minister on this very issue and would welcome it if the committee sent correspondence again along the same lines.

It was asked where Byw'n lach was in terms of having enough Welsh-speaking staff to provide a bilingual service, and specifically in terms of swimming lessons for children. In response, it was noted:-

- That Byw'n lach would have had more choice of candidates in the past, but over the last 2 years we had to go out to advertise repeatedly to attract any candidates for certain positions.
- Language skills were obviously important in recruitment, but we had faced a situation in recent years where 1,000 children in Arfon were waiting for swimming lessons and Byw'n lach were unable to recruit enough swimming teachers who were confident in their Welsh.
- No one had been recruited with no language skills at all, but there were situations where it was a choice between not recruiting and leaving an extra 40-50 children on the waiting list for swimming lessons for the next 2-3 years, or recruiting people with lower-level language skills, and working with them to develop their language skills and confidence to use Welsh in the workplace.
- That the swimming teachers' work contracts give Cyngor Gwynedd staff access to the same learning and development support available so that the individuals can receive support from the Council's language officers and take advantage of the development programmes available. Also, a swimming officer worked with those individuals in terms of their swimming vocabulary, and posters had been placed in the staff rooms reminding people of that vocabulary. However, building the confidence of the swimming teachers to use Welsh at work was going to take time and wouldn't happen overnight.

RESOLVED

- 1. To accept the report and to note the observations.**
- 2. To send a letter to the Minister of Health and Social Services highlighting the work being done by Cwmni Byw'n lach in relation to the National Exercise Referral Scheme and the need for more funding to fund its Gwynedd operation.**

7. GWYNEDD BEACH MANAGEMENT

The Assistant Head of Economy and Community and the Maritime Service Manager were welcomed to the meeting.

The report of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy Operational Matters invited the committee to scrutinise the arrangements for beach management in Gwynedd.

The Cabinet Member set the context and the Assistant Head of Economy and Community elaborated on the content of the report. Members were then given the opportunity to ask questions and offer observations.

With reference to Table 1 in paragraph 5.2 of the report, it was questioned whether the increase in employee costs was due to an increase in overtime pay. In response, it was noted:-

- That the expenditure patterns highlighted the immense pressure on the coast over the last 2-3 years which had resulted in extending the period for beach wardens along with paying overtime.
- That the current permanent structure consisted of only one Senior Beach Officer and one other Beach Officer, and as part of the increase in income, it was proposed to establish two more posts to address the gap, namely a Beach Officer for Meirionnydd and a Beach Officer for Morfa Bychan.
- Much of the preparation took place over the winter period and it was recognised that the structure needed to be strengthened in that regard.

It was asked whether there was a possibility of a getting a bylaw to give the beach officers powers to fine people who misbehave with cars, etc., on the beach. In response, it was noted:-

- That the Service worked closely with the Police, and in particular at Morfa Bychan, which was the only beach in Gwynedd where driving and parking was allowed on the beach.
- That there were strict rules in place with signs on the beach with the Police and Council logo on them. Staff walking the beach used body cameras and staff also had cameras in the vehicles, so evidence could be passed on to Police.
- That it would be beneficial if the beach officers, particularly the chief officers, had powers to introduce punitive fines for beach offenders, and it was believed that this required guidance from the Legal Department.

It was asked whether beach management was safe from cuts, etc., given that it was a non-statutory service to local government. In response, it was noted:-

- Although the service was non-statutory, the field touched on several statutory responsibilities, and although there was uncertainty in terms of the legal framework, it was not believed that neither the Department nor the Service would recommend that there be no responsibility at all, be that as almost a moral responsibility, more than a legal responsibility.
- There had been previous service interruptions due to the need to secure savings, but unfortunately, it had been observed that not providing a service could lead to problems.
- That it was a matter for all the members to identify how the Council would respond to the financial challenges, but that the Department was aware of the importance of providing the provision on our beaches.
- There may be options to make savings without cutting frontline services, and increasing income was one of those options.

It was asked whether it was inevitable that we would move from employing beach wardens to employing lifeguards in the future. In response, it was noted:-

- That the Service's risk assessments did not currently recognise lifeguards as a necessary provision.
- However, the Service would be open to considering any opportunities to extend the provision to include lifeguards, but as it was a professional service, rather than voluntary service, that could be costly.

- Organisations such as the RNLI provided lifeguards to other authorities in Wales, but they charged a fee.
- Before considering this type of service, a discussion was needed as to the method of funding. If the concept of a Tourist Tax would be implemented, it could possibly be considered whether this type of provision would be a priority for any income from such a tax.
- The answers and solutions were not available at this time, but this was one of the areas that the Service wished to consider over the next couple of years.

It was asked whether it would be possible for the Council to be progressive and refuse to pay the Crown Estate lease as a way of saving money and creating further discussion about the devolution of the Crown Estate in Wales. The following was noted in response:-

- That the Council currently had a series of individual agreements along the coast, with part of the coast outside of those agreements.
- That the Crown Estate had proposed to modify the existing arrangements some years ago, in order to have a single composite agreement along the Gwynedd coast.
- As part of the initial discussions, the Service highlighted that the completion of such an agreement placed responsibility on the Council, and that costs were also associated with that responsibility.
- That the Service had identified the area as one that it would be very keen to discuss further, and if the scrutineers had any ideas or recommendations in terms of direction, the officers would be very grateful to receive those comments.

In response to a further question, it was noted that the amount paid by the Council annually to the Crown Estate was a few thousand, but that the exact figure could be confirmed following the meeting.

The officers were asked to confirm that risks were constantly assessed, and responded to circumstances and events, etc., rather than just following a timetable, and that there was action to reduce those risks. The following was noted in response:-

- That the Service had risk assessments for every single beach, main resorts as well as rural beaches.
- That each site had its specific risks, and that there were experienced officers within the Service, who had received thorough training in risk assessment. In addition, a number of Service officers lived locally and also volunteered with the RNLI and Coastguard, and were therefore very much aware of coastal risks.
- That the risk assessments were dynamic and living documents, which were renewed at least once a year, and more often than that should there be an incident or change in the nature of a beach, or additional developments that had increased or decreased the risk.
- That the Service sends out questionnaires, etc., and takes note of the feedback. Weekly and monthly inspections were also carried out, and if staff had realised that new risks had arisen, those documents would be modified at the earliest opportunity.
- That every beach differed from each other, and that the assessments reflected the characteristics of the individual beaches, having regard to the characteristics of the beach layout and the risks in terms of conflict.
- That there were boat launching arrangements, etc., on some beaches and that there was a pretty consistent risk assessment for each in terms of individuals getting into difficulty while swimming. As such, there was a fairly practical assessment of the risks for every single beach, identifying mitigation measures.

- That there were also risk assessments in terms of the signage schemes for the beaches, with specific signage now for every single beach highlighting the main risks for that location.
- That measures had been identified at some beaches where information and advice from beach wardens could also be a way of reducing the risks, e.g. an effort has been made to prevent people from entering the water at certain beaches due to the dangers of the location.

It was asked how many people were penalised annually for using jet-skis without a licence. The following was noted in response:-

- The number of jet-skis and powerboats in Gwynedd was believed to be very high compared to other authorities and Gwynedd was leading the way with the online registration system, which had led to a significant reduction in the number of complaints and incidents and accidents.
- That there were several private launch sites in use, e.g. the large caravan sites in Meirionnydd, but the Service worked with the owners of those sites to try and ensure that their customers launching from their sites had registered, and the vast majority did so.
- The Service did not have powers to issue fines, but new legislation, the Merchant Shipping (Watercraft) Order 2023 came into force on 1 April this year. There was a case of jet-skis causing an accident by acting irresponsibly in the vicinity of Aberdyfi Harbour and officers were working with police to try and secure a prosecution.
- That the Coastguard Agency would take the lead on any prosecution sought on the coast.
- That the whole purpose of the registration system was to identify those driving jet-skis or powerboats irresponsibly so that they could be contacted to inform them that they had breached the rules.
- That a bylaw prohibited speeds of more than 4 knots per hour within 100 metres of the water's edge. If anyone breached the rule, they could be prosecuted, but to date, no internal fines had been issued to powerboat owners.

It was suggested that registration and launching fees for a powerboat / jet-ski should increase quite significantly above inflation next year to generate income for the Council. The following was noted in response:-

- That the comment was accepted, and possibly, that consideration would have to be given to raising the fees next year. Fees had already increased significantly over the past 2-3 years and had risen above the level of inflation last year.
- That the Service would consider and recommend fees for 2024/25 in the new year.
- That the increase in fees over the last 2-3 years had created difficult situations at times for front-line staff on the beaches, and if there were to be further fee increases next year, it would be necessary to consider how to get the message out in good time so that people were aware of the increase before coming to the beaches.

It was asked how many powers Cyngor Gwynedd had in terms of ensuring water quality. In response, it was noted:-

- That the main destinations were monitored by Natural Resources Wales and that the results would be officially released on 23 November.
- If officers saw any pollution, or had concerns about a particular site, they would contact Natural Resources Wales directly so they could take samples, etc.
- Following this, the Council would await any direction from Natural Resources Wales in terms of closing an area off or putting up signs informing the public to stay away.

- That many sites, including Cricieth and Aberdyfi in Gwynedd were included in Natural Resources Wales' 'Forecasting and Discounting' programme which means that the Council is notified in advance if they believe that the quality of bathing water would be affected, e.g. by heavy rainwater washing material from the streets and down rivers, and so on.
- Such cases were rarely seen, but if there was concern that any pollution or sewerage had flowed into the sea, the Council would put up signs at those sites to try and discourage people from entering the water.

Concern was raised that raising the fees of watercraft would lead to more people launching them from unofficial sites. A particular problem was cited in the Aberdyfi area, where people were launching from the Borth area and driving over to Aberdyfi outside the Harbourmaster's working hours. The following was noted in response:-

- The officers' working hours had been extended and there were barriers on the beaches, such as at Abersoch and Morfa Bychan, after staff left at 8.00pm.
- Although staff were on duty between 10am and 5pm in most places, they would be asked to stay on if there were many boats and users still on the coast.
- It was not possible to stop people launching outside working hours and it wasn't possible to close public slipways either as there were people going out fishing for the day, etc.
- If the fees were deemed too high, there was concern that this could encourage users to go to unofficial sites outside the Council's control, putting pressure on sites and infrastructure not designed to deal with that type of use and reducing the number of registered watercraft.
- That there were quite good arrangements now, but, in effect, it was a voluntary system in the county, as there were no national statutory arrangements.

It was asked how often the safety equipment was inspected. In response, it was noted:-

- That the equipment was inspected every two weeks between April and September, and monthly during the autumn and winter months, and that the officers at the main resorts inspected them daily during the main season.
- That several faulty or vandalised emergency phones were currently out of order, and those phones had been purposely covered. BT were unable to supply replacements, and it was necessary to consider whether some sites really needed them.
- The beach officers carried personal rescue equipment, e.g. safety ropes and rescue buoys, which could be used as emergency mitigation measures, but it was stressed that staff did not have the qualification to enter the water to rescue anyone.

In response to a question, it was confirmed that the Maritime Service had a protocol for responding to severe weather, and that they also assist other departments, particularly in flood situations, etc., by providing vehicles, jet-skis and boats, along with staff qualified to drive them. It was also confirmed that sea gates were closed at some sites if bad weather was forecasted.

Reference was made to collaboration difficulties with Natural Resources Wales in Dinas Dinlle, and enquiries were made about the nature of the relationship between the Maritime Service and the owners of the land that abutted the beaches. In response, it was noted:

- That the Service had a good relationship with the private landowners and site managers parallel to our beaches, and that the relationship with Natural Resources Wales was generally quite good.
- The National Trust managed sections of the coast and the Service also worked closely with community councils.

- That the other organisations did not have designated officers for the coast and that any problems arising were dealt with by Maritime Service officers, even on private land.
- There were specific issues at Dinas Dinlle with campervans parking overnight on sites on Natural Resources Wales land, however Natural Resources Wales officers would rarely take enforcement action.
- That the Service had an agreement with the owners of several caravan parks to take mitigation measures regarding jet-skis, etc.

In response to a question about how the Service will respond to the challenges in the years ahead, particularly considering the fiscal problems facing us, it was stated:

- That it was difficult to predict what would happen in the future, and that the Service operated within a specific budget.
- That the season appeared to be extending and there had been a significant increase in the numbers using our beaches since Covid.
- That the existing bylaws needed to be updated to address emerging new technology, e.g., the increased use of drones on beaches.
- That the Service needed to give intensive attention to planning in relation to the coastal risks posed by climate change and had initiated work with Natural Resources Wales on sites such as Dinas Dinlle, Porthmadog, Pwllheli and Fairbourne.
- Coastal activities were dependent on the slipways and structures that offer flood protection. Many of these structures were outdated and consideration needed to be given to how the Council would also respond to the need to invest in our infrastructure.

The Service was thanked for providing a very thorough and full report.

RESOLVED to accept the report and to note the observations.

8. AUTISM PLAN TASK AND FINISH GROUP

A report was presented by the Scrutiny Adviser inviting the committee to elect two members to represent the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee on the Autism Plan Task and Finish Group.

The names of Councillors Dawn Jones and Gwynfor Owen were proposed. It was highlighted that both had a connection to the autism field. A member noted that he had had a conversation with the Monitoring Officer about the situation. He elaborated that during the conversation that a request for a dispensation could be submitted to the Standards Committee.

As the next meeting of the Standards Committee was on 19 February 2024, and the Task Group was scheduled to report back to the Care Scrutiny Committee on 1 February, it was noted that the Standards Committee would have to be asked to hold an extraordinary meeting to discuss the requests for dispensations.

It was also noted that two reserve members of the Task Group should be elected in case one, or both, requests for dispensation be refused by the Standards Committee.

RESOLVED

- 1. That Councillors Dawn Jones and Gwynfor Owen (who have a connection with the autism field), submit applications for dispensations to allow them to**

- represent the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee on the Autism Plan Task and Finish Group.**
- 2. To ask the Standards Committee to hold an extraordinary meeting to consider requests for dispensations from Councillors Dawn Jones and Gwynfor Owen.**
 - 3. To elect Councillors Cai Larsen and Beth Lawton as reserve members to represent the Committee on the Task and Finish Group.**

The meeting commenced at 10.30am and concluded at 1.35pm.

Chair