

Date of meeting:	11 July 2023
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Beca Brown
Contact Officer:	Gwern ap Rhisiart, Assistant Head of Education Department: Primary Sector
Title of Item:	Issuing a statutory notice on the proposal to close Ysgol Felinwnda on 31 December 2023, and to transfer the current pupils to a nearby alternative school, Ysgol Bontnewydd or Ysgol Llandwrog, in accordance with the parents' choice, from 1 January 2024.

DECISION SOUGHT:

- 1) To approve commencing the process to close Ysgol Felinwnda on 31 December 2023 under section 43 of the Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013.
- 2) Approve the publication of a statutory notice, on the proposal to close Ysgol Felinwnda on 31 December 2023, allowing a statutory objection period of 28 days in accordance with the requirements of the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013 and the guidance of the Schools Organisation Code 011/2018, and to transfer the current pupils to a nearby alternative school, Ysgol Bontnewydd or Ysgol Llandwrog, in accordance with the parents' choice, from 1 January 2024.
- 3) Approve transport arrangements for the transitional period only, which would offer free transport to those pupils who are currently registered at Ysgol Felinwnda, and live in Ysgol Felinwnda's catchment area, to Ysgol Bontnewydd or Ysgol Llandwrog, for the remainder of the learners' period at one of those schools, in accordance with Cyngor Gwynedd's transport policy.
- 4) Subject to the Cabinet's decision regarding the proposal to close Ysgol Felinwnda, allow a consultation to be held on revising the catchment area boundaries of schools that border Ysgol Felinwnda's current catchment area.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Based on the PLASC (Pupil Level Annual School Census) January 2023, Ysgol Felinwnda is the smallest school in the county, with only 8 learners. Consequently, the Education Department submits this report to Cabinet requesting permission to hold a statutory objection period on the proposal to close Ysgol Felinwnda in accordance with the guidelines of the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013 and the Welsh Government statutory code (School Organisation Code 011/2018).
- 1.2 Section 48(3) of the 2013 Act provides that the requirement to consult does not apply to proposals to close a 'small school' as defined in the Act, and the School Organisation Code 011/2018 states:

"If a school has less than 10 registered pupils (or if there are no pupils left in a school) when the census is held in January, the 2013 Act allows governing bodies/local authorities to follow a simpler procedure in order to close the school officially.

The only thing they would be required to do under that procedure would be to issue the closure notice - the requirement to consult generally would be waived, if enough places in equivalent schools had been identified which would be reasonably accessible to those pupils who have been displaced or may be displaced."

As there are less than 10 registered learners at Ysgol Felinwnda in PLASC January 2023, the School Organisation Code allows the authority to follow a simpler procedure to close the school. In particular, the requirement to consult in general is waived, and the only thing that would be required would be to publish the statutory notice. Following that there would be the usual objection period, and any objections received would need to be considered before reaching a final decision. It would not be possible to refer such a decision to the Welsh Ministers as with other schools.

2. THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT

- 2.1 The Council has implemented the 'Excellent Primary Education for Children in Gwynedd' strategy since it was adopted by the Full Council in April 2009. It is noted in the strategy that there is a need to ensure 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 an Education System which is Fit for Purpose" which now provides 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 FELINWNDA

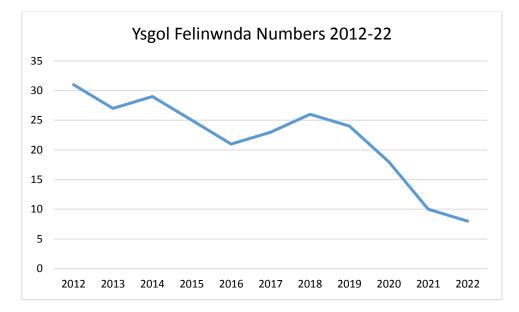
3.1 Ysgol Felinwnda is located near the villages of Saron and Dinas on the outskirts of Caernarfon and serves the nearby villages and areas. It provides education for pupils aged between 3 and 11 years. Children are admitted to the nursery class on a part-time basis in the September following their third birthday, and on a full-time basis in the September following their fourth birthday.

3.2 Number of learners

The table and graph below show the reduction in the numbers of learners at Ysgol Felinwnda over the past 10 years:

Year	Number of learners at Ysgol Felinwnda
2012	31
2013	27
2014	29

25
21
23
26
24
18
10
8



As can be seen, the number of pupils at the school has reduced substantially since 2018 and has been vulnerable for some time.

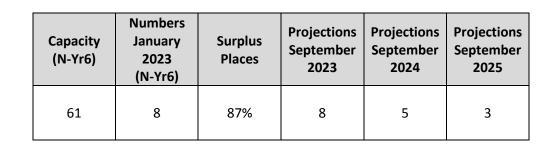
3.3 Broad age range within small classes

According to the PLASC in January 2013, 8 learners were recorded at Ysgol Felinwnda, which is the lowest number of learners at any school in Gwynedd. The learners are taught in two small multi-age classes with one class for year 1-3 learners and another for year 4-5. There are no nursery age, reception class, or year 6 pupils at the school:

		Year							
	Ν	R	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Felinwnda	0	0	1	1	1	2	3	0	8
Classes	Class				Class				

3.4 Projections

The table below shows the current position of the school and the projected numbers over the next 3 years:



As can be seen from the projections, it is likely that the numbers at the school will continue to reduce to levels that are even more vulnerable than the current situation over the next few years.

3.5 High percentage of surplus places

Based on the figures for January 2023, there were over 87% of surplus places at the school (a total of 53).

4. FINANCE

4.1 The following table shows the financial allocation of Ysgol Felinwnda for 2022-23:

	School's Financial Allocation 2022- 23	Cost Per Head 2022- 23	Safety Net 2022-23
Ysgol Felinwnda	£138,226	£14,643	£54,924
Gwynedd Schools Average	£478,000	£4,509	£34,456*

* Average of the 21 primary sites in the safety net.

4.2 Cost Per Pupil

The total allocation for the 2022-23 financial year (based on the numbers in September 2021) is £138,226, which means that the cost per head at Ysgol Felinwnda is £14,643 (2022-23). The county average for the cost per pupil in the same year is £4,509, which means that the cost per head at Ysgol Felinwnda is over 3 times more than the county average.

4.3 Safety Net

Ysgol Felinwnda receives a sum of £54,924 for 2022-23 through the minimum staffing policy (which guarantees at least a headteacher and teacher at every school, and a headteacher and assistant at schools with fewer than 15 learners).

4.4 Future challenges



Ysgol Felinwnda is facing a challenge to set a balanced budget for 2023-24 since the school will receive an allocation based on the number of learners, and this, along with a protected sum allocated to them will only enable them to employ a headteacher and assistant.

For 2023-24, Ysgol Felinwnda can make extensive use of balances to be able to continue with the current staffing arrangement for another year. However, it will not be possible for the arrangement to continue for 2024-25, since they will not have remaining balances and therefore, it would be mandatory to implement a staffing structure of headteacher and assistant for the whole range of learners at Ysgol Felinwnda.

Consequently, sharing a headteacher with Ysgol Llandwrog, as currently happens, would be impossible, and the teacher employed at Ysgol Felinwnda would face compulsory redundancy.

5. SPECIFIC FACTORS WHEN CONSIDERING SCHOOL CLOSURES

Although a process to close a school with less than 10 pupils omits the requirement to consult in general, the School Organisation Code 011/2018 states that relevant issues that are included in the Code must be considered. It notes that particular attention should be given to the following options when considered whether closing a school is appropriate:

a. Whether the establishment of multi-site schools might be considered as a means of retaining buildings, or the reasons for not pursuing this option?

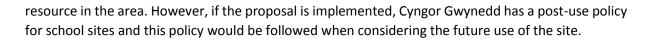
As there are only 8 learners in the school, Ysgol Felinwnda is facing an increasing challenge to set a balanced budget as the school receives an allocation based on the number of learners, and that, together with a minimum staffing protection sum allocated to them, will only enable them to employ a headteacher and a teaching assistant. Because of this, Cyngor Gwynedd is of the opinion that establishing schools with more than one site could not be considered as a way of keeping the school open.

b. Whether alternatives to closure, such as clustering, collaboration or federation with other schools, might be considered (taking account of the scope for use of ICT links between school sites) or the reasons for not pursuing these as an alternative

As clustering, collaborating, or federalisation with other schools would mean continuing with the current school, and therefore there is a high probability that the current challenges will continue and intensify over the next few years, the Council is of the opinion that this is not an option that would address the challenges facing Ysgol Felinwnda now and into the future.

c. Whether the possibility of making fuller use of the existing buildings as a community or educational resource could be explored

As Canolfan Bro Llanwnda is located next door to the school and runs many activities such as the Cylch Meithrin and Cylch Ti a Fi, it is not anticipated that the community will require another community



d. The overall effect of closure on the local community (including the loss of school based facilities which are used by the local community

There is no community use of the school at present. Canolfan Bro Llanwnda is located next door and runs many activities such as the Cylch Meithrin and Cylch Ti a Fi. Cyngor Gwynedd is of the opinion that as the centre is independent of the school it is not anticipated that the closure of the school would have any effects on local community events.

e. How parents' and pupils' engagement with the alternative school and any facilities it may offer could be supported

To mitigate any possible negative impact on the learners, we will encourage discussions between the alternative school or schools with the parents of Ysgol Felinwnda's catchment area learners so that they can take advantage of their facilities and after school activities, and to encourage the collaboration between the schools and the community at Felinwnda.

6. OPTIONS CONSIDERED TO OVERCOME THE CHALLENGES

- 6.1 It is obvious that many challenges are facing Ysgol Felinwnda, which means that the school's position is unsustainable in the future. The Education Department has considered 3 options for the future of education in the Ysgol Felinwnda catchment area and has evaluated every option against the following criteria, which corresponds with the "'Excellent Primary Education for Children in Gwynedd' Strategy.
 - Number of learners
 - Class sizes
 - Financial resources
 - Geographical factors
 - Leadership and staffing
 - The community
 - The Welsh language
- 6.2 See below a collection of the outcomes of the evaluation for the 3 options. The full evaluation can be seen in **Appendix A.**

6.2.1 Do nothing

Although the case for change has already been established, the 'Do Nothing' model has been included for comparison purposes.

This model would mean that there would be no change to the current provision in the Ysgol Felinwnda catchment area.



It is believed that the current situation of Ysgol Felinwnda will continue and intensify over the next few years, and as a result, we are of the opinion that continuing with the status quo is not an option for the future.

6.2.2 Federalisation with a nearby school

This model would ensure the continued presence of the school in Felinwnda 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.

If schools are federalised, they are required to be of the same status, therefore in the case of Ysgol Felinwnda they would need to federalise with another community school. The nearest community school is Ysgol Bontnewydd.

Conclusion

As this option involves continuing with the current school within the federation, it is anticipated that there is a high likelihood that the current challenges would continue and intensify over the next few years. Therefore, we are of the opinion that federalisation is not an option that would address the challenges facing Ysgol Felinwnda now and in the future.

6.2.3 Close Ysgol Felinwnda and offer a place to the learners at a nearby alternative school

This model would mean closing Ysgol Felinwnda and offering a place for the current learners to be educated in a nearby alternative school, or schools of the parents' choice, in accordance with the proposal in this report.

Should the Cabinet decide to implement the proposal to close Ysgol Felinwnda, then the Education Department will review the catchment area boundaries in the area by holding a consultation to collect the opinion locally, before reaching a decision on adjusting the school, or schools, catchment area to include Ysgol Felinwnda's catchment area for the future.

Conclusion

It is anticipated that this option will solve the challenges of low numbers, small classes, and high costs by:

- offering more opportunities to take part in activities with several other learners
- offering education in more suitable class sizes
- offering teaching in classes with more children of the same age
- reducing cost per head



The nearby alternative schools have enough space and equally good buildings and rooms for Ysgol Felinwnda's current pupil numbers.

7. THE PREFERRED OPTION

After conducting the options appraisal, the preferred option for the proposal for the future education of learners in the Ysgol Felinwnda catchment area is to close Ysgol Felinwnda on 31 December 2023, and the current pupils to transfer to a nearby alternative school, Ysgol Bontnewydd or Ysgol Llandwrog, in accordance with parents' choice, from 1 January 2024.

Should the Cabinet decide to implement the proposal to close Ysgol Felinwnda, then the Department of Education will review catchment area boundaries in the area by holding a consultation to collect the opinion locally, before coming to a decision on Ysgol Felinwnda's catchment area in the future.

Based on the Cabinet's decision on the future of Ysgol Felinwnda, it is anticipated that the consultation would be held early in the Spring term of 2024.

Subsequently the area served by Ysgol Felinwnda would form part of the catchment area of an alternative school or schools, and access to the school, or those schools, would be offered in accordance with the county's access policy, and transport would be provided to the school in accordance with the County's School Transport Policy.

8. IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

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:

- Assessing the Impact on Equality Characteristics, the Welsh language, and the Socio-Economic Disadvantage
- Impact Assessment Report of The Well-being of Future Generations Act
- Community Impact Assessment Report
- Assessment Report of the Probable Impact on Travel Arrangements
- Quality and Standards of Education Assessment Report

The above assessments can be seen in Appendix B.

8.1.1 Equality Assessment

The assessment gives specific attention to different equality elements such as race, gender, disability, language, religion or belief and age. The assessment identifies the current situation and shows that policies and arrangements are in place which would ensure that the proposal considers and is compatible with equal rights.

Following a weighing of the relevant factors it is concluded that learners will receive more equal opportunities when placed in an alternative school because the learners will receive learning experiences that are based on national learning principles, with a variety of styles including

working in mass groups, smaller groups, partner work and individually within their specific age range, together with lessons that are appropriately differentiated for the age range in question.

The children of Ysgol Felinwnda will have a better learning environment in a school with more learners of the same age, it will ensure that they make the most of their education and allow access to more activities relevant to their age and level ability.

Ysgol Felinwnda children will benefit from mixing with more age-related peers in a school with more learners, which will ensure suitable educational and extracurricular experiences for them together with access to more extracurricular activities.

The Council will follow normal processes by supporting and monitoring, to ensure compliance of each school with the equality characteristics.

8.1.2 Welsh Language Impact Assessment

The Welsh Government guidance (School Organisation Code 011/2018) states that a Welsh language impact assessment must be conducted as part of any proposal involving school reorganisation. A Welsh Language Impact Assessment was completed, by assessing the impact of the language on every option in the options appraisal.

The Gwynedd Education Language Policy has the same aim for all the county's primary schools, and every primary school (except one school) fall into category 3 in accordance with the school categorisation guidance according to the Welsh medium provision, Welsh Government. This means that the learners at Ysgol Felinwnda will be able to continue to receive their education through the medium of Welsh in accordance with the Education Language Policy in the alternative primary schools noted.

It is not anticipated that there would be a negative impact should the proposal be implemented, but it is possible that it could have a positive impact on the Welsh language as Ysgol Felinwnda learners benefit from additional opportunities to use Welsh with a broader range of peers in the classroom and socially.

8.1.3 Impact Assessment on socio-economic disadvantage

Following an assessment, it is anticipated that the proposal will reduce the inequality caused by socio-economic disadvantage by ensuring that the learners have more experiences and access to more services and activities in the alternative schools. Learners will receive more equal opportunities because the learners will receive learning experiences that are based on national learning principles, with a variety of styles including working in mass groups, smaller groups, partner work and individually within their specific age range together with lessons that are appropriately differentiated for the age range in question.

Ysgol Felinwnda children will have a better learning environment in a school with more learners of the same age, and it will ensure that they make the most of their education. The children will benefit from having more age-related peers in a school with more learners, which will ensure suitable educational and extracurricular experiences for them together with access to more extracurricular activities.



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 places 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".

Following consideration and assessment in accordance with the requirements of the well-being act, the seven goals of the well-being act and the Council's well-being objectives were considered, and it is concluded that the proposal meets the requirements.

It is acknowledged that this proposal leads to the loss of a school in the community of Felinwnda, however, a vast number of the children living within the school's catchment area already attend the nearby alternative schools, and therefore a link already exists between the schools and the community of Felinwnda. Every effort will be made to mitigate the impact on the community by encouraging links between the communities. Should the proposal be approved, discussions will be held to discuss the possibility that the alternative school's community activity includes the Felinwnda community where appropriate.

The proposal will ensure that the children of the area are educated on a site that is suitable and in a naturally Welsh-speaking society, thus increasing the opportunities to socialise and collaborate with others, and to give them a fair opportunity to thrive among their peers.

8.3 Community Impact Assessment

Welsh Government guidelines (School Organisation Code 011/2018) state that a community impact assessment needs to be carried out as part of any proposal to reorganise schools.

The assessment shows that there is no community use of the school. Canolfan Bro Llanwnda is located next door to the school and hosts several activities including the Cylch Meithrin and Cylch Ti a Fi. As the centre is independent from the school it is not anticipated that the closure of the school would have any effect on the ability of the Cylch Meithrin, Cylch Ti a Fi, or other events to continue.

If the option of closing Ysgol Felinwnda and offering learners a place in an alternative school were to be realised, it is not anticipated that it would have a negative impact on the Felinwnda community. To mitigate any possible negative impact on the learners, we will encourage discussions between the alternative school, or schools, and the parents of Ysgol Felinwnda learners so that they can take advantage of their facilities and activities after school, and to encourage collaboration between the school and the Felinwnda community.

8.4 Assessment of the Impact on Travel Arrangements

Welsh Government guidance (Schools Organisation Code 011/2018) states that a community impact assessment must be held as part of any proposal for schools' reorganisation. An impact

assessment on travel arrangements and travel impact assessment on each option was completed in the options evaluation.

It is stated in the assessment that, if the proposal were to be implemented, 3 learners of Ysgol Felinwnda at the moment, namely those who live in the catchment area of the school, would be offered transport to the alternative school from January 2024, in accordance with the county's Schools Transport Policy.

If the proposal were to be implemented, learners who currently attend Ysgol Felinwnda, and live within the catchment area, would be offered free transport to an alternative school from 1 January 2024, in accordance with County's Schools Transport Policy, at an annual cost of between £7,400 - £22,200 depending on the number of taxis required.

8.5 Assessment of the Quality and Standards of Education

Based on the result of the above assessment, and comparing Estyn's reports, it is concluded that the standard of education provided in the 2 nearby alternative schools is higher (Excellent) in one, and at least as good (Good) in the other, compared to the standard of education at Ysgol Felinwnda (Good). As a result, it is anticipated that there would be a likely positive impact in terms of the quality and standards of education resulting from the proposal to close Ysgol Felinwnda and transfer the learners to a nearby alternative school or schools.

9. IMPLICATIONS OF THE PROPOSAL

9.1 Current leaners

If the Cabinet decides to implement the proposal, Ysgol Felinwnda will close on 31 December 2023 and current pupils will transfer to a nearby alternative school, in accordance with parents' choice, from 1 January 2024.

9.2 Transport

If the Cabinet decides to implement the proposal, Ysgol Felinwnda will close on 31 December 2023 and transitional transport provision would be available for current Ysgol Felinwnda pupils (who also live in the school's catchment area) to either Ysgol Bontnewydd or Ysgol Llandwrog, in accordance with the County's Transport Policy.

9.3 Staffing Considerations

Should the proposal be implemented, it is anticipated that there would be staffing implications that could lead to redundancies. Discussions have already been conducted with staff and Unions to inform them that a report is being taken to Cabinet, requesting formal permission to hold an objection period on the option to close Ysgol Felinwnda.

Cyngor Gwynedd has developed a detailed staffing policy, in conjunction with Trade Unions and headteachers. Any redundancies resulting from this proposal will have to be in line with that policy. Clear and open communication will play a fundamental part in implementing any proposals.

10. REQUIREMENTS OF THE SCHOOLS ORGANISATION CODE 011/201

Any statutory process will be conducted in accordance with the Welsh Government's guidelines (School Organisation Code 011/2018) which provides:

"The requirement to consult is not applicable to proposals to terminate a small school..." (section 48(3)

and the Welsh Government Statutory Code (Schools Organisation Code 011/2018), which states:

"Where a school has fewer than 10 registered pupils (or there are no pupils remaining at a school) at the January census point the 2013 Act permits governing bodies/local authorities to undertake a streamlined procedure to bring about official closure.

This consists solely of the issue of the notice of closure – the requirement for general consultation being waived, provided sufficient equivalent school places have been identified which would be reasonably accessible to those pupils actually or potentially displaced."

11. NEXT STEPS AND TIMETABLE

Timetable	Steps
11 July	Cabinet - decide whether to go ahead and approve the issuing of statutory notices and hold an objection period.
September – October	If the Cabinet approves the proposal, a statutory notice will be issued, and an objection period (28 days) will be held where anyone will have the opportunity to submit an objection to the proposal in the notice
November	Cabinet - discuss and consider the objection report and decide whether to approve the proposal.
31 December	Subject to Cabinet decisions, implement the proposal
Spring Term 2024	Subject to a Cabinet decision - conduct a consultation on adjusting the boundaries of neighbouring school/s to include Ysgol Felinwnda's current catchment area
Spring Term 2024	Cabinet - consider a report on the consultation and decide to approve the proposal or not
September 2024	Dependent on Cabinet decision - implement the proposal

VIEWS OF STATUTORY OFFICERS

The 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:

From a financial point of view, it is clear that Ysgol Felinwnda's current situation is not sustainable, given that 87% of places in the school are empty. The report shows that an assessment has been carried out of the options available, and I am satisfied with the robustness of the financial estimates contained therein. I therefore support the decision sought.

Local Member:

I would like to thank the Cabinet of Gwynedd Council for postponing making a decision on this matter last March, in order to maintain a period of local engagement.

Nevertheless, I express disappointment that there has been an engagement rather than a consultation process. Engagement did not provide an opportunity to consider public opinion, and the engagement sessions could have been better promoted as there was very little, if any, reference to the engagement on the Council's website and social media.

I accept that a quicker process can be followed in order to close schools with less than 10 children, but this does not prevent consultation being carried out.

I remain concerned about the possible impact of closing the school on Ganolfan Bro Llanwnda and Cylch Meithrin Llanwnda, and therefore on the wider community. Although Ganolfan Bro Llanwnda is independant, losing the hustle and bustle of a school next door can reduce the community link that has existed between the school and the Centre. In addition, there would be an impact on numbers in the Cylch Meithrin, not only harmful to the Cylch itself, but also to the Centre, as one of the main users.

I welcome the fact that Ysgol Llandwrog is named as an alternative school together with Ysgol Bontnewydd. However it can be argued that the alternative school should only be Ysgol Llandwrog, as there is collaboration and sharing of a Headteacher between Ysgol Felinwnda and Ysgol Llandwrog, and the nature and feel of the two schools are similar.

I also welcome the intention of Gwynedd Council, (if there is a decision to close), to look again at Ysgol Felinwnda's catchment area. If this were to happen, I very much hope that that process would include a full and purposeful consultation.

The opinion locally is that Ysgol Felinwnda provides good education and is an asset to the community, but there is no dispute that the current numbers of pupils and future projections are fragile.

It must be accepted that sometimes difficult decisions have to be made, but I trust that Gwynedd Council, (if it proceeds to issue a statutory notice), will sincerely consider any objections received as part of that process.



Appendix A: Options Appraisal Table

Appendix B: Impact Assessments:

- Assessing the Impact on Equality Characteristics, the Welsh language, and the Socio-Economic Disadvantage
- Impact Assessment Report of The Well-being of Future Generations Act
- Community Impact Assessment Report
- Assessment Report of the Probable Impact on Travel Arrangements
- Quality and Standards of Education Assessment Report