

Committee	Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee
Report Title	Ysgol Abersoch
Meeting date	21 October 2021
Relevant Officer	Gwern ap Rhisiart, Area Education Officer
Relevant Local Member	Councillor Cemlyn Rees Williams

1. The Cabinet's decision, 28 September 2021

Following a Cabinet decision on 15 June 2021, a statutory notice was issued on 25 June 2021 on the intention to implement a proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch, and provide a place for pupils at Ysgol Sarn Bach, commencing a 28 day objection period, in accordance with the School Standards and Organisation Act 2013, and the School Organisation Code.

To remind members, here are the statutory elements of the process involved in a proposal (in this case) to close a school:

1. Undertake a statutory consultation on the proposal
2. Consider the results of the consultation and decide whether or not to proceed with the proposal
3. Issue a statutory notice of intention to implement a proposal with a 28 day objection period
4. Consider any objections received during the objection period, and decide whether or not the proposal should be implemented.

On 28 September 2021, the Cabinet considered the objections received during the objection period (stage 4). It should be considered that the previous statutory actions have been completed, and those decisions are now final. The proposal cannot therefore be revisited and modified, and the Committee is scrutinising the Cabinet's decision to implement the proposal following its consideration of the objections received during the objection period. In particular it will consider those issues given as reasons for calling in the decision.

The School Organisation Code states:

“Where a local authority’s proposals have received objections, and require determination under section 53 of the 2013 Act, the local authority must not approach the determination of these proposals with a closed mind. Objections must be conscientiously considered alongside the arguments in respect of the proposals and in the light of the factors set out in section 1.3 – 1.14 of this Code.”

2 The Council's Response to the Objections

The Education Department is confident that the objections report deals with and responds to the objections in accordance with the Schools Standards and Organisation Act 2013 and the associated Code. The Cabinet report discussed on 28 September refers to objections relating to the impact on the community and the Welsh language, possible developments in the area, transport and travel and the proposal's implementation date. The Council's response to those objections is noted below.

It should also be noted that the objections that referred to the impact on the community and the Welsh language, transport and travel and the proposal's implementation date were highlighted and discussed further during the Cabinet meeting - the webcast for the meeting can be viewed [here](#) .

i. Impact on the Community and the Welsh Language

“The Report is incorrect and misleading in terms of the Community impact for example the Welsh language and culture, the table on page 714 says there is will be no impact on Language.”

The above refers to page 714 of the 15 June 2021 Cabinet report, which has already been implemented. However, below is a summary of the Council’s response to the objections relating to the impact on the community and the language, as noted in the report presented to the Cabinet on 28 September 2021.

During the objection period, a number of comments were received that referred to the school’s influence on language and culture in Abersoch and that losing the school would have a negative impact on the amount of Welsh spoken in everyday circumstances in the village of Abersoch.

In response to those comments, the Authority acknowledged the efforts made by Ysgol Abersoch to develop learners’ bilingual skills and also promoting the importance of the Welsh language and culture more widely in the community, conveying an appreciation of the community support to the school and the Welsh language as a result. It is also noted that the Council acknowledges the concerns regarding the potential impact on the Welsh language. However, it is the Authority’s expectation that all primary schools in the county support and improve the use of the Welsh language as the medium of education and the social language of pupils, as the linguistic expectations are the same for all primary schools in Gwynedd.

To mitigate any potentially negative impact on the community should the proposal be realised, the community impact 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 the community in Abersoch, where appropriate. Additionally, the Council noted that the impact assessment notes that some negative impact was anticipated as a result of the school’s closure. However, it is noted that 9 (35%) of Nursery – year 3 pupils living the Ysgol Abersoch catchment area already attend Ysgol Sarn Bach, as a result, it is concluded that a link between the school and the wider area is already established.

It is confirmed that the above matter has been the subject of discussion during the Cabinet meeting on 28 September 2021.

ii. Developments in the area e.g. housing and a hotel

“The Report does not take into consideration the future Housing and Constructions that is to come to the village (a) There is a New Development underway to build a New Hotel that will generate at least 40 full time jobs in the area – Staff and Family will need resources including Education for our children.

(b) The Welsh Government’s Housing and Property Department, Gwynedd Council and the Housing Association (who owns the land in the village) are currently looking at means of Building more houses The Welsh Government has said that a grant is available to develop this land and there is a possibility of 15 houses.

The Housing Association has confirmed that plans are underway for the Bryn Garmon site.

The report does not mention the Housing and Property Department’s new plans nor does it mention the new developments in the Village and therefore the Education Department has failed to respond to the requirements of the National Wellbeing Act in not doing this.”

It should be noted that no comments were received during the objection period that specifically referred to the development of 15 houses in the village of Abersoch, nor the intention to develop the Bryn Garmon site.

During the objection period some expressed their dissatisfaction that there was no mention of the 150 new jobs that building and opening a new hotel in Abersoch would create, encouraging local families to stay in the area and creating an opportunity for new families to come to the area.

In response to the comment, it was noted that there is no certainty that future demographic changes and an increase in the number of jobs locally would increase pupil numbers at Ysgol Abersoch. Children in the catchment area would be offered high quality education at Ysgol Sarn Bach which is 1.4 miles from the village of Abersoch.

Additionally, several comments were received noting the problem of second homes in Abersoch and the impact that this had on the school. In addition, a number of comments were received stating that one of the reasons why the pupil numbers had not increased in recent years is the lack of affordable housing.

In response to the objections received, it was noted that the Council noted the observations / objections, however, the Council wishes to note that it does not have control over the open housing market. In December 2020, Gwynedd Council adopted an Action Plan that will invest £77m in over 30 specific plans to tackle the increasing challenge of a lack of suitable housing for the County's residents, including increasing the number of affordable housing available for local people. The Plan will be implemented over the next six years, including projects such as increasing the number of social housing in Gwynedd; purchasing former social housing and private houses to let at an affordable rent to the residents of Gwynedd; developing our own houses to increase the opportunities for Gwynedd residents to compete; refusing applications to remove a local person condition on former "Council houses"; Homebuy Scheme and First Time Buyers' Grants to renovate empty houses. The exact locations of some of these schemes are to be confirmed following an exercise of consulting with communities in order to establish their housing needs.

The Council is aware that a set of measures will be required, a number of them currently beyond the direct control of the Council, if we are to be able to achieve genuine fairness for local residents in the field of housing. This Housing Action Plan is one of these measures and allows us to aim to directly act to the best of our abilities in order to attempt to reconcile the current situation. We also acknowledge that we will continue to campaign for further national changes in order to strengthen our ability to operate within Gwynedd and the Council will continue to do so at every possible opportunity in the field of housing, taxation, licensing and planning.

iii. Transport and travel

“Concerns over the footpath between Abersoch and Sarn Bach have been expressed and the education Department has said that contact has been made with the Highways Department but that nothing specific has been presented in terms of solving the risk here that endangers pupils. The Education Department mentions transport arrangements, which obviously adds to the climate and presents a negative example for the children in how the council considers the impact on the climate.”

It is confirmed that the objections relating to transport and travel were discussed at the Cabinet meeting on 28 September 2021.

Some comments were received expressing concerns over the potential impact of travelling to school, highlighting that the footpath from Ysgol Abersoch to Ysgol Sarn Bach is dangerous.

In response to those objections, it was noted that the Gwynedd Council Strategy for primary education aims to restrict travel from home to school to a one-way journey of no more than 30 minutes. Free transportation is available for primary school pupils who live two miles or more from the school in their catchment area.

As the route from Abersoch to Ysgol Sarn Bach is considered a dangerous one, transport would be provided in accordance with the County's school transport policy.

Some objectors also noted that the proposal would have an impact on the environment as there would be a need to travel further to school. In response to those comments, as a bus already transports key stage 2 children from Abersoch to Ysgol Sarn Bach, and we anticipate that there will be enough space on that bus (or a larger bus) for the children in the Abersoch catchment area, no significant increase in CO2 emissions is anticipated.

“One child misses out on transport in this proposal because of age policies – in the future when the number of children increases due to (a) and (b) it is likely that other children will be rejected this Transport and therefore will suffer in terms of their education.”

Objections were received noting dissatisfaction about the lack of transport provision for nursery age pupils. In response to those objections, it was noted that Gwynedd Council provides free transport for learners receiving primary education who live 2 miles or further from the school in their catchment area, or the nearest school (not including nursery class pupils). In accordance with Gwynedd’s Transport Policy, it is the parent’s responsibility to arrange transport for nursery age pupils.

Following the Cabinet meeting, the Education Department contacted the parent of the only nursery age pupil attending Ysgol Abersoch this term. Following discussing a number of options, it became apparent that there is no practical means for the parent to collect their child from the nursery provision at the alternative school and that not responding would deprive the pupil of the rest of their nursery education.

It has been agreed to amend the transport policy to note that we will provide transport for nursery pupils if the school they have started their education is to close during the school year. As a result, the pupil will be provided with transport to and from the alternative school for the remainder of the academic year.

iv. Proposal implementation date

“The decision is to close the school in the middle of the school year and there is no doubt that this will confuse the children and again will negatively impact on their education and there is no explanation why and what is the reasoning here.”

It is confirmed that the above matter has been the subject of discussion during the Cabinet meeting on 28 September 2021.

Objections were received which questioned implementing the proposal in the middle of a school year. In response to those objections, although the consultation was held on the proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch on 31 August 2021 and provide a place for pupils in Ysgol Sarn Bach from 1 September 2021, after considering the comments received in the consultation expressing concerns about the outline timetable, it was decided that deferring implementation until 31 December 2021 would allow more time for the Education Department to put arrangements in place in order to ensure a smooth transition for pupils from Ysgol Abersoch to Ysgol Sarn Bach.

Subject to the Cabinet’s decision, it is anticipated that this will allow enough time for the Education Department to work with the two schools to put all the necessary arrangements in place prior to transferring pupils to Ysgol Sarn Bach at the beginning of January 2022.

With the co-operation of the staff at Ysgol Abersoch it is anticipated that the transition to the alternative school could begin gradually over time.