

Committee	Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee
Title of Report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education Annual Report 2020-21 • The Education Department's Priorities
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Author	Garem Jackson, Head of Education
Relevant Cabinet Member	Councillor Cemlyn Rees Williams

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 In accordance with the wishes of the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee, the Education Department's Annual Report for 2020-21 is submitted before the committee.
- 1.2 The Education Department acknowledges that it is no easy task to ensure effective scrutiny of a document covering a years work by the Education Department at a committee meeting, and consequently it has attempted to formulate a summary report that highlights the Department's usual main work, positive aspects, along with areas that need addressing over the next period. The Annual Report is to be found in Appendix 1.
- 1.3 In addition, GwE will detail what they have achieved in the field of school improvement to ensure a complete overview of the area for the committee for 2020-21.

2. THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT'S KEY AREAS OF WORK IN 2020-21

- 2.1 The 2020-21 academic year was incredibly challenging for the Education Department and schools as the Covid-19 pandemic continued to affect our children's education, staff in our schools and our communities. We saw the 'firebreak' period during the year in an attempt to control the virus, and after the Christmas holidays there was another lockdown, with schools returning to blended learning provisions i.e. a combination of live learning sessions, remote learning, and work on Google Classrooms or similar on HWB. After the February half-term holiday, the youngest learners returned to school first, with the remaining years returning gradually afterwards until the Easter holidays.
- 2.2 Although Covid remained in our communities, there was greater stability during the summer term, and schools were able to take more advantage of the outdoors because of the fairer weather. However, once again this year the pandemic led to a situation where learners received teachers' assessments at the end of their educational career in years 11, 12 and 13, rather than the standard external examinations (GCSE and A Level). We recognise that the uncertainty and lack of clarity around the end-of-year assessments caused considerable frustration, stress and concern for teachers and learners alike.
- 2.3 Below is a summary of what we managed to achieve in some of the key areas of the Education Department work during the past year, which include:
- Safeguarding
 - ALN&I
 - Information Technology

- Communication
- The Welsh Language
- Modernising Education
- Catering and Cleaning

2.4 Safeguarding

Safeguarding the welfare of Gwynedd children and young people is a key priority for the Department and the Council, and is even more important of course as a result of the pandemic and various lockdowns when the majority of our learners (apart from vulnerable learners and the children of key workers) had to stay at home. The Department has recently created a new Welsh-medium training package for Child Protection Designated Persons in schools and education centres, in conjunction with the Welsh Government's Safeguarding in Education Group. The course was piloted in Gwynedd in 2020, and is now being delivered as part of a regular training programme.

Schools in Gwynedd have also received information about the Wales Child Safeguarding Procedures that were introduced by the Welsh Government in April 2020. The new procedures have been introduced digitally via an App, and key staff in the Department and schools in Gwynedd have received basic training on the procedures through a provision by NSPCC Wales, through an agreement with the North Wales Safeguarding Board.

2.5 ALN&I Service

The period since the beginning of the pandemic has been extremely challenging for learners in general, but particularly so for learners with ALN&I. During the year the ALN&I service produced a library of resources to promote the mental health and well-being of learners and their families, which is available on the service's website, and the Department has added capacity to the counselling service to ensure support for learners following the lockdown periods and the continuation of the pandemic. Monthly individual hits on the website increased from 15,000 in January 2020 to 130,000 in April 2020. During an Estyn Thematic inspection of the provision being offered to vulnerable learners, they commended the team's work with regard to the support that was provided to schools, parents and learners.

At the same time the ALN&I Service has been preparing for the introduction of the new legislation, and during the past year have sustained the momentum of progress in preparation for the legislation. There was uncertainty around releasing the Final Code for implementation, and what changes would have been made to the Draft Code, but the final Code was released in March 2021.

A Welsh Government ALN Act Readiness Review shows very strong progress in terms of the Authority's preparations for the Legislation. The requisite statutory posts are in place since January 2021 and are operating effectively. Collaboration with the Health Board has developed well by collaborating with the Designated Education Clinical Lead Officer (DECLO). A number of stakeholder training events have been held in order to specify particular aspects of the Final Code. We have completed work on the dispute resolution routes to ensure that they are operational. In the early years sector the necessary systems for early identification, and establishing clear processes have been completed. Preparatory work in the post-16 sector is continuing. Also, the work of developing a work, curriculum and assessment link between the mainstream and Special Schools has developed and continues to develop.

To this end, pioneering work is continuing to happen in terms of the use and continuous development of the on-line Individual Development Plan system, with the system driving the entire process for the schools, parents, external agencies and other education provisions (e.g. the early years).

3.6 Information Technology

The Education Department was very proactive and progressive in the field of ICT from the start of the first lockdown, and provided 1,200 Chromebook devices and 175 MiFi devices to families who were without access to technology in the summer term 2020.

To this end, the Education Department produced innovative policies and procedures to allow Gwynedd schools to teach remotely through live learning technology. Gwynedd's innovative policy was eventually adopted by a number of other authorities, and the Authority was prominent in promoting and encouraging live learning sessions with our schools.

During the Summer Term 2021, over 6,000 devices were provided for schools, with an additional 6,000 devices having been purchased. During the year the Cabinet approved a Digital Education Strategy which identifies how we will respond to the challenge of supporting education through technology. We also succeeded in establishing a procedure for carrying out future maintenance for the devices.

3.7 Communication

The Education Department has continued to place great importance on communicating with stakeholders during the past year, seeking to ensure timely leadership, guidance and decisions so as to enable schools to operate in the most appropriate way under the circumstances.

3.8 The Welsh Language

Following an extended period of home learning, and the national concern expressed about the adverse impact of Covid on Welsh language standards, we have designed a questionnaire to gain a better overview of learners' Welsh language skills in schools in Gwynedd. Questions were asked in consideration of how children's language skills are affected by extended periods away from school. We enquired about any specific support/training needs the workforce may have in order to support skills development to ensure the expected progress, and we asked about the learners' engagement with the work that was set for them during the lockdown periods, and about any obvious barriers. We questioned every head-teacher, as well as representatives of the six Areas of Learning and Experience in every secondary school, and also representatives from the Foundation Phase. The vast majority of respondents agreed that learners' language skills had been affected as a result of the periods of home-learning.

The data gathered concludes that the main concerns are the learners' social use of the Welsh language, learners' willingness to speak Welsh, and the standard of their oral language patterns. We have therefore identified that oracy is the greatest concern county-wide. The next steps will be to share the report individually with every school head-teacher, which will include a potential plan to target the weaknesses highlighted, and ask them to refine and confirm the action plan to respond to the findings.

We have also focused in particular on supporting the workforce's language skills to try and facilitate a Welsh-medium future for the provision across the curriculum in Key Stages 3, 4

and 5, by trialling the Welsh Government's Work Welsh pilot scheme for teachers with the teaching staff of one secondary school in the county.

3.9 Modernising Education

Despite the pandemic the new Ysgol y Garnedd building opened its doors in October 2020 and became the new educational home for up to 420 learners in the city of Bangor. The school site also offers a nursery education and wrap-around childcare provision in a bespoke environment with the best possible resources. Also, there is a carefully-designed space for specialist units to support child development on the site. Excellent team work and clear communication was a feature of this successful project, that managed to keep within the budget allocated to it.

The project has been nominated for three Construction Excellence in Wales 2021 awards, namely:

Digital Construction Award

Integration and Collaborative Working Award

Client of the Year Award

<https://www.cewales.org.uk/cew-awards/awards-2021/>

3.10 Catering and Cleaning

This service has been essential during the pandemic to ensure a regular cleaning service during the day, in order to provide a safe environment for learners and staff in our schools, and also to ensure school meals provision. Indeed, the service has been absolutely essential in enabling schools to remain open, at a time when the service is facing recruitment difficulties and high levels of sickness absence, even before the pandemic.

After the schools reopened following the second lock-down, the percentage of children having school meals remained fairly steady around the 50% mark from April – July 2021, which corresponds roughly to the percentage of children who were having school meals before the pandemic.

4 THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT'S PRIORITIES

4.1 The Well-being and Attainment Gap

As a result of the pandemic and lock-downs, the Education Department and the Council have identified the well-being and attainment gap as one of the main priorities in light of concern that some children and young people may be left behind in terms of their educational attainment, and that some would need additional support to close that gap, as well as the need for support with their well-being.

In response to this concern, since September 2020, all schools in Gwynedd have implemented an *Accelerated Learning Programme* with funding from the Welsh Government, to respond to the impact of the lockdown on the well-being and attainment of some specific groups of 5-16 year old learners. A year has now passed since announcing the programme, and we are keen to know what effect the programme and the funding have had on our learners' well-being and attainment. Consequently, over the coming months and jointly with the schools improvement service (GwE), we will gather evidence of the programme's effect and the difference it has made to some learners.

Beyond school, we have identified two stages in a child and young person's life as being a priority in terms of responding to the well-being and attainment gap, namely 0-5-year olds, and young people post-16. The lock-down periods have certainly highlighted the vulnerability of the early years sector, with inconsistency across the county in respect of the range and availability of services. The range of partners who are involved in the provision along with the strategic direction of the field nationally makes it difficult to structure our services here in Gwynedd. As a result, we intend to introduce a strategy for this field where the needs of Gwynedd will be central to it, and consult on its content with all the key stakeholders over the coming months.

Also, recognising that the 16-24 age group has been disproportionately affected by the pandemic more than any other age group, we have produced an initial report that collates all the evidence in one place, and intend to reconvene the cross-departmental group that was already meeting in relation to the engagement framework, with the aim for this group to take charge of the work programme.

4.2 Digital Education Strategy

What we are trying to achieve through the digital strategy is highly ambitious and is an indication of the way we prioritise our children's education here in Gwynedd. Put simply, the strategy, when implemented fully, will provide all children from year 3 to year 11 with a suitable device each to enable digital learning. Gwynedd will be one of the first authorities in Wales to do this, and it is something we can take pride in.

Considerable work has already been achieved, which includes upgrading the schools' network in accordance with the education digital standards, and also transforming web-filtering methods. A little over £1.3m has been invested in the network over the past two years. Subsequently, a substantial number of devices have been distributed in accordance with the strategy. Enough *ipads* have been distributed to provide one to every four learners in the Foundation Phase, and enough *Chromebooks* have been distributed so that all learners in years 3 to 6 have one device each. Windows 10 devices are also being prepared for all pupils in years 7, 10 and 11. Every teacher in Gwynedd will receive a standard device through the strategy over the coming months, with the hope that this will further spark imagination, ingenuity and effectiveness in aspects of digital learning across the sectors.

4.3 The Welsh Language

Since the pandemic, significant work has been achieved over the past year discussing and planning the content, targets and priorities of the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP), which is a statutory document for the Local Authority. From September 2022, the WESP will become a 10-year planning document for Welsh/bilingual education in accordance with the new regulations published by the Welsh Government.

In light of the work that has already been completed, we have now published a draft version of the WESP and are currently in the middle of a public consultation period on it, with the aim of considering any observations received in response to the consultation during the spring term of 2022. We will then amend the content of the WESP as we see fit, with the newly-designed WESP becoming an operational document by September 2022.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

The members are asked to present any observations on what the Education Department has achieved during the year which is outlined in this covering report and the Annual Report in Appendix 1, together with any observations on the Department's priorities for the next period.