

REPORT TO THE CABINET

Date of meeting:	15 September 2020
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Cemlyn Rees Williams
Contact Officer:	Gwern ap Rhisiart - Dwyfor Meirionnydd Area Education Officer
Title of Item:	Ysgol Abersoch

DECISION SOUGHT:

The permission of the Council's Cabinet is sought to begin a period of statutory consultation in accordance with the requirements of section 48 of the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013, on the proposed proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch on 31 August 2021 and to provide a place for the pupils at Ysgol Sarn Bach from 1 September 2021 onwards.

1. INTRODUCTION

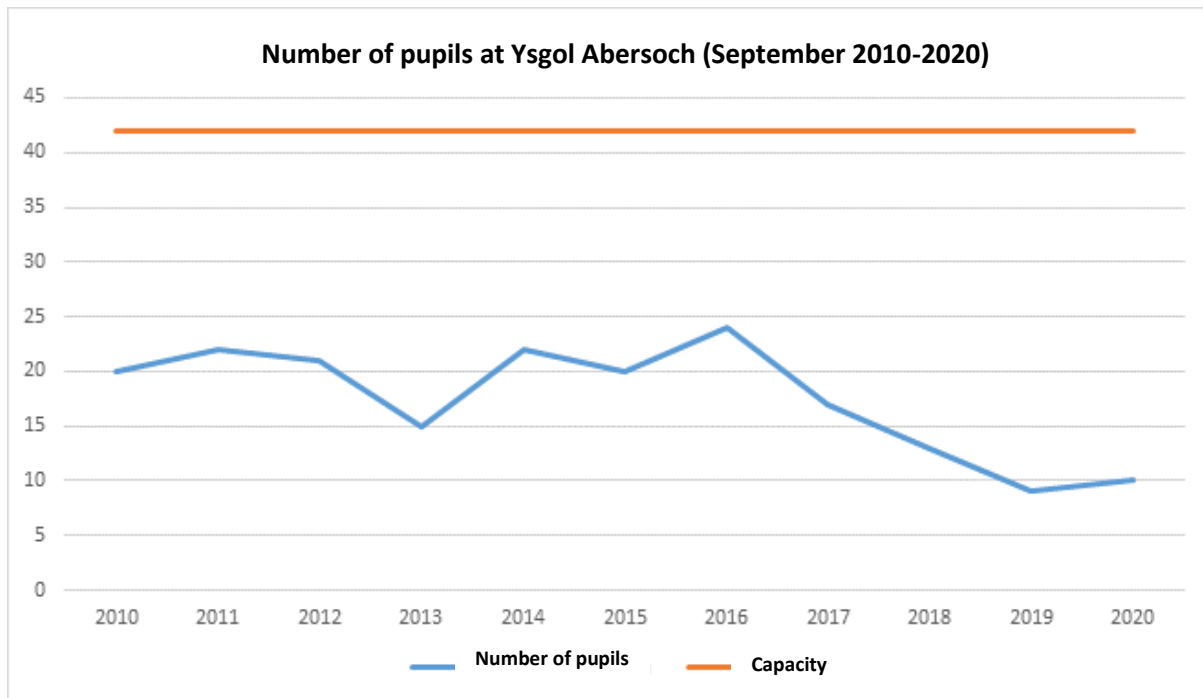
- 1.1. At their meeting on 17 September 2019, the Cabinet supported a recommendation to commence formal discussions with the governing body of Ysgol Abersoch in order to consider options for the future. The decision came about as a result of recent concerns regarding a reduction in pupil numbers at the school.
- 1.2. The purpose of this report is to report back on the outcome of the local discussions, and seek permission to carry out a statutory consultation on a proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch on 31 August 2021, and provide a place for the pupils at Ysgol Sarn Bach from 1 September 2021 onwards.

2. THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT

- 2.1 The Council implemented the *Excellent Primary Education for the Children of Gwynedd* strategy following its adoption in April 2009. It was noted in the strategy that there was a need to provide a way of giving attention to the situation of some vulnerable schools.
- 2.2 At its meeting on 18 December 2018, the Cabinet approved the principles of the "Fit for Purpose Education" principles which now provide a basis to realise the Education Department's vision and develop the system to ensure a high quality education for the children and young people of Gwynedd for the twenty first century. These principles work towards rationalising age-ranges within primary classes and ensuring sufficient non-contact time for headteachers to focus on leadership matters in the primary schools.

3. THE CURRENT SITUATION AT YSGOL ABERSOCH

- 3.1 Ysgol Abersoch is located in the centre of the village of Abersoch, near Pwllheli, and provides education for pupils aged between 3 and 8 years. The pupils transfer to Ysgol Sarn Bach after year 3 in order to complete their primary education.
- 3.2 Ysgol Abersoch has a capacity of 42 (nursery to year 3), and there are 8 full-time pupils, and 2 nursery pupils (part-time) on the register (September 2020).



3.3 As can be seen from the above graph, the total number of pupils attending the school has consistently reduced since 2016 and this has been vulnerable for some time. Therefore, it is likely that the school is facing increasing challenges, including:

- **Pupil numbers** – In September 2020, there were 8 full time pupils, and 2 nursery pupils
- **Projected numbers** - September 2021 = 10; September 2022 = 12; September 2023 = 12
- **High percentage of surplus places** - Based on the figures for September 2020, there are approximately 76% of surplus places at the school (a total of 32)
- **Small class sizes** - 1 class with 10 pupils (September 2020)
- **Broad age ranges within classes**
- **Ysgol Abersoch receives an additional sum to the usual allocation** through the minimum staffing policy (which ensures at least a headteacher and a teacher in every school, and a headteacher and an assistant in schools with fewer than 15 pupils). The total cost during the 2020-21 financial year (based on the numbers in September 2019) is £52,582.
- **Cost per Pupil** at Ysgol Abersoch is £17,404 (2020-21), the county average cost per pupil is £ 4,198.

4. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Establish a Cylch Meithrin and Cylch Ti a Fi at Ysgol Abersoch

- 4.1 During the Autumn term of 2019, Ysgol Abersoch stakeholders set up a Voluntary Management Committee to undertake the task of establishing a Cylch Meithrin and Ti a Fi group in the school.
- 4.2 The first sessions of the Cylch Meithrin and Cylch Ti a Fi were held in February this year. At present, Cylch Meithrin Abersoch is part of the free 30-hour childcare plan for 3 and 4 year olds, and runs a 2 hour playgroup session five times a week, as well as a lunch club session three times a week.

5. LOCAL DISCUSSIONS

5.1 In July 2019, officers from the Education Department met the Governing Body of Ysgol Abersoch in order to discuss the school's vulnerable situation. During the meeting, it was noted that it was intended to seek the Cabinet's approval to progress the discussions by holding formal meetings with the Governing Body and relevant stakeholders to discuss options for the school.

5.2 In accordance with the Cabinet's decision (17 September 2019), an Ysgol Abersoch Review Panel (PAY) was established in October 2019. An invitation was extended to all members of the Governing Body, parents and school staff, as well as the local elected member, to be members of the panel and participate in the discussions.

5.3 On 7 October 2019, the first of three PAY meetings were held in order to commence the discussion and consider options. During this meeting, it was explained that there was a need to consider options that would respond to the challenges facing the school (as detailed in paragraph 3.3 above).

5.4 The second PAY meeting was held on 13 November 2019. The strengths, opportunities, weaknesses and threats of all options were evaluated during this meeting. In addition, following the meeting, further observations were received from the governing body.

5.5 After receiving the input of the PAY members, all options were evaluated against the factors of the *Excellent Primary Education for the Children of Gwynedd* strategy, and the above-noted challenges (paragraph 3.3). Having considered the conclusions of the evaluation, the list of options was whittled down to 3. These options were presented during the third PAY meeting on 6 January 2020, and an explanation was given of the intention to undertake further assessments before making a decision on the preferred option.

6. OPTIONS APPRAISAL

6.1 In accordance with the "*Excellent Primary Education for the Children of Gwynedd*" strategy, a number of factors were considered when appraising the options for the situation, including:

- Class sizes
- Pupil numbers
- Leadership and Staffing
- The Community
- Financial Resources
- The Welsh Language
- Geographical Factors

6.2 With the input of members of the PAY during the local meetings, a list of options was created to be considered for the school:

- Do nothing (continue with the status quo)
- Amend the age range of Ysgol Abersoch from 3-8 to 3-11 years
- Amend the age range of Ysgol Abersoch from 3-8 to 3-9 years
- Federation with a nearby school
- Federation with a nearby school, locating the Foundation Phase on the Ysgol Abersoch site, and KS2 on the site of a nearby school

- Federation with nearby schools, locating the Foundation Phase + Years 3 and 4 + Years 5 and 6 on the sites of three different schools
- Close Ysgol Abersoch and offer a place for the pupils at an alternative school
- Locate a Language Centre on the Ysgol Abersoch site
- Establish a Cylch Meithrin at Ysgol Abersoch
- Change the age range of Ysgol Abersoch from 3-8 to 3-9 years + establish a Cylch Meithrin at Ysgol Abersoch

6.3 Following evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of the above options against the factors in the *Excellent Primary Education for the Children of Gwynedd* strategy, 3 options emerged as being the most viable and realistic to address the school's current situation, namely:

- Amend the age range of Ysgol Abersoch from 3-8 to 3-11 years
- Federation with a nearby school
- Close Ysgol Abersoch and offer a place for the pupils in an alternative school

6.4 A further comparison of all options against the strategy's factors can be seen in Appendix 1. As explained in paragraph 4.1 above, the school situation has developed since September 2019 with the opening of a Cylch Meithrin and a Cylch Ti a Fi on the school site. To ensure a fair comparison, please note that the development of the Cylch Meithrin and its potential impacts have been considered under all options, including the Status Quo.

7. COMPARISON OF OPTIONS

7.1 Do nothing – continue with the Status Quo:

- 7.1.1 Although the case for change has been established, the 'Do Nothing' model has been included for comparison purposes.
- 7.1.2 This model would mean that there would be no change to the current provision in the Ysgol Abersoch catchment area.
- 7.1.3 As noted above, a Cylch Meithrin and Cylch Ti a Fi opened on the school site in February 2020. However, whilst acknowledging the potential positive impact that locating a Cylch Meithrin on the Ysgol Abersoch site may have on pupil numbers, it cannot be guaranteed that it would lead to a significant increase in numbers.
- 7.1.4 Having considered the school's latest position against the relevant factors, it is concluded that this model does not adequately respond to the school's vulnerable situation. By doing nothing, the challenge of falling pupil numbers, small class sizes and the financial challenges facing the school would continue.

7.2 OPTIONS FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

7.3 Amend the age range of Ysgol Abersoch

- 7.3.1 Two options to amend the school's age range were discussed, namely extending to 3-9 and extending to 3-11.
- 7.3.2 It should be noted that the option favoured locally was the option to extend the school's age range to 3-9, including the development of the Cylch Meithrin. This option was

preferred locally for practical reasons such as improved use of the empty space in the school building as a result of providing a location for the Cylch Meithrin, and to mitigate against the possible impact of the change on the numbers of Ysgol Sarn Bach (the school which provides education to the 9-11 year old pupils in the Abersoch catchment area).

- 7.3.3 When comparing the two options, it was concluded that the best option to be considered further was the option to extend the age range to 3-11. The 3-9 option was disregarded for many reasons, specifically:
- It is anticipated that adding an educational year would not lead to a sufficient increase in the numbers. Consequently, the challenges facing the school would continue.
 - The age range would not be consistent with the majority of the county's primary schools.
 - It would not allow for the school to offer a comprehensive KS2 provision. The pupils would continue to transfer to Ysgol Sarn Bach to complete their primary education.
- 7.3.4 It is believed that the option to extend the age range to 3-11 would offer more advantages from the perspective of having an opportunity to increase the numbers at the school. The option would also rationalise the age range with the rest of the county's schools, and would mean that the school offers a comprehensive KS2 provision.
- 7.3.5 In order for the option to respond to the challenges facing the school, this increase would have to be substantial. Nevertheless, it is likely that any increase in the numbers at Ysgol Abersoch after extending the age range, would cause a reduction in the numbers of Ysgol Sarn Bach and, potentially, at nearby schools.
- 7.3.6 After further consideration, it was concluded that the option would not be a sustainable solution for the future for the school, and may have an impact on pupil numbers at neighbouring schools.

7.4 Federation:

- 7.4.1 As seen above (para. 6.2), 3 different forms of federation were discussed and considered. It was concluded that the most reasonable option to be considered further was the option to federate with a nearby school.
- 7.4.2 This model would ensure the continued presence of the school in the village of Abersoch by means of a collaboration agreement with a nearby school under the leadership of a headteacher or headteachers and one Governing body. The governing bodies of the individual schools would be revoked and a (new) federal governing body would be formed. The identity of the school in question (including name, ethos and school uniform) would continue, and it would enable the possibility of sharing staff, resources, IT, buildings and expertise.
- 7.4.3 However, it is unlikely that the option would address the challenge of a reduction in numbers, and consequently, the school's financial challenges would continue.

- 7.4.4 When considering this model, any impact on the operation of both schools must be assessed. Noting the challenges facing Ysgol Abersoch, it would be necessary to ensure that such an arrangement could offer benefits to all children and young people in the federated schools by improving educational provision.
- 7.4.5 Discussions were held with the headteachers and chairs of governors of the two nearby schools (Ysgol Sarn Bach and Ysgol Llanbedrog) regarding the option to establish a federation with Ysgol Abersoch.
- 7.4.6 After weighing up the advantages and disadvantages, it was concluded that the option would not be a sustainable solution for the school. If this option were realised, it is anticipated that the challenge of low pupil numbers, small class sizes and the financial challenges facing the school would continue.

7.5 Close Ysgol Abersoch and offer a place for the pupils in an alternative school

- 7.5.1 This option would mean closing Ysgol Abersoch and offering a place for the pupils to receive their education at Ysgol Sarn Bach.
- 7.5.2 Ysgol Sarn Bach is considered as the 'alternative school' for the following reasons:
- Geographically, Ysgol Sarn Bach is the closest school to Ysgol Abersoch. The school is located 1.4 miles from the site of Ysgol Abersoch.
 - Ysgol Sarn Bach already accepts pupils in year 4 from Ysgol Abersoch.
 - 40% of the children (3-8 years) from the Ysgol Abersoch catchment area already attend Ysgol Sarn Bach.
 - Ysgol Sarn Bach has capacity to accept the current pupils of Ysgol Abersoch.
- 7.5.3 This proposal is detailed further in the following section.

8. THE PREFERRED OPTION

8.1 Of the options considered, the preferred option for further consultation is to close Ysgol Abersoch and transfer the pupils to Ysgol Sarn Bach. This option is favoured for the following reasons:

8.2 Class sizes:

- 8.2.1 Ysgol Abersoch has one class, with 10 pupils aged between 3 and 8 years (September 2020). The current average class size at Ysgol Sarn Bach is 23. Delivering the proposal would mean that pupils would be educated in more sustainably sized classes, with more children from the same age group.
- 8.2.2 At Ysgol Sarn Bach, there are two classes, one with 22 pupils aged between 3 and 8 years, and one with 24 pupils aged between 8 and 11 years (September 2020). If the proposal is implemented, appropriate attention will need to be given to any potential impacts on class sizes in order to ensure the best opportunities and experiences for the children.

8.3 Pupil Numbers

8.3.1 Pupil numbers at Ysgol Abersoch have varied over the years; however, in general, there has been a 50% drop over the past 5 years. According to the projections created in September 2020, it is anticipated that numbers will remain low over the next three years. See below (table 1) the numbers at Ysgol Abersoch since September 2014 up to the projections for September 2023. The figures below do not include the potential impact of the Cylch Meithrin on the school.

Table 1: Numbers at Ysgol Abersoch (N - Yr. 3)

Actual Numbers (Source: Annual Census - September)							Projections (Source: September 2020)		
2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
22	20	24	17	13	9	10	10	12	12

8.3.2 Ysgol Sarn Bach has capacity of 72 (N - Yr. 6), and in September 2020 it had 45 full-time pupils (reception - Yr. 6) and 3 part-time pupils (Nursery). With 24 surplus places (N-Yr. 6), Ysgol Sarn Bach has sufficient capacity to accept all current pupils from Ysgol Abersoch.

8.3.3 As a result of the low numbers, there are also a number of surplus places in Ysgol Abersoch - around 76% (32 in total). Welsh Government's School Organisation Code (2018) notes that there are "excessive numbers of unused places that could be removed meaning that resources are tied up unproductively... A significant level of surplus provision is defined as 25% or more of a school's capacity." Currently, between Ysgol Abersoch and Ysgol Sarn Bach, there are 56 (49%) surplus places in the area. Delivering the preferred option would reduce the number of surplus places in the area to 14 (19%).

8.4 Leadership and Staffing

8.4.1 The current staffing structure of Ysgol Abersoch includes one full-time headteacher, a part-time teacher, part-time PPA teacher and a part-time assistant. The Headteacher teaches for 70% of the time and receives 30% of non-contact time for managerial and leadership matters.

8.4.2 At Ysgol Sarn Bach, there is a headteacher, two part-time teachers (FTE 1.0), and three part-time assistants. The Headteacher teaches for 80% of the time and receives 20% of non-contact time for managerial and leadership matters.

8.5 Financial Resources

8.5.1 There is a broad range in the cost per pupil in the area:

- Ysgol Abersoch - £17,404
- Ysgol Sarn Bach - £4,683
- Ysgol Foel Gron - £4,982
- Ysgol Llanbedrog - £4,274

(2020-21 Budget - Based on the numbers in September 2019)

8.5.2 This means that the cost of educating a pupil at Ysgol Abersoch is over £10,000 more than in nearby schools.

8.5.3 In addition, in terms of the cost per pupil, Ysgol Abersoch is the highest school in the county. The average Gwynedd-wide cost per pupil is £4,198.

8.5.4 Below is a summary of Ysgol Abersoch's financial allocation compared to Ysgol Sarn Bach.

	Ysgol Abersoch	Ysgol Sarn Bach
2020-21 Allocation	£84,558	£228,890
£ Minimum Staffing Protection (2020-21)	£52,582	-
2020-21 Total Allocation	£137,140	£228,890
£ per pupil (based on September 2019 numbers)	£17,404	£4,683

8.5.5 Ysgol Abersoch receives an additional amount to the usual allocation via the minimum staffing protection policy (which ensures at least a headteacher and teacher at each school, and a headteacher and an assistant in schools with fewer than 15 pupils). This current financial year (2020-21), this sum amounted to a total of £52,582.

8.5.6 Ysgol Sarn Bach does not receive an additional amount through the protection policy. The school's current numbers attract a sufficient budget to maintain an appropriate staffing level.

8.5.7 In the 2020-21 financial year, a total of £366,030 was allocated to the two schools. In terms of revenue costs, it is projected that the proposal would create an annual saving of £110,062, less the costs of additional transport needs (£14,000) - namely around £96,062 a year.

8.6 Learning Environment

8.6.1 Ysgol Sarn Bach has capacity for the existing current pupils at Ysgol Abersoch. The Property Department's latest condition assessment notes that the condition category of both Ysgol Abersoch and Ysgol Sarn Bach is 'B'.

8.6.2 Both schools are community schools and provide Welsh medium education

8.7 The Community

8.7.1 Welsh Government guidance (The School Organisation Code 011/2018) states that a community impact assessment must be held as part of any proposal for schools reorganisation. A community impact assessment was carried out on the list of options noted in paragraph 6.3. **See the full report in Appendix 2.**

- 8.7.2 In brief, the assessment notes that there would be some negative impact on the community as a result of closing the school. Nevertheless, it is noted that 25 pupils (N-Y6) who live in the Abersoch catchment area already attend Ysgol Sarn Bach; therefore, it is concluded that a link already exists between the school and the broader area.
- 8.7.3 To mitigate any potential negative impact on the community should the proposal be realised, the assessment notes the importance of ensuring that the Abersoch community is included in the activities of the alternative school, and to encourage community collaboration between the alternative school and Abersoch community, where appropriate.

8.8 The Welsh Language

- 8.8.1 Welsh Government guidance (School Organisation Code 011/2018) notes that a Welsh language impact assessment must be held as part of any proposal for school reorganisation. A Welsh language impact assessment was carried out on the list of options noted in paragraph 6.3. **See the full report in Appendix 2.**
- 8.8.2 It is noted in the assessment that no negative impact is anticipated on the Welsh language, should the proposal be implemented. It appears that the linguistic situation at Ysgol Sarn Bach is very strong. With 57% of Ysgol Sarn Bach pupils coming from Welsh speaking homes. In comparison, 33% of Ysgol Abersoch pupils come from Welsh speaking homes.
- 8.8.3 Ysgol Abersoch has worked hard to develop the children's bilingual skills and promote the importance of Welsh culture. In addition, in 2019, the school managed to secure the Welsh Language Charter gold award. Therefore, it is important that the proposal acknowledges the need to support and continue this work.

8.9 Geographical Factors

- 8.9.1 It is noted in the "Excellent Primary Education for the Children of Gwynedd" Strategy that an attempt should be made to restrict travelling to a maximum of 30 minutes of one-way travel between the home and the school. From implementing the proposal, it is anticipated that all existing pupils of the school would be within a reasonable distance (less than 30 minutes of travel) to the alternative school, Ysgol Sarn Bach.
- 8.9.2 If the proposal was implemented, the pupils who live within the Ysgol Abersoch catchment area would receive transport to Ysgol Sarn Bach, in accordance with the County's School Transport Policy.

9. **IMPLICATIONS OF THE PROPOSAL**

9.1 Schools admissions catchment areas

- 9.1.1 It should be noted that Ysgol Sarn Bach already accepts pupils from the Ysgol Abersoch catchment area at the beginning of September following their 8th birthday.

9.1.2 If the proposal was implemented, the Ysgol Sarn Bach catchment area would be amended to include the existing Ysgol Abersoch catchment area.

Map 1: Area's existing catchment areas



Map 2: Ysgol Sarn Bach Catchment Area if the proposal was implemented



9.2 Transport

9.2.1 As noted in para. 8.9.2 above; if the proposal was implemented, the pupils who live within the catchment area of Ysgol Abersoch would receive transport to Ysgol Sarn Bach in accordance with the County's School Transport Policy.

9.3 Staffing Considerations

9.3.1 If the proposal was implemented, there would be staffing implications that could lead to redundancies. There will be consultation with staff and Union representatives specifically as part of the statutory consultation period. Gwynedd Council has developed a detailed staffing policy, jointly with Trade Unions and headteachers. Any redundancies resulting from this proposal will have to comply with that policy. Clear and open communication will play a fundamental part in the implication of any proposals.

10. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

10.1 The School Organisation Code 011/2018

10.1.1 Any statutory process will be conducted in accordance with Welsh Government Guidelines (School Organisation Code 011/2018).

10.1.2 As part of the process of developing the proposal, a range of options for the school were considered and evaluated and a series of impact assessments were undertaken, including:

- Welsh Language Impact Assessment (see para. 8.8)
- Assessment of the likely impact on the quality and standards of education
- Assessment of the likely impact on different transport arrangements
- Assessment of the likely impact on the community (see para. 8.7)

10.1.3 The above assessments are included in **Appendix 2**.

10.2 Equality Assessment

10.2.1 An equality impact assessment was carried out on the proposal - **see the full report in Appendix 2**.

10.2.2 The assessment gives specific attention to various equality elements such as race, gender, disability, language, religion or belief and age. The assessment notes the current situation and shows that policies and procedures are in place which will ensure that the proposal considers and is in accordance with equal rights.

10.2.3 Having weighed-up the relevant factors, it is concluded that the proposal is unlikely to have a negative impact on equality characteristics. It is noted that measures are already in place to ensure that there will be no unlawful discrimination and harassment.

10.2.4 The Council will follow the usual procedures by supporting and monitoring, in order to ensure the compliance of every school with the equality characteristics.

10.3 Well-being of Future Generations Act

10.3.1 The Education Department has a role in promoting the well-being objectives of the Act amongst pupils in the county through its activities and projects. The Act sets a duty on public bodies in Wales to improve economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being. As part of the duty, the Council has published well-being objectives that outline the way it will improve well-being in the "2018-23 Gwynedd Plan".

10.3.2 Following consideration and an assessment in line with the requirements of the Well-being Act, it is concluded that the proposal did satisfy the seven well-being objectives within the Act (as noted in para 8.1), and the Council's well-being objectives. This proposal will allow us to respond to and address the children's needs today, and strengthen their future well-being.

10.3.3 See the full report in Appendix 2.

11. NEXT STEPS AND TIMETABLE

11.1 If the Cabinet resolves to support the recommendation submitted in this report - a period of statutory consultation will need to be undertaken in accordance with the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013 and the guidance given in the School Organisation Code 011/2018. It is anticipated that this will be held in the coming weeks.

11.2 Subsequently, a further report will be submitted to the Cabinet in order to report back on the outcomes of this consultation. The Cabinet will then have to consider the outcomes of the consultation, and decide whether or not a Statutory Notice should be published. If a Statutory Notice is issued, a period of 28 days is allowed for any objection to be submitted. Following the period, a further report will be submitted to the Cabinet for a final decision. That report will include a summary of any objections received along with responses to them.

12. VIEWS OF THE STATUTORY OFFICERS

Monitoring Officer:

The contents of this report has been the subject of legal advice by the Legal Service.

No further comments regarding propriety.

Head of Finance Department:

There are clear reasons (including financial ones) supporting the proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch. I can confirm that the financial figures in sections 3.3 and 8.5.1-8.5.7 of the report and in the 'Financial Resources' section of Appendix 1 are either true accurate costs, or fair estimates (where appropriate). Establishing the new arrangements (closing Ysgol Abersoch and providing pupil places at Ysgol Sarn Bach) would save £110,062, less additional transport needs (currently estimated at around £14,000), resulting in annual net savings of approximately £96,062 (as noted in clause 8.5.7 of the report).

Appendices

Appendix 1: Comparison of the characteristics of the models against the strategy's factors.

Appendix 2: Impact Assessments:

- An Assessment of the likely Impact on the Quality and Standard of Education
- Assessment of the likely impact on travel arrangements
- Assessment of the likely impact on the community
- Language Impact Assessment
- Well-being Assessment
- Equality Assessment

Appendix 3: Background pack, which includes presentations and minutes of the local meetings.