



# Complete Agenda

Democracy Service  
Swyddfa'r Cyngor  
CAERNARFON  
Gwynedd  
LL55 1SH

Meeting

**EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Date and Time

**10.30 am, THURSDAY, 12TH DECEMBER, 2024**

**(NOTE: A BRIEFING SESSION WILL BE HELD FOR MEMBERS AT 10.00AM)**

Location

**Siambwr Hywel Dda, Swyddfeydd y Cyngor Caernarfon and virtually on Zoom**

**\* NOTE**

**This meeting will be webcast**

**[https://gwynedd.public-i.tv/core//en\\_GB/portal/home](https://gwynedd.public-i.tv/core//en_GB/portal/home)**

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(DISTRIBUTED 04/12/24)

# **EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

## **MEMBERSHIP (18)**

### **Plaid Cymru (12)**

#### Councillors

Jina Gwyrfai  
Dawn Lynne Jones  
Gareth Tudor Jones  
Gwynfor Owen  
John Pughe  
Rhys Tudur

Iwan Huws  
Dewi Jones  
Olaf Cai Larsen  
Llio Elenid Owen  
Huw Rowlands  
Sian Williams

### **Independent (6)**

#### Councillors

Elwyn Jones  
Beth Lawton  
John Pughe Roberts

Gwilym Jones  
Dewi Owen  
Richard Glyn Roberts

### **Ex-officio Members**

Chair and Vice-Chair of the Council

### **Other Invited Members**

## **CO-OPTED MEMBERS:**

### **With a vote on education matters only**

[vacant seat]	Church in Wales
Colette Owen	The Catholic Church
[vacant seat]	Meirionnydd Parent/Governors Representative
Karen Vaughan Jones	Dwyfor Parent/Governors' Representative
Sharon Roberts	Arfon Parent/Governors' Representative

### **Without a Vote**

Elise Poulter	NEU
Gwilym Jones	NASUWT

# **A G E N D A**

## **1. APOLOGIES**

To receive any apologies for absence.

## **2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST**

To receive any declarations of personal interest.

## **3. URGENT BUSINESS**

To note any items that are a matter of urgency in the view of the Chair for consideration.

## **4. MINUTES**

The Chair shall propose that the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee held on 17th October, 2024 be signed as a true record.

## **5. SCHOOL REVENUE BUDGETS**

To submit a report on the above.

## **6. EDUCATION TRANSPORT**

To submit a report on the above.

## **7. EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE REVISED FORWARD PROGRAMME 2024-25**

To adopt an amended work programme for 2024/25.

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## EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 17/10/24

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### Attendance:

**Councillors:** Councillor Cai Larsen (Chair)  
Councillor Rhys Tudur (Vice-chair)

Councillors:- Jina Gwyrfai, Iwan Huws, Dewi Jones, Elwyn Jones, Gareth Tudor Jones, Gwilym Jones, Beth Lawton, Dewi Owen, John Pughe Roberts, Huw Llwyd Rowlands and Sian Williams.

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

**Officers present:** Bethan Adams (Scrutiny Advisor) and Eirian Roberts (Democracy Services Officer).

**Present for item 6:-** Gwern ap Rhisiart (Head of Education), Ffion Edwards Ellis (Assistant Head: Special Educational Needs and Inclusion) and Ellen Rowlands (Inclusion Manager).

**Present for item 7:-** Gwern ap Rhisiart (Head of Education) and Sioned Owen (Early Years Service Manager).

**Present for item 8:** - Councillor Menna Trenholme (Cabinet Member for Corporate Services), Catrin Love (Assistant Head of Corporate Services Department) and Gail Warrington (Health, Safety and Well-being Advisory Services Manager).

**Present for item 9:-** Rhys Glyn (Head of Gwynedd's Immersion Education System).

The Chair referred to the news that had just been announced that the Leader of the Council, Councillor Dyfrig Siencyn, had resigned. He noted that the Leader used to attend the meetings of this committee in his role as Chair of North Wales Economic Ambition Board, and he thanked him for his work. He also noted that Councillor Beca Brown, who used to attend this committee regularly in her role as Cabinet Member for Education, had also resigned, and he thanked her for her work, as well as Councillor Elin Walker Jones, who had intended to be present in this meeting in her role as Cabinet Member for Children and Supporting Families, but had also resigned.

### 1. ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIR

**RESOLVED to elect Councillor Rhys Tudur as Vice-chair of this committee for 2024/25.**

### 2. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Dawn Lynne Jones, Gwynfor Owen, Llio Elenid Owen and Richard Glyn Roberts.

### 3. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declarations of personal interest were received.

#### **4. URGENT ITEMS**

None to note.

#### **5. MINUTES**

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee which took place on 18 July 2024, as a true record.

#### **6. PROGRESS REPORT ON RESPONSE TO ESTYN RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Head of Education and the officers were welcomed to the meeting.

Submitted - a report detailing the progress of the Education Department in response to recommendations from the Estyn Report on education services in Cyngor Gwynedd (June 2023) in relation to pupils' behaviour and attendance in the county's schools.

The Head of Education gave a brief summary of the content of the report, noting that they had intended to report to the committee later on the progress in response to Estyn's third recommendation in relation to moving forward on the Department's strategic priorities.

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

Referring to paragraph 4.3 of the report, it was enquired whether the Welsh Government's Attendance Grant to target attendance improvements for specific individuals within schools was likely to continue. In response, it was noted:-

- In terms of the Welsh Government's grants, no assurance had been given further than one year at a time. However, as the discussions nationally with the Government highlighted that this was a national problem and that it was a national priority to get children into school, it was very unlikely that this grant would come to an end in a year.
- Despite this, the Department was required to prepare for the possibility that the grant could come to an end, and the main discussions regarding this focused on the team's capacity and how schools responded to lack of attendance.
- It was not possible to address the lack of attendance on the current scale with a team of 10 welfare officers, and that everyone was required to work as one to explain to the schools what their duties were to ensure that the Welfare Team could then work with a specific cohort of children whose attendance were lower than a specific threshold.

The main reason for the low attendance levels in schools was enquired. In response, it was noted:-

- That illness was mainly reported by schools. Following the lockdown period, parents tended to keep children home from school with minor illnesses such as a cold or a headache, and it was very difficult for the Authority and the schools to challenge that.
- The policy was revised to be able to highlight the steps that schools could take to respond to illness, especially in connection to continuous, extended or regular absences, and through the monitoring arrangement, it could be possible to identify patterns and send a welfare officer in to discuss with the parents if needed.

It was suggested that it would be useful for guidelines to be available to help parents come to a decision regarding when to keep their children at home and when to send them to school. In response, it was noted:-

- That parents' mindset regarding when to keep their children home from school had changed since Covid, and there was more awareness by now of the possibility of spreading diseases.
- More people worked from home since Covid and it was therefore easier for some parents to keep their children home from school.
- At the end of the day, this was a decision for the parents to make, but the Authority could support the schools in terms of the messages given to parents to get to grips with that.

It was noted that the number of exclusions in Arfon was substantially higher than other parts of the county and it was enquired whether this was a general pattern or whether there was a small number of schools in Arfon pushing that figure up? It was noted that it would be beneficial to see the data per school to see what was behind this. In response, it was noted:-

- That Arfon's population was much higher than Meirionnydd and Dwyfor combined and the percentage was looked at per thousand pupils.
- That the Authority tracked 5 schools, 4 in Arfon and one in Meirionnydd.

Referring to an earlier observation in the discussion that parents' mindset towards sending children to school had changed since Covid, it was enquired whether this was also true within the schools. In response, it was noted:-

- That there was certainly nervousness amongst school staff, which did not exist previously, in terms of the impact that sick children could have on them and the rest of the school community.
- However, attendance was back on the top of individual schools' priorities list by now, with those schools celebrating high attendance and encouraging parents to send their children to school.
- That the situation was much better by now with the percentage of attendance increasing, but it was not increasing as quickly as they had wished.

It was enquired whether attendance levels raised quicker in the primary sector or the secondary sector. In response, it was noted:-

- That attendance levels in the primary sector were substantially higher than the secondary and were also quite stable.
- A small increase was seen in the secondary sector compared to the previous year but it was acknowledged that there was more work to be done on this. The Department worked very closely with the schools to prioritise increasing attendance to the pre-Covid level, and higher than that.
- To be able to increase the attendance percentage of the county, attention must be given to the bulk of school population which had an attendance percentage under 90%, instead of the individual cases that might be 30% or 40%, as those numbers were low and the individuals in question received support from welfare teams etc.
- That the Head of Education had sent a letter to all parents in the county emphasising that attendance must be a priority. The responses received by parents were very mixed, but perhaps it highlighted the confusion amongst some parents regarding the importance of sending their children to school. However, throughout, people understood that they must change gear in terms of attendance, otherwise the children would not thrive academically.

The fact that schools gathered quite thorough data in terms of absence tracking and used it to refine the implementation then needed to increase the attendance figure was welcomed. In response, it was noted that the use of data was good in schools. However, it was believed that parents who contacted the school to say that their children were sick needed to be challenged more, as it was not possible to prosecute parents based on lack of attendance if that absence was authorised by the school, and this was the type of messages being put forward to the school by now.

It was noted that the findings of Mrs Caroline Rees, who was commissioned to conduct a detailed survey of the Inclusion Service, reflected Estyn's recommendation that there was a need for suitable locations for provision outside of school, and it was enquired whether there was an update regarding that. In response, it was noted:-

- That Mrs Caroline Rees' report had helped the service to create a foundation in terms of the direction in the inclusion field and the behaviour support field, especially to the increasing number of children who were unable to cope, or who could not be included in mainstream schools.
- That the basic principle in Gwynedd was that children should be included within the mainstream schools, but that it was a challenge to do so every time, especially as the children's behaviour intensified as the years went by.
- That establishing a Project Board was an important step forward to get the opinion of schools' headteachers on the direction of the Inclusion Service over the next few years, as it was the headteachers who made decisions relating to excluding an individual. Therefore, it was essential that the headteachers were part of the solution to ensure that the provision outside of the school was fit for purpose.
- That detailed work was achieved examining good practices in other counties etc., but as the financial situation in the Department was difficult, they looked at how better use of the funding that already existed could be made to create a model that provided better support for the same cost. This was challenging because caring for children with intense behavioural needs was costly, with the ratio of staff to child, for example, costing much more than if those children were in a mainstream school.
- That the Department's wish was to see as little pupils as possible out of education and the provision for them was excellent and provided good value for money. That it was not possible to provide for hundreds of children exempt from education in Gwynedd as the county's geography meant that it was not possible to provide one centre in the middle for everyone.

The honesty of the report was welcomed, for example, referring to the need to change gear in terms of attendance. Referring to the table in paragraph 4.4 of the report, it was realised that there was an increase in the attendance of 56% of the targeted groups, and the Welfare Officers were thanked for their work. However, whether the increase in the attendance levels since the Estyn visit in June 2023 was sufficient was enquired. Referring to the attendance per local authority, the fact that Gwynedd's figures had increased from 88.7% in 2022/23 to 89.1% in 2023/24 was welcomed, but it was noted that the figures of some other counties were higher, namely Wrexham (90.1%) and Monmouthshire (90%), and it was enquired whether there were any lessons to be learnt from those councils. In response, it was noted:-

- That the increase in attendance levels in Gwynedd was insufficient, but it was clear that the vast majority of councils also had trouble achieving this. The Department intended to continue to look into this matter relentlessly, until the attendance figures had returned to where they should be.



- That the Department's officers discussed with their colleagues across the region, and also held national discussions, and it was believed that Gwynedd worked on the right things.
- As well as the national campaign that was on its way from the Government, there was also an intention to conduct a campaign locally to promote attendance on the Council's social media. Gareth the Orangutang was also asked to do work on promoting attendance with school children.
- That the Department looked at whether there were any lessons to learn from other counties, but in some situations, other counties looked at Gwynedd as an example of good practice and considered what they could learn from us.
- That the main weakness at present was the fact that the data on authority level arrived late and without being analysed to the level that we would have wished. This put the Council on the back foot in terms of targeting specific groups of learners etc. However, the Department was working urgently to get to grips with this.

It was noted that Mrs Caroline Rees agreed with Estyn's recommendation that the Authority needed to work with school leaders to jointly draw up an effective inclusion strategy across the county. It was enquired how many discussions had been with the schools regarding that and whether anything had been achieved. In response, it was noted:-

- That the headteachers worked with the Department from the start to bring a plan together and that they were also part of the visits to see good practice.
- In terms of the inclusion challenges, that the work with other agencies and other departments within the Council was part of that.
- They looked at solutions such as holding a workshop to look at what services also worked with young people outside of the school. This was not only a school solution but was something that also needed to be done on a wider scale in terms of the community.

It was enquired whether the Department encouraged headteachers to remind the staff to fill the register to avoid gaps in the data. In response, it was noted that this message had gone out to schools several times and that it would be sent out once again to remind the schools of the importance of registering children twice a day in a timely manner, in accordance with the legal requirement.

It was enquired whether the Department monitored if the school had managed to register every pupil in a timely manner. In response, it was noted:-

- That the Department could monitor whether a school had registered children twice a day, but it was not possible to monitor if that had been done in a timely manner.
- That it was the school's responsibility to ensure that children had been registered in a timely manner and the Management Team of any school, especially secondary schools, was expected to be aware if staff had not registered children on time and to address this.

It was enquired whether there were secondary schools that had not excluded at all in two years. It was also noted that it would be beneficial to see comparative figures of other counties. In response, it was noted:-

- That comparison with other authorities was complex with a number of different factors feeding into this, and that there were even exemptions within individual authorities.

- In Gwynedd, with 12 secondary schools and 2 all-through schools, there were 14 headteachers making decisions in terms of excluding children, and the Authority did not intervene in that decision unless necessary.
- That other authorities had a smaller number of schools, their inclusion provisions were possibly different too.
- That a small county geographically, where everything was close to each other, could have provision in the middle that would include a number of the children before they reached the point of facing exclusion.
- Gwynedd could have a higher number of exclusions, but a low number of pupils out of education, and other counties could have a low number of exclusions, but a substantially higher number than Gwynedd of year 11 children out of education within mainstream schools.
- Despite all of this, the number of exclusions in Gwynedd was too high. It could be concluded that children's behaviour in Gwynedd was similar to children's behaviour in other counties, but it seemed from the figures that those other counties did not exclude as much as us, and that was the message conveyed to the schools very recently.

Referring to the observation previously in the discussion regarding tracking schools, the type of support and challenge given to those schools was enquired. In response, it was noted:-

- That the support given to individuals with a high number of exclusions included looking at the barriers and tracking individuals who received a lot of exclusion periods to be able to support them.
- Although the number of continuous exclusions were extremely high and required attention, only 10% of all exclusions had led to continuous exclusions during the period in question.
- That the Authority had an agreement with the schools to try to do everything to avoid continuous exclusions.
- That the Authority had provision outside of the school should it be required to move urgently in the case of an individual receiving continuous exclusion from one school facing continuous exclusion from another school.
- That the Department was confident that they were completely aware which schools excluded the most, who were the pupils and where resources were required to support them, despite the associated financial challenges.

It was suggested that it would be beneficial to have an update in a year on the progress of the 5 schools in Gwynedd that were being tracked.

Concern was expressed that children dealt with drugs outside secondary school. It was enquired whether this was also a problem within the schools, and what was being done about it. In response, it was noted:-

- That it was sad to report that there were individuals taking drugs into school, and there were exclusions associated with that.
- That they managed to attract additional funding to appoint 2 officers located within the Youth Justice Service, but who worked in partnership with the Education Department, to visit the schools and to work with individuals who have been excluded for bringing drugs into the school.

It was noted that it was a great comfort to see the Department giving consideration to the drug problem that was intensifying within our community.

## **RESOLVED**

- 1. To accept the report and note the observations.**

## 2. Request an update to the Committee on future progress.

### 7. TRANSFORMING EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN IN THEIR EARLY YEARS

The Early Years Service Manager was welcomed to the meeting.

Submitted – the report inviting the committee to scrutinise:-

- What were the steps intended to take to transform education for children in their early years?
- What was the timetable and the key milestones to transform the service?
- How was it intended to fund the transformation of the early years service?

The Early Years Service Manager provided a brief summary of the content of the report.

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

Disappointment was expressed regarding the progress of the work thus far. It was noted that the barriers in terms of staffing and funding was understood, but it was emphasised that the early years was the most important period in a child's development.

It was enquired how much close collaboration happened between the Education Department and the Children's Department because, according to the Government's definition, the early years included 0-7 years old, but there was no reference in the report to the period after the children started at school. In response, it was noted that the Early Years Unit's work programme focused on the pre-school period mainly, which was nursery education and the plans for children under 4 years old.

Reference was made to the new policy that would be coming into force next year regarding toileting, and it was enquired how they intended to pay for the provision. An enquiry was also made regarding whether a child that was not toilet trained could be deprived from going to school with their peers. In response, it was noted:

- That the policy would expect parents to teach their children about toileting, with support provided to do so.
- That the plan was welcomed by the schools as it re-defined the relationship between parents and school, to ensure that parents were parenting and schools were educating the children.
- That the commitment of the Education Department and the Children's Service to the early years was substantial in terms of time and in terms of what was attempted, and was also challenging as they had to try to overturn complex systems, incorporating the health services into it too.
- That the schools themselves paid to dispose of nappies, which was very costly for them. There would be no cost for the schools as a result of introducing the new policy as the children would be required to be toilet-trained before coming to the school, but the cost of the support through the health service etc., would come from the grants available.

An enquiry was made as to why there was not much reference to the *Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin* and the health service in the plans. In response, it was noted:-

- That the relationship with the *Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin* was good. However, there was more work to be done to further develop that relationship, and that was part of the work currently achieved by the Early Years Unit.
- It could be argued that Gwynedd had more *Cylchoedd Meithrin* than other counties, and that was due to the nature of the language etc.

- That there was a Quality Board for the early years which included representation from inside the *Cylchoedd Meithrin*, and that there was a team of teachers who supported the quality of the provision and a team of officers from the *Mudiad* who supported more managerial and governing aspects of the provision.
- That a vast majority of the matters raised were matters relating to the *Cylchoedd's* leadership and governance, instead of the quality of the provision.

In response to these observations, the member who raised the matter noted that this was unclear in the report.

By reading paragraph 9 of the Early Years Transformation Work Programme, concern was expressed that it appeared that only 21 of the 83 registered childcare providers in Gwynedd provided a service through the medium of Welsh or bilingually. In response, it was noted that there were 81 registered providers, with 21 of them providing after-care service for 2-year-old children, and that it was a requirement for all providers to provide through the medium of Welsh or bilingually.

It was suggested that the Early Years Play, Learn and Care in Wales document could be a precedent to draw up a strategy for Gwynedd with the local data that we had. All the consulting and commissioning surveys were questioned, instead of moving forward with the strategy. It was also noted that transforming education for the early years involved creating change for the better through the whole of Gwynedd, but no reference to Llŷn was seen in the report. It was noted that very good work was being undertaken in pockets of the county, but it was emphasised that every 5-year-old child should be in the frame for education and play opportunities. It was enquired where the vision was and the Service was urged to develop the Strategy urgently as time was scarce. In response, it was noted:-

- That drawing up the Strategy was a priority for the Service.
- That the Government's grants over the last 10 years had led to more provision in some pockets of the county, and it was not equal for all of Gwynedd's children. This would steer the Strategy, and there would be a need to work with our other partners to draw it up.
- We would also have to look at the work's accountability and appreciation was expressed of the fact that this matter was being scrutinised to ensure this.

Referring to paragraph 10 of the Work Programme, it was enquired how prominent the Welsh language would be in the new childcare and nursery education space, specifically therefore at Our Lady's School, Bangor, which was in the transition category. In response, it was noted:-

- That there was a meeting with the governors of Our Lady's School to explain the vision in terms of having Welsh or bilingual provision, and that they agreed, when the scrutiny process would be undertaken, that we would look for provision that would operate bilingually.
- That there was currently provision on the school's existing site, and the Department would collaborate with that provision over the last period to improve their quality in terms of bilingual provision.

In response to a question, it was confirmed that the governors and the Council officers would have input into the work of evaluating the scrutiny process, looking to having bilingual provision on the site.

It was noted, although the spaces were to be welcomed, that it was sometimes difficult to maintain the spaces that already existed, especially therefore in rural areas where

the number of children could be low from time to time, and there was an enquiry about how much weight was given to maintaining those spaces. In response, it was noted:-

- That several financial sources currently went to the childcare and nursery education locations, and that had substantially increased over the last 4 years.
- Over the recent period, quite fair contributions had been given to small *Cylchoedd* to keep them viable, but there was also more funding to come from the Government as they hoped to further extend 2-year-old childcare. Therefore, all of this had to be considered and to see what exact funding formula needed to go to *Cylchoedd* to retain them.
- That retaining some of the smaller *Cylchoedd Meithrin* was very challenging in a rural county such as Gwynedd, but the increase in the requirement as a result of further extending 2-year-old childcare could make them more viable in the future.
- That education and childcare in the early years was costly as there was a need for a safe staff / child ratio and because the expectations on the locations were substantial, whether it was an Estyn inspection or an inspection of the safeguarding guidelines etc. which was carried out regularly.
- That the number of children in pockets of areas in Gwynedd were not there to justify, or to establish viable provision for the future, and this due to parents' choices or the fact that there were not any children in some areas.
- In terms of funding *Cylchoedd Meithrin*, that the Council had been providing a core allocation to each location, which meant that a *Cylch* with 3-4 children had the same core allocation as a *Cylch* with 30 children.
- That the situation was complex, especially as it was volunteers who mainly established *Cylchoedd Meithrin* and care provisions, and that extreme pressures were on them as individuals to be able to maintain those provisions.
- They wished to ensure the scrutineers that the Service had considered everything in terms of how to ensure quality provision to children before they started at the school, and that sustainability was one of them.

It was noted that some parents in extremely rural areas had chosen not to put their children in the nearest *Cylch Meithrin* as the numbers were already low, and to put them in another *Cylch* where the numbers were higher. This meant that fewer children would be in those rural schools in the future, and that was a concern. It was suggested that there were various ways to try to encourage people to distribute children fairly across *Cylchoedd Meithrin*, especially as some of the parents did not use the *Cylch* that was on their doorstep.

It was asked if there was room to consider whether or not schools could have their own *Ysgol Feithrin*, so that they came under the Council's wing, instead of *Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin*. In response, it was noted:-

- That the question was difficult to answer because the situation in some areas lended itself as more of a model where children would possibly start earlier in the school than they would in other areas.
- That the situation was also complex in terms of the question whether the Council provided the education and the care, and how they could be fair with care providers in the private sector outside of education.
- As Gwynedd only had one admission policy for all the schools, changing the admission age in one school would mean consulting with every school.
- That many of the volunteers in the *Cylchoedd Meithrin* were also school governors.
- That this must be weighed up moving forward, but they wished to emphasise the good work relationship between the Council and *Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin* and the way they tried to think about more sustainable methods to maintain the

provisions. The Council was conducting these types of discussions with the *Mudiad* as it was not believed that the current arrangement of a committee of volunteers and a small number of staff and children was sustainable for the future in Gwynedd.

It was noted that this was the type of thing that members would have preferred to see in the report in order to receive assurance in terms of the collaboration, and disappointment was expressed regarding the lack of vision to move forward and plan in the report.

#### **RESOLVED**

- 1. To accept the report and note the observations.**
- 2. Identify concern about the lack of resources available to move the work forward.**
- 3. That the committee looks forward to seeing wider cooperation with other relevant agencies.**
- 4. Request an update to the Committee in a year's time.**

#### **8. STAFF WELL-BEING STRATEGY**

The Cabinet Member for Corporate Services and the officers were welcomed to the meeting.

Submitted - the report of the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services inviting the committee to scrutinise the staff well-being field to receive assurance that appropriate arrangements were in place and the proposed Strategy would address the challenges in terms of the after-effects of the pandemic period amongst the workforce and staff absence costs due to sickness.

The Cabinet Member set out the context and the Assistant Head of Corporate Services provided a brief summary of the content of the report.

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

It was noted that:-

- As was always common in a staff survey, there were a lot of views in the report regarding the information and skills of middle managers, and it was noted that the Strategy was welcomed as long as it was implemented and adopted specifically by senior officers, and that the line managers, and specifically the middle managers, received regular training and leadership.
- Although the report had quoted some words from staff to convey the feeling, it would have been beneficial to present more data and information to show the views of staff from different departments within the Council as a result of the Staff Voice Survey.
- That the staff absences were high, and it would have been beneficial to present more information to see whether there were obvious problems in some departments, and the reasons for that.
- The opportunity for the committee to scrutinise this field again was welcomed.

In response to the observations, it was noted that:

- The data was certainly available. In terms of the Staff Voice Survey specifically, there was a clear message in terms of the statistics on well-being, with the well-

being score lower than the jobs / services score. There was also a clear message that front-line staff were unaware of the support packages available.

- In terms of the observations regarding managers, a healthy and satisfied workforce was now one of the 9 work streams in the Ffordd Gwynedd Plan, with another work stream related to staff and manager developments, and the Strategy would tie into that in terms of the programmes available to develop managers.

It was suggested, although middle managers were experts in their field, that they were not always natural managers, and it was asked where should staff refer any concerns they had about managerial-related matters. In response, it was noted:-

- Clearly, staff could escalate such matters within the service or the department, but, as part of the Well-being Plan, it was intended to identify well-being coordinators within each department.
- Staff could also refer the matter to the attention of the Human Resources Service or the Whistle-blowing procedure.

It was noted that it would be interesting to see the statistics on pages 2 and 3 of the Well-being Plan over a period of 5 years to be able to compare the current situation with the situation before and during the Covid period.

The intention to identify well-being coordinators was welcomed, and it was enquired, in terms of the coordinators' own well-being, was there an intention to release them from their normal duties for periods to undertake this role. In response, it was noted that the discussions regarding this continued.

There was an enquiry whether staff could turn to an independent person for advice regarding well-being matters. In response, it was noted that the Council had an agreement with Medra, which had a number of counsellors across Cyngor Gwynedd, and that staff could go to them in complete confidence to discuss any concerns.

There was an enquiry whether it was a corporate priority for all staff to be evaluated, and what were the arrangements for that. In response, it was noted:-

- The continuous evaluation was one of the 9 work streams within the Ffordd Gwynedd Plan.
- The evaluation arrangement had been quite time-consuming over the year, but that work was now underway to draw up a new framework which was more flexible.
- That the new arrangement must work for every service, from teams having one-to-one meetings with their managers on a monthly basis to a workforce that was out on sites, and who did not see their managers often.

Hope was expressed that the Well-being Strategy would increase low morale which still remained amongst staff. In terms of the work environment, disappointment was expressed that there was no reference to the Office Modernisation Plan in the Strategy, as simple provisions such as space for staff to go for a cup of tea and water cooler dispensers etc. would contribute extensively towards well-being. In response, it was noted:-

- That the Office Modernisation Plan did not relate to well-being as such, and the Well-being Strategy was a corporate strategy which included every workplace, including residential homes, schools etc.
- That the work of modernising the Council Headquarters had commenced, with the Property Department leading on the work.

- That there was an intention to create a well-being area for staff in the old reception in the Headquarters. The exact timetable for the work could not be confirmed, but the officers could follow that up after the meeting.

It was enquired whether there was space in the Headquarters for staff to eat their lunch, instead of having to eat by their desks. In response, it was noted that the arrangements varied between corridors, but there was certainly an intention to create corporate space on the lower ground of the Headquarters.

It was enquired whether there were staff members who chose to work from home as they did not feel healthy enough to go to the workplace and mix with other people. It was also enquired whether they saw more depression since people had been working from home. In response, it was noted:-

- That more and more staff members now came into the workplace and that many of them reported that they felt better as they were able to mix with others.
- That the number of well-being referrals was increasing, and although working from home could be a factor in terms of that in some cases, there were no statistics available to prove that.
- That it was now a requirement for office staff to return to the office twice a week, except for exceptional circumstances.

In response to the above observations, it was enquired whether it was possible to see if any research had been undertaken by universities or companies into these types of questions to be able to identify patterns.

It was noted that the work pressure on staff was increasing, and it was enquired whether the Council had a corporate policy or departmental policies which looked at workload assessments. In response, it was noted that the Council had stress risk assessments for individuals and services and should an individual feel that they were under pressure due to work overload, they could discuss that as part of the stress risk assessment.

It was noted that they understood that more people took sickness days since Covid and it was enquired whether data was available regarding that. In response, it was noted:-

- That data was available, but there had been a delay in terms of obtaining data historically.
- That there was an intention for a new absence record system to go live on the staff self-service system. This system would offer some flexibility, for example, if an individual had been working from home 3 days from Monday to Wednesday and did not feel good enough to come into the office on the Thursday, they could also be allowed to work from home on the Thursday, as long as that complied with the requirements of the service.

#### **RESOLVED**

- 1. To accept the report and note the observations.**
- 2. That the Committee notes concern about the high levels of staff absences and requests that future updates on the Strategy detail specific data, such as comparison over periods, etc.**

#### **9. ENGAGEMENT SESSIONS TO DISCUSS GWYNEDD'S EDUCATION LANGUAGE POLICY**

The Head of Gwynedd's Immersion Education System was welcomed to the meeting.



Submitted - the report inviting the committee to elect 5 members to be present in an engagement session to be held between 1:30 and 3:30 on the afternoon of 4 December to discuss and gather ideas and suggestions regarding Gwynedd's Education Language Policy, and to consider whether there was a need to amend the policy in light of the results of the 2021 Census and a number of policy developments in the language and education field on a national level.

**RESOLVED to elect Councillors Jina Gwyrfai, Elwyn Jones, Beth Lawton, Richard Glyn Roberts and Rhys Tudur to attend the engagement session to discuss Gwynedd's Education Language Policy on 4 December between 1:30 and 3:30 in the afternoon.**

The meeting commenced at 10.30am and concluded at 12.40pm.

Chair

<b>MEETING</b>	Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee
<b>DATE</b>	12 December 2024
<b>TITLE</b>	School Revenue Budgets
<b>REASON TO SCRUTINISE</b>	To ensure the Scrutiny Committee's input and understanding of the impact of cuts, demography and grants on school revenue budgets
<b>AUTHOR</b>	Gwern ap Rhisiart, Head of Education

## 1. Why it needs scrutiny?

- 1.1 This report is submitted in response to a request from members of the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee to receive a report on School Revenue Budgets.

## 2. What exactly needs scrutiny?

- 2.1 The purpose of this report is to present information on the situation of School Revenue Budgets and the impact that any reduction in the revenue budget will have on Gwynedd Schools.

## 3. Summary of the Key Matters

- 3.1 This report summarises the difficult situation facing Gwynedd Schools as a result of the current financial climate, and the impact of cuts, changes in demography, and potential changes to grants on school revenue budgets. Any reduction to school revenue budgets has an impact on all aspects of the school including staffing levels, standards and increasing work pressures on staff, educational resources and experiences, maintenance, risk management, as well as staff's ability to run the schools.

## 4. Background / Context

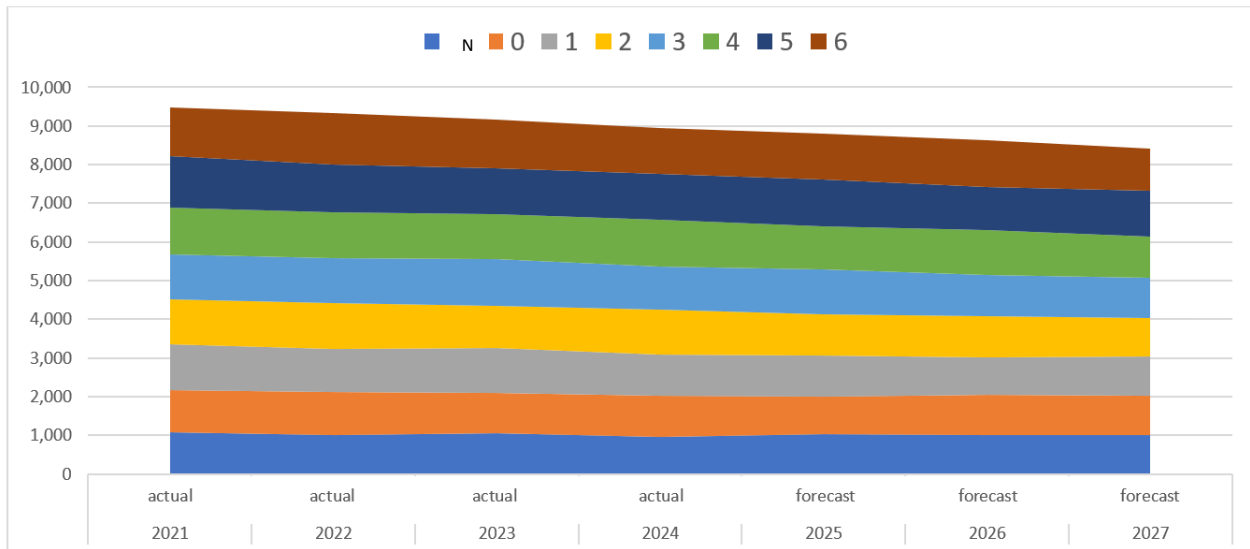
### 4.1 The Impact of Reducing School Budgets

#### 4.1.1 What is the impact of cuts on school budgets in Gwynedd?

- 4.1.2 With the Council's financial situation intensifying, the Council had to implement a cut of 2%, which is £1.965 million over 2 years, namely 2023/24 and 2024/25 on the schools' revenue budget. The impact of this cut on schools is further detailed in point 4.3 of this report.

### 4.1.3 What is the impact of demography changes on school budgets in Gwynedd?

4.1.4 The number of learners in **primary** schools in Gwynedd has continuously declined over the past 5 years, with a projected 1,060 fewer primary learners in our schools between 2021 and 2027, as the table below shows:

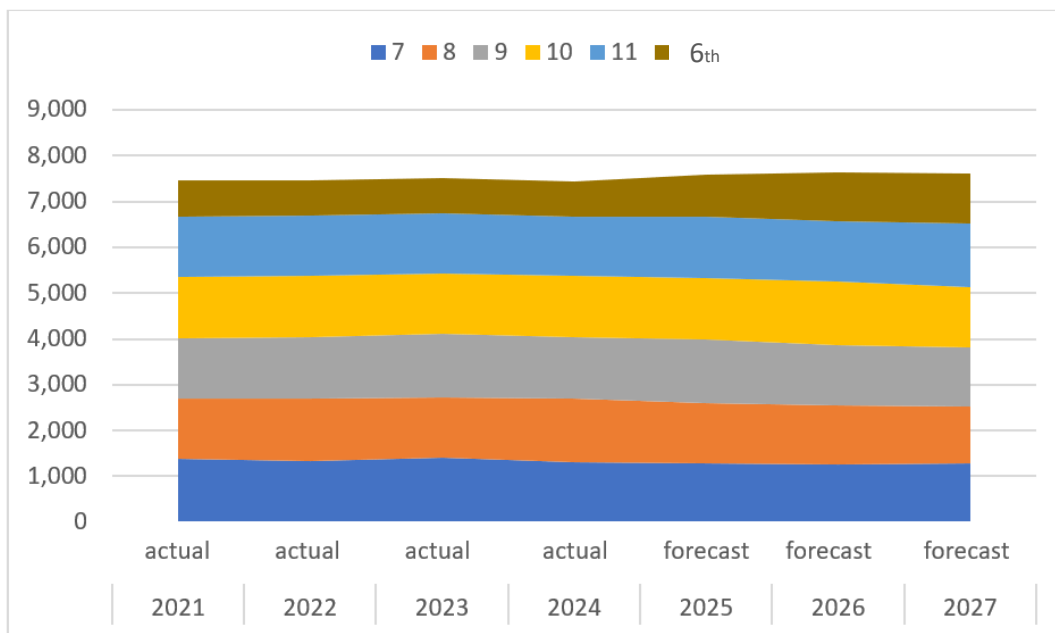


4.1.5 Between September 2023 and September 2024 there were 182 fewer learners in the primary sector resulting in a reduction of £338,000 in the total funding (based on learner numbers) devolved to Gwynedd primary schools in 2025/26.

4.1.6 Furthermore, the primary schools themselves anticipate a further reduction of 144 pupils in the primary sector by September 2025, and a further reduction of 134 pupils by September 2026. This further reduction of 460 learners in the primary sector between September 2024 and September 2026, will result in a reduction of approximately £1.2million in the budget devolved to Gwynedd primary schools over the period.

4.1.7 In the secondary sector there is a different funding model for KS3 and KS4 although the two key stages are funded by Cyngor Gwynedd, with the 6th form in 6 secondary schools in Arfon and Ysgol Godre'r Berwyn being funded by a body new MEDR. Between September 2023 and September 2024, there are 75 fewer learners in the secondary system, leading to a reduction of £248,000 in the total funding (based on learner numbers) that will be devolved to Gwynedd secondary schools in 2025/26.

**4.1.8** However, **secondary** schools are forecasting a 166 increase in their numbers over the subsequent two years (September 2026 and September 2027) as the table below shows:



However, we want to give the secondary schools a further opportunity to revise their forecasts given the reduced primary sector learner numbers that will feed into the secondary over the next few years. As a result, over the next period, we will work with the schools to improve the basis of the projections to ensure more reliable information in terms of forward planning.

**4.1.9** The 6th form in 6 secondary schools in Arfon and Ysgol Godre'r Berwyn are funded by the new MEDR body. There were 23 fewer post-16 pupils in the 6th form between September 2023 and September 2024 resulting in a budget reduction of £92,000 for 2025/26. Again, the secondary/all-through schools anticipate an increase in post-16 learner numbers over the subsequent two years (September 2026 and September 2026), but as with KS3 and KS4 numbers, we will re-visit this. Based on the above, therefore, secondary schools face a total of £340,000 less in the budget in 2025/26.

**4.1.10** In the all-through sector, learner numbers are a combination of primary and secondary, with 32 fewer pupils between September 2023 and September 2024, resulting in a £56,000 reduction in available funding in 2025/26. Similarly, we will re-visit the secondary age forecasts of the all-through schools as noted above.

**4.1.11** There has been an increase in the intensity of pupils' needs in the special schools in the last two years. An increase in learner numbers means that the special schools have not seen the effect of changing demographics in the same way as the rest of the system's schools. In general, the special schools are protected from any financial cuts by the Council. As a result, the financial situation of the special schools has been more stable over a period of time compared to the rest of the system.

**4.1.12** When planning for 2025/26 and onwards, it must be considered that schools have used £3.784million worth of balances to set their budgets for this year. As a result, it will be a significant challenge for schools to set a budget for 2025/26 if no staff/resource cuts have occurred in 2024/25. Therefore, other than if a school anticipates an increase in learner numbers to maintain or increase the financial allocation it is due, it is inevitable that schools will have to use any remaining balances if any cuts are to be postponed from 2025/26. It is recognised that this situation is not sustainable in the mid/long term.

**4.1.13** Changes in grants are also having an impact on school budgets. Learner numbers is the main driver in the formula and an increase or decrease in learner numbers can have a significant impact on the amount of grants allocated to an individual school. Welsh Government grants are also driven by learner numbers. The impact of learner numbers on school allocations and grants for 2025/26 shows a reduction of £1.177million including everything we are currently aware of, and can be broken down by sector as follows:

- Primary - £848,000
- Secondary - £176,000
- All-through - £144,000
- Special - £10,000

**4.1.14** Neither the Council's settlement nor school grants for 2025/26 have been confirmed as yet. There is also no guarantee that all grants will continue or increase/decrease for 2025/26. The Welsh Government will announce its budget on 10 December 2024 and the local council settlement will follow.

**4.1.15** In light of the recent regular messages about the Council's financial situation, it is inevitable that schools will face cuts in 2025/26. However, there is no decision on the level of cuts for schools as yet.

## **4.2 Impact on Staffing Levels**

**4.2.1** **What will be the implications of cuts on school staffing levels? What will be the impact of this on the children?**

**4.2.2** Concern is expressed regularly by Headteachers about the impact and implications of funding cuts on staffing levels within their schools. A number of Gwynedd schools went through some form of redundancy and staff restructuring process last year due to budget shortfalls.

**4.2.3** In the primary sector, a large percentage of Headteachers report being unable to offer specialist provisions e.g. ELSA, extra reading and numeracy interventions to meet learners' needs as they do not have the staff to undertake the work.

**4.2.4** Cuts in staffing levels can also have an impact on the schools' ability to maintain their schools safely e.g. fewer staff out in the playground, fewer staff making it harder for schools to be able to provide off-site experiences / trips to enrich learning.

**4.2.5** This will definitely have a negative effect on the quality of teaching and on learners in the schools e.g. if a child is having difficulties with aspects of their development - reading, emotional, the school may not be able to ensure sufficient time or a contact person to provide a specific programme to meet this need.

**4.2.6** The table below shows the effect of cuts on teacher numbers:

equivalent number of teachers @ £60k per head

	Full year	7/12th	5/12th
£500,000	8	5	3
£1,000,000	17	10	7
£1,500,000	25	15	10
£2,000,000	33	19	14
£2,500,000	42	24	17
£3,000,000	50	29	21
£3,500,000	58	34	24

**4.2.7** The table below shows the number of schools that have used balances to set their budget in 2024-25

Schools	Number of schools	Use of balances	%
Primary	78	68	87%
Secondary	12	9	75%
All-through	2	2	100%
Special	2	2	100%
<b>Total</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>86%</b>

**4.2.8** The table below shows the number of schools in deficit at the end of the 2023-24 financial year

<b>Schools</b>	<b>Number of schools</b>	<b>Number of Schools with a Deficit</b>	<b>%</b>
Primary	78	3	4%
Secondary	12	3	25%
All-through	2		0%
Special	2		0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6%</b>

**4.2.9 What happens to schools that get a large number of incomers at once?**

**4.2.10** There has been one case fairly recently where an additional class had to be created in a school due to a large number of incomers. Additional funding was provided to the school for the period September-March (7/12th), before new year funding started.

### **4.3 Redundancies**

**4.3.1 How many schools have gone through redundancy because of the cuts?**

**4.3.2** The number of schools that have had to formally initiate the redundancy process over the past 5 years is as follows:

<b>2024</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2020</b>
18	10	4	6	4

**4.3.3** This is only part of the picture, and we will be discussing in January with all schools where the financial situation for the year ahead looks fragile. Those numbers over the last 5 years are as follows:

<b>2024</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2020</b>
39	28	11	11	10

**4.3.4** As you can see the number between 2020 and 2022 was quite constant but there was a significant increase in 2023 and again this year in 2024. Grants due to COVID-19 have been received by the Welsh Government with Gwynedd schools receiving +£3.8million in 2020/21, +£6.3million 2021/22, +£1.9million in 2022/23 and +£1.7million in 2023/24, a total of £13.7million over the period. This enabled schools to employ additional teachers and assistants to support learning during and

following the pandemic. Now that these grants are reducing, schools have used balances over the years to set budgets there has been, and will continue to be, a reduction in the level of staffing in our schools, be it through redundancies, staff leaving or not renewing/extending temporary contracts.

**4.3.5** Those who can avoid formally initiating the redundancy process generally do so through a combination of adjusting budgets (e.g. cutting the Allowance per Head or Supply budget), ending temporary jobs and using any balances they have available.

**4.3.6** As you can see above, at least half of schools facing a budget deficit are able to avoid the redundancy process in doing so – that is a consistent pattern that we are seeing. However, we have not been collecting exactly how many temporary jobs are being lost annually from doing this.

**4.3.7** In terms of those schools formally initiating the redundancy process, the following are the figures in terms of teaching time/teaching assistant hours that have been lost over the last 5 years:

	<b>2024</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2020</b>
<b>Teaching Jobs</b>	24.2	4.1	1.2	3.9	4.4
<b>Assistants and Ancillary Staff</b>	519 hours	210 hours	119 hours	74 hours	228 hours

**4.3.8** The figures above show that there was consistency this time from 2020 to 2023 but that there was then a huge jump in 2024 in terms of teaching time and teaching assistant hours lost from the 18 schools that had to implement the redundancy process this year.

**4.3.9** From the discussions held in early January with individual schools, it is fair to note that several schools now feel they have cut their spending and staffing level to the bone by now.

**4.3.10 What is the process of ensuring that support funding goes with a pupil when moving school if they have additional learning needs?**

**4.3.11** In 2024/25 ALN funding has been 'frozen' based on learner hours allocated in March 2024, so only in exceptional cases would money move from school to school, or additional funding provided to the second school.

**4.3.12** There will be a change to the ALN funding base in 2025/26, and funding will be based on the November 2024 IDP score and only in exceptional cases will additional funding be available (there will be no money from school-to-school).



#### **4.4 Support for Schools**

##### **4.4.1 What support is there for schools that ensures that the quality of education does not decrease?**

**4.4.2** At present, schools receive external support from a Supporting Improvement Adviser employed at GwE - the School Improvement Service. There has been a change to the service since April 2024 and it is now a service commissioned by the Authority. The service will end on 31 March 2025 as a result of the Welsh Government's middle tier consultation.

**4.4.3** Each Primary school is able to receive up to two Supporting Improvement Adviser visits per term (three in Secondary) which can support the school as they evaluate the quality of teaching through monitoring and evaluation processes. These procedures may include scrutinising books, observing lessons, analysing data or conducting learning journeys, talking to learners, supporting leadership, and leading on training.

**4.4.4** For those schools in any Estyn category - significant improvement or special measures, the Primary and Secondary Assistant Headteachers chair and lead on the Management Boards that are established to address the implementation of the Post-Estyn Inspection Action Plan. The Authority is also ensuring a higher level of support for those schools through the commission with GwE and, if necessary, by securing the support of various Additional Learning Needs and Inclusion (ALS) Officers. Support is tailored to the school based on need and recommendations by Estyn.

**4.4.5** Some schools have initiated collaboration within their cluster to support each other to evaluate and review evaluation processes and quality of teaching within their schools. These schools receive support from the Supporting Improvement Adviser as they conduct training for the cluster or as they facilitate collaboration arrangements.

**4.4.6** This year the Authority has placed an expectation on the Headteacher of each school to complete and submit their strategic plans by the end of the summer term 2024 so that all schools can start to implement their priorities from 1 September 2024. This has ensured that all Supporting Improvement Advisers have been able to support the leadership of the schools during the Summer Term to thoroughly prepare for the academic year ahead. Sound and empowered leadership is the key driver to ensure quality teaching across sectors.

## **4.5 Impact on Classes**

### **4.5.1 What is the impact of large classes on the quality of education for the children?**

**4.5.2** Ensuring a high-quality education is based on a number of factors unrelated to large class sizes and large numbers. Here in Gwynedd, we have examples of children in classes with a large number of learners receiving excellent education and also examples of learners in classes with very small numbers of learners receiving unsatisfactory education. It is entirely dependent on the quality of the teacher standing in front of them, ethos, commitment, planning and experiences that are delivered as part of the curricular design of the school. There are also other factors, such as the quality of daily formative assessment and the feedback learners receive to move learning forward.

**4.5.3** What is more challenging in classes where there are large number of learners is the adult's ability to provide individual attention of a good quality to each learner in turn. Also, the larger the class, the greater the challenge to be able to differentiate tasks for the individual pupil. There are additional challenges to consider in the primary sector in Gwynedd as there are so many smaller schools. There are examples of classes with 32 learners with 4 age ranges taught by one teacher. In such a situation, there will be a wide range of abilities within one class and the teacher is expected to differentiate the teaching for all of those abilities. We also have classes of 30 pupils of the same age. The other side of this is that there are mixed classes of 10 or fewer. Every situation has its challenges, but we are seeing our medium-sized schools facing a financial squeeze and feeling an impact on the classroom floor.

### **4.5.4 What is the impact of classes with large numbers on teachers and ancillary staff?**

**4.5.5** In terms of the main impact of large classes on teachers and ancillary staff, the main effect is probably their frustration that they fail to reach each learner every day to pay individual attention to them. Schools often work a rota system to reach all learners within a week.

**4.5.6** There is increasing pressure on members of staff to provide feedback to learners at the time during the learning moment – this can prove challenging if there are large numbers in the class.

**4.5.7** Some aspects, e.g., listening to children reading in Primary can be challenging and the element of continuous assessment can be very burdensome.

**4.5.8** Purposeful planning to respond to learners' individual needs can also be challenging especially if the learner has specific learning needs and no assistant in class to support. Frustration and feelings of unfairness can arise among school staff when you compare a situation of a class with large numbers of learners with that of a smaller school that may have very small numbers of learners in comparison.

#### **4.5.9 How does the department ensure consistency in education in schools with large classes?**

**4.5.10** The Department's monitoring arrangements are the same with schools with large or small classes. There is no difference in this regard.

**4.5.11** As has already been noted, good pedagogy exists in large, medium and small schools, and can likewise be lacking if a school is large, medium or small. Leadership has a key role to play in ensuring the quality of teaching across the school.

#### **4.6 Training**

**4.6.1 What support and training is available to school staff and governors to ensure their confidence in dealing with the subject?**

**4.6.2** Regarding the Redundancy process the Headteachers and Chairs of schools with a budget with potential deficit are invited to meet with officers to discuss their individual situation as a school. Beyond that if a Finance Panel specifically asks for support to understand the financial implications and the need to make cuts, the senior accountants can meet with individual panels. Therefore, specific support is offered to each school.

**4.6.3** A small part of the Governor's Redundancy training touches on understanding elements of the Budget but there is a need to look at developing wider training on School Finance for Governors.

### **5. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015**

**5.1** The aim of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 is to improve the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales. The Act places a well-being duty on public bodies which is aimed at delivering the seven well-being goals by following the five ways of working.

**5.2** The Act places a welfare duty on the Council to carry out sustainable development work by working in conjunction with the 'sustainable development principle'. This means that the impact on people in the future needs to be considered when making decisions.

**5.3** In terms of **collaboration** and **including** others, we have already held engagement sessions recently with all Gwynedd Headteachers on 20/11/24, and then with the Gwynedd Governors Association Forum on 28/11/24 to share information and discuss the projections for school revenue budgets for 2025/26. The Schools' Budget Forum

has also been held where projected revenue for 2025/26 was presented based on September 2024 learner numbers.

**5.4** In terms of the **long** term and looking to the future, we are already aware of the changes in demography facing the County and the impact this will have on school revenue budgets. Consequently, we are in the process of creating an Education Strategy for Gwynedd that recognises the challenges and opportunities facing the county and schools over the coming years, on which basis the strategy will set a clear strategic direction for the education system in Gwynedd over the next 10 years.

**5.5** In order to **prevent** problems from arising or worsening in the future, we will continue to work in a multi-agency way and evaluate the impact of any change on a regular basis.

## **6. Impact on Equality Characteristics, the Welsh Language and the Socio-Economic Duty**

**6.1** An Equality Impact Assessment is not required in response to the impact of demography changes on school budgets and grants. However, we will be expected to create an Equality Impact Assessment on any budgetary decisions made by the Council as part of identifying savings and cuts that could affect the funding available to schools.

## **7. Next Steps**

**7.1** The Welsh Government will announce its budget on 10 December 2024 and the settlement for local councils will follow.

**7.2** When the financial situation and grant situation for schools is clear for 2025-26, the Education Department along with officers from the Finance Unit (Education) will support schools to plan their budgets appropriately for 2025-26, along with supporting them to follow and implement the redundancy process as needed.

<b>MEETING</b>	Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee
<b>DATE</b>	12 December 2024
<b>TITLE</b>	Education Transport
<b>REASON TO SCRUTINISE</b>	A strategic audit into over-spending/under-funding in education transport.
<b>AUTHOR</b>	Mr Robert John Jones, Education Transport Manager.

## 1. Why it needs scrutiny?

1.1 This report is presented at the request of the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee in light of the fact that Education transport claims one of the Education Department's largest budgets and consequently the need to rationalise spending in this area requires attention. It is an area which has been overspending historically, and is consequently subject to a Strategic Review to identify and understand the reasons for the overspending, what has been achieved to date in response to the situation, as well as new options under consideration to mitigate the situation to the future.

## 2. What exactly needs scrutiny?

2.1 The purpose of this report is to explain the background and rationale for the historical overspending, to report on progress and the actions that have been taken in response to the situation, as well as to present options being considered in terms of future education transport arrangements to try to rationalise and reduce costs where practicably possible.

## 3. Background

3.1 The Learner Travel (Wales) Bill 2008 (the Bill) sets out the legal framework specifically applicable to travel and transport provisions for learners travelling from home to school in Wales; with 'Statutory Provision and Operational Guidance' (The Guidance) published in 2014.

3.2 The Bill states that local authorities must:

- Assess the travel needs of learners in their authority area;
- Provide free transport from home to school for learners of compulsory school age attending primary school who live two miles away from the nearest suitable school;
- Provide free home to school transport for learners of compulsory school age attending secondary school who live three miles away from the nearest suitable school;
- Assess and meet the needs of 'looked-after' children in their authority area;

- Promote access to Welsh-medium education and faith schools;
- Promote sustainable modes of transport.

3.3 To meet the requirements of the Bill, by means of a Service Level Agreement, the Integrated Transport Unit in the Environment Department is responsible for planning and procuring learner transport provision on behalf of the Education Department. The Education Department is responsible for funding the transport provision, with the Integrated Transport Unit responsible for administering the provision on a county-wide basis. The Transport Unit has a responsibility to deliver transport provision in accordance with policies, applicable legal and regulatory requirements, as well as to deliver a good quality, consistent and cost-effective service. The purpose of the Integrated Transport Unit is to deliver integrated transport arrangements across Council services to ensure effective and efficient transport arrangements. The Integrated Transport Unit arranges and procures learner transport for the following:

- Primary, secondary and special schools
- ABC Units
- Primary and secondary Language Immersion Centres
- Llechen Lân
- Post-16 transport to schools and colleges
- Out-of-county transport

3.4 This transport is provided via a range of vehicles, including dedicated school buses, minibuses, and taxis provided by third party transport operators. In addition, a number of learners and students are provided with a 'travel pass' to use public transport where this suits their circumstances. A travel assistant is also provided where necessary based on an assessment of learners' needs.

3.5 A range of factors over the years mean that the provision of education transport becomes increasingly costly to fulfil, such as:

- Re-tendering bus provision every 5 years results in significant cost increases due to inflation, as well as increased costs to the provider in having to meet additional safeguarding requirements on buses over the years which is reflected in the prices of the tender process;
- Increased costs to provide taxis over the period, with regular tendering processes for them resulting in the costs of the contracts increasing regularly reflecting the market price consistently;
- Increased costs to provide transport for learners attending our special schools over the period from £739,000 in 2017/18 to £1.5m in 2018/19. This does not include learners with additional learning needs who attend mainstream schools.
- Lack of provision in some areas of the county resulting in increased costs to provide transport from other areas to meet the requirement;
- Learners' demand for transport increases annually for various reasons.

3.6 Recent national discussions suggest that authorities across Wales are facing the same challenges regarding increased education transport costs, and the picture is very similar across rural Welsh counties with similar geographical challenges to Gwynedd.

3.7 The table below shows the budget for Gwynedd's education transport since 2016/17, together with the actual expenditure to meet education transport requirements over the same period:

	Taxis and trains			Buses			Total		
	Budget	Actual	Over/(under) expenditure	Budget	Actual	Over/(under) expenditure	Budget	Actual	Over/(under) expenditure
2016/17	2,064,210	2,038,424	-25,786	2,554,540	2,582,690	28,150	4,618,750	4,621,113	2,363
2017/18	2,021,500	2,223,188	201,688	2,558,770	2,545,402	-13,368	4,580,270	4,768,590	188,320
2018/19	2,335,140	2,471,034	135,894	2,609,570	2,805,616	196,046	4,944,710	5,276,650	331,940
2019/20	2,342,610	2,516,348	173,738	2,821,950	2,884,973	63,023	5,164,560	5,401,321	236,761
2020/21	2,323,850	1,969,468	-354,382	2,931,910	2,560,678	-371,232	5,255,760	4,530,145	-725,615
2021/22	2,615,480	2,790,864	175,384	3,149,730	3,092,720	-57,010	5,765,210	5,883,585	118,375
2022/23	2,841,050	3,147,025	305,975	3,279,460	3,521,664	242,204	6,120,510	6,668,690	548,180
2023/24	2,743,340	3,427,763	684,423	3,646,240	4,457,345	811,105	6,389,580	7,885,109	1,495,529
2024/25 - estimated	3,907,460	3,752,712	-163,579	4,182,150	4,758,976	576,826	8,089,610	8,511,688	413,247
2025/26 - estimated	3,461,260	3,718,067	256,807	4,246,210	4,801,060	554,850	7,707,470	8,519,127	811,657

3.8 The education transport budget seen in the table above has increased by £3.1m since 2016/17 due to inflation and permanent bids to the Council by the Education Department to meet the increase in costs to provide transport over the period in question. However, costs have increased by £3.9m, which still leaves an estimated deficit of £812,000 for 2025/26.

3.9 Focusing on recent times, in 2023/24 education transport overspent by £1.5m, on a budget of £6.4m. This was mainly due to implementing a process to re-tender school buses during the year, the impact of the economy generally, along with increased costs for bus providers associated with accessibility requirements. Furthermore, there is increasing pressure on the requirement for taxis, mainly related to Additional Learning Needs.

3.10 In response to the overspend, the Council provided the Education Department with a permanent additional budget of £895k, and a one-off budget of £895k for 2024/25 only. This means there is no overspend this year, giving the Education Department the opportunity to identify opportunities for trying to rationalise the costs associated with providing education transport. At the same time, it must be recognised that implementing modifications to transport contracts and changing the way we provide education transport is a matter that will take some time to implement and fully see its impact.

3.11 Based on current contract data, the cost of providing education transport for the 2025/26 financial year is forecast to be £8.5m. The cost can be divided into 2 main categories, namely spending on bus contracts of £4.8m and spending on taxi contracts of £3.7m. Based on these costs, an £812k overspend on education transport is forecast in 2025/26. The overspend includes additional costs that are outside the Department's control, but

the schemes implemented to save money (detailed in Section 4 of the report) may slightly reduce amount of overspending anticipated above. However, it is intended to submit a one-off bid to the Council for 2025/26, alongside the intention to continue to identify money-saving opportunities.

- 3.12 In light of the above, the Education Department has appointed an Education Transport Manager since April 2024 to ensure a dedicated resource to be able to respond to the situation, and in the same period education transport has been the subject of a Strategic Review and a work programme has been created to focus on creating practical solutions to the challenges faced in education transport.

#### 4. Work Programme and Savings

##### 4.1 Work Programme

- 4.1.1 Below is an outline work programme created to respond to the education transport overspending situation and in an attempt to try to rationalise future costs. This outline work programme sets out what has been achieved over the last 6 months, recognising that it is early days as this is exactly the period that this programme and the Education Transport Manager have been in place:

Education Transport Work Programme	Progress to date
Update the Education Transport Policy and Equality Impact Assessment	An initial draft of the Education Transport Policy has been drawn up. Once the draft Policy is complete, it is intended to consult on it. This policy will meet the statutory requirements in the same way as the existing policy. In parallel, an Equality Impact Assessment has been produced.
Review existing education transport contracts to identify efficiency savings	This is ongoing work, and below are examples of what has already been achieved (see 4.2)
Identify an education transport pilot scheme that would be able to be implemented in conjunction with a Language Centre	Initial pilot scheme partially implemented this term (see 4.2)
Identify an education transport pilot scheme that could be implemented in conjunction with a special school	Initial discussions have been held with Ysgol Hafod Lon and potential opportunities have been identified, but further work to be undertaken aiming to start a pilot in Spring 2025. (see 4.2)
Revisit ALN learner transport arrangements	The process of revisiting the timetable for identifying the transport needs of ALN learners has commenced to ensure the best conditions for tendering the provision to ensure value for money.
Consider the affordability of Post-16 Education Transport with the abolition of the 16+ Travel Pass	Initial discussions have taken place with Grŵp Llandrillo Menai.



Renewable Electric Vehicles	A grant application submitted to the Welsh Government by the Council for financial support to purchase 2 electric minibuses, which would provide potential opportunities to provide education transport in an alternative way.
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## 4.2 Savings

### 4.2.1 Review of Education Transport Contracts

### 4.2.2 Ysgol Dyffryn Ogwen Catchment Area Savings

All education transport contracts for the Dyffryn Ogwen catchment area were reviewed and it was identified from the school admissions data that the number of learners eligible for transport had fallen for September 2024, as the table below shows:

No.	Route	Number (September 23)	Number (September 24)	Current Bus Capacity
450	Mynydd Llandygai	26	<b>13</b>	45
466	Talybont/Llanllechid	7	<b>6</b>	16
449	Rhiwlas/Tregarth	52	54	56

The above figures identified opportunities to make potential savings on education transport provision in the area. It was possible to make savings by re-tendering contract 466 as an 8-seater taxi contract, along with combining a contract that already operated from the Llanllechid area to Ysgol Dyffryn Ogwen. By ending contract 466 and reducing the capacity of 450 by re-tendering, a one-year saving of **£27k** was made on Ysgol Dyffryn Ogwen bus contracts for the period from September 2024, as shown in the table below:

No.	Route	Annual Cost September 2023	Annual Cost September 2024
450	Mynydd Llandygai	£34,964.00	£30,360.00
466	Talybont/Llanllechid	£22,440.00	£00,000.00
YDO56	Llanllechid – Ysgol Dyffryn Ogwen	£3,040.00	£ 3,040.00
	<b>Annual Total</b>	<b>£60,444.00</b>	<b>£33,400.00</b>

### 4.2.3 Dyffryn Nantlle Catchment Area Savings

All Ysgol Dyffryn Nantlle catchment area education transport contracts were reviewed and it was identified from the school admissions data that the number of learners eligible for transport had fallen for September 2024 on the 300 school bus route in the Nebo and

Llanllyfni area. From September 2024, the 300 school bus contract was abolished and the two contracts were combined with service 14. An annual saving of £29,600 was made from September 2024.

No.	Route	Annual Cost September 2023	Annual Cost September 2024
300	Nebo/Llanllyfni to YDN	£29,600.00	£00,000.00
14	Capel Uchaf to YDN	£6,040.00	£6,040.00
	<b>Annual Total</b>	<b>£35,640.00</b>	<b>£6,040.00</b>

See the new current timetable below:

<b>Tudweiliog - Trefor - Pwllheli</b>							<b>14</b>
<b>Llun i Sadwrn</b>			<b>Monday to Saturday</b>				
Côd/Code:	SH	NS	Sch	Sch	MWF	NS	
<b>Tudweiliog</b>	...	0715	...	...	...	1748	
Ederm	...	0722	...	...	...	1753	
Morfa Nefyn	...	0725	...	...	...	1756	
Nefyn	...	0728	...	...	...	1800	
Pistyll	...	0733	...	...	...	1805	
LLITHFAEN	...	0738	...	...	...	1810	
Llanaelhaearn	...	0743	...	...	...	1815	
TREFOR	...	0748	0755	...	...	1820	
Clynnog Fawr	...	...	0800	...	1110R	...	
Capel Uchaf	...	...	0805	...	1115R	...	
Tai'n Lon	...	...	0810	...	1120R	...	
Pant Glas	...	...	0823	...		...	
Nazareth	...	...	0825	...		...	
Nebo	...	...	0830	...		...	
Llanllyfni	...	...	0835	...		...	
Penygroes	...	...	0837	...		...	
<b>Ysgol Dyffryn Nantlle</b>	...	...	0840	...		...	
Clynnog Fawr	...	...	...	...	1125R	...	
<b>TREFOR</b>	...	...	...	...	1135	...	
Llanaelhaearn	...	...	...	...	1139	...	
Pencaenewydd	0816	...	...	0855	1144	...	
Llangybi	0821	...	...	0858	1148	...	
Llanarmon	0824	...	...	0902	1152	...	
Chwilog	0827	...	...	0906	1155	...	
Y Ffôr	0831	...	...		1203	...	
Rhos-fawr	0834	...	...		1205	...	
Pwllheli, Ysbyty Bryn Beryl		...	...		1207	...	
<b>PWLLHELI, Gorsaf Bws/Bus Station (C)</b>	0840	...	...	0920	1213	...	

#### 4.2.4 Combining public transport and education transport

As part of the process of reviewing the numbers, another education transport route was identified in the Dyffryn Nantlle catchment area, where the numbers of learners eligible for education transport had dropped significantly. A public bus service was already travelling on a similar route, with capacity available in the vehicle that would meet the requirement in the context of education transport. It was decided to abolish the school bus contract saving this cost. The public transport travel route was adapted to transport learners from September 2024, making an annual saving of £30,000.00.

#### **4.2.5 Pilot Projects**

##### **4.2.6 Bangor Ogwen Catchment Area Pilot Project**

To find further savings in education transport, we looked at opportunities to make use of the Council's fleet vehicles. Significant savings could certainly be made in combining transport already operating, whether within Education or other departments. In mapping the existing provision in the Bangor and Dyffryn Ogwen catchment areas, a suitable vehicle was identified at Canolfan Dydd Plas Hedd in Maesgeirchen, Bangor. The minibus is located at this centre and its purpose is to collect and take adults to the Day Centre in the morning and take them home in the afternoon, with the driver employed by the authority in the Adults Department.

4.2.7 We looked at the possibilities of using this vehicle to provide education transport in the same area. Following a detailed mapping exercise, a suitable transport route was identified to take learners to the Language Immersion Unit on the site of Ysgol Tryfan, Bangor. The Day Centre's vehicle and driver are used to this end, initially picking up learners from their homes in the Bethesda and Bangor area and taking them to the Language Unit. Subsequently, the adults are collected from their homes and taken to the Day Centre. The same is done in the afternoon, combining timetables to get the best value for money.

4.2.8 This pilot demonstrated the clear potential there is to trial similar projects, making consistent and wider use of the Council's fleet vehicles. Savings were made by operating the transport directly ourselves as a Council, with departments working together on the timetables to ensure the most efficient use of the Council vehicle, whilst also ensuring an appropriate transport service for users.

##### **4.2.9 Schools Pilot Project**

With the fact that taking learners to Ysgol Pendalar and Ysgol Hafod Lon is now costing the Education Department over £1.5m a year with costs continuing to increase, we must look at whether there are alternative ways of providing transport to our special schools. As a result, we hope to collaborate on a new transport project between the Education Department, the Integrated Transport Unit, fleet officers and energy officers, with a view to having a pilot project with Ysgol Hafod Lon operational during the Spring Term 2025.

4.2.10 We are looking specifically at a pilot project that would involve the need to invest in electric vehicles as a starting point, (and a national grant is available to reduce an element of the cost of procuring electric vehicles). If successful, these vehicles could be used to transport learners to and from Ysgol Hafod Lon on a daily basis, as well as being available to provide other transport services in the area during the day.

##### **4.2.11 Impact of 16+ Travel Pass changes**

There is an increase in the number of learners attending post-16 colleges, and as a result the demand for transport is increasing which is resulting in additional costs for the Education Department. Furthermore, the capital investment by Grŵp Llandrillo Menai on their sites has increased the capacity of those sites, and as a result of the investment, there have been changes to the college sites over time resulting in the need to transport

a number of learners on dedicated college buses, with fewer being transported by public transport.

## **5. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015**

- 5.1 The aim of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 is to improve the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales. The Act places a well-being duty on public bodies which is aimed at delivering the seven well-being goals by following the five ways of working.
- 5.2 The Act places a welfare duty on the Council to carry out sustainable development work by working in conjunction with the 'sustainable development principle'. This means that the impact on people in the future needs to be considered when making decisions.
- 5.3 In terms of **collaboration** and **including** others, we collaborate cross-departmentally and with schools to find creative solutions to rationalise the costs associated with providing education transport. We will also consult on the draft Transport Policy in the Spring Term 2025.
- 5.4 In terms of the **long term** and looking to the future, we are already aware of the changes in demography facing the County and are adapting and planning education transport provision in response to that to rationalise the costs, ensuring the affordability of transport provision to the future. We are also in the process of updating the Education Transport Policy which will continue to meet the statutory requirements of the Bill, but we also hope that the revised Policy will provide further clarity to users over the coming years.
- 5.5 In order to **prevent** problems from arising or worsening in the future, we will continue to collaborate cross-departmentally and with schools to ensure affordable education transport provision, continually reviewing and evaluating our provisions to prevent problems arising or worsening in the future.

## **6. Impact on Equality Characteristics, the Welsh Language and the Socio-Economic Duty**

- 6.1 Alongside updating the Education Transport Policy we are also producing an Equality Impact Assessment, and it is planned to consult on the Education Transport Policy inviting comments on the Equality Impact Assessment at the same time. We will take into account all comments received as part of the consultation and adjust the Education Transport Policy and the Equality Impact Assessment as appropriate in light of the comments received.

## **7. Next Steps**

7.1 The Strategic Review into education transport will continue to seek to rationalise the costs associated with providing transport for learners. Over the coming period, it is planned to move forward with the following:

- Consultation on the Education Transport Policy
- Review Education Transport Contracts to find further savings (ongoing)
- Identify and implement pilots to reduce costs associated with providing education transport (ongoing)
- Transfer successful pilots into permanent transport arrangements
- Consider opportunities to rationalise the costs associated with the 16+ Travel Pass



## **APPENDIX 1**

- 1) Has the Education Department considered establishing its own fleet and the cost of doing this?

*Following a successful pilot during this year's Autumn Term, where the use of a fleet vehicle was trialled for the purpose of parallel education transport and adult transport, the education department will investigate further and pilot education transport in some areas. This gives an opportunity to calculate costs and to map possibilities for the future.*

- 2) What rights do the authority, and the transport providers have to terminate contracts?

*Conditions within the transport agreements enable the authority and the provider to terminate transport agreements. The conditions vary depending on the agreement.*

- 3) What kind of training is provided to taxi drivers and to people who escort children, especially in relation to special schools?

*Child protection training is provided by means of e-modules when a driver's badge is applied for, a certificate is obtained after completing the training as evidence. The certificate will need to be renewed every 3 years in parallel with the renewal of the driver badge.*

- 4) What are the DBS arrangements regarding education carriers?

*In relation to the authority's taxi drivers, the following applies:*

*"Update driver's license every 3 years so update DBS at the same time. In addition, a medical test certificate will be necessary. A record is kept on the taxi licensing department's database, and a warning/letter will be sent out in good time to remind that an update is necessary.*

*In relation to the authority's bus drivers, the following applies:*

*"Update DBS certificate every 3 years. A record of the data is kept on a spreadsheet in the transport department.*

*In relation to the authority's travel escort drivers, the following applies:*

*"Update DBS certificate every 3 years. Update First Aid certificate at the same time. A record of the data is kept on a spreadsheet in the transport department.*

- 5) What exactly are the rules regarding free transport?

*The Learner Travel (Wales) Measure 2008 (the Measure) sets out the legal framework that specifically applies to travel and transport provisions for learners traveling from home to school in Wales; with 'Statutory Provision and Operational Guidance' (The Guidance) published in 2014.*

*The Measure states that local authorities must*

- *Provide free transport from home to school for learners of compulsory school age who attend a primary school who live further than two miles from the nearest suitable school;*
- *Provide free transport from home to school for learners of compulsory school age who attend a secondary school who live further than three miles from the nearest suitable school.*

6) Is there any intention to review the qualifying distance for free transport?

*We will review the qualifying distances when reviewing the transport policy and follow guidance in the statutory requirements in doing so.*

7) Does the Transport Policy go beyond the legal requirement?

*In addition to what is stated in the statutory requirements, the authority offers empty seats as part of the empty seats scheme which generates additional income and facilitates transport for some learners. A free Post-16 Travel Pass is issued to transport learners to school or college although there is no statutory duty on the Council to do so.*

8) How do Gwynedd's education transport policies and overspend compare with other authorities?

*Recent national discussions suggest that authorities across Wales are facing the same challenges regarding increases in education transport costs, and the picture is very similar across the rural counties of Wales which have similar geographical challenges to Gwynedd.*

9) What are the arrangements when a school closes? Is there an attempt made to ensure that children go to the nearest school?

*Designating an alternative school for a situation when a school closes is part of the process of reviewing a school's future. Transport costs are part of the considerations, and revenue savings obtained from closing a school contribute to an increase in any transport costs due to the closure process.*



# Agenda Item 7

<b>MEETING</b>	EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
<b>DATE</b>	12 December 2024
<b>TITLE</b>	Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee Forward Programme
<b>PURPOSE OF THE REPORT</b>	To adopt an amended work programme for 2024/25
<b>AUTHOR</b>	Bethan Adams, Scrutiny Advisor

1. A Forward Programme for 2024/25 was adopted at the Committee meeting on 18 July 2024.
2. The item 'Immersion Education System' was programmed for discussion at this meeting.
3. A request was received from the Education Department to move this item to the 13 February 2025 meeting. An evaluation of the Immersion Education System will be conducted during this school term. The Education Department is collaborating with Bangor University's Education Department to conduct the evaluation. It is anticipated that a draft report of the findings and any recommendations will be received in the new year.
4. Following consultation with the Chair, the request to move the item was agreed to ensure that the item is scrutinised in a timely manner to enable scrutiny to add value.
5. See attached as an appendix to the report, the amended work programme for 2024/25.
6. **The Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee is asked to adopt the amended work programme for 2024/25.**

**EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME 2024/25**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Reason to scrutinise</b>
<b>18/7/24</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• GwE Annual Report</li> <li>• Middle Tier Review - Schools Improvement Service</li> <li>• Safeguarding arrangements in schools</li> <li>• Gwynedd and Eryri Sustainable Visitor Economy Plan 2035</li> </ul>	Annual Item / Assurance
		Input to the future direction
		Assurance in terms of the arrangements
		Council Plan 2023-28 - A Prosperous Gwynedd
<b>17/10/24</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Progress report on response to Estyn recommendations</li> <li>• Transforming education for children in their early years</li> <li>• Staff Well-being Strategy</li> </ul>	External Auditor's Report
		Council Plan 2023-28 - Tomorrow's Gwynedd
		Scrutiny of staff well-being support
<b>12/12/24</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School Revenue Budgets</li> <li>• Education Transport</li> </ul>	The Impact on Gwynedd Schools
		Overspending in the field
<b>13/2/25</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gwynedd Economy Plan</li> <li>• Education Language Policy</li> <li>• Immersion Education System</li> </ul>	Strategic Plan
		Council Plan 2023-28 - A Welsh Gwynedd
		Council Plan 2023-28 - A Welsh Gwynedd
<b>10/4/25</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth Service</li> <li>• Additional Learning Needs in the mainstream and special schools</li> </ul>	Council Plan 2023-28 - Tomorrow's Gwynedd
		Scrutinise the additional learning needs education provision