

MEETING	Cyngor Gwynedd Cabinet
DATE	7 November 2023
CABINET MEMBER	Councillor Beca Brown
OFFICER	Gwern ap Rhisiart
TITLE OF ITEM	Ysgol Felinwnda

1. THE DECISION SOUGHT

- a) The Cabinet is requested to give its final approval to the proposal under Section 43 of the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013, issued through a statutory notice to close Ysgol Felinwnda on 31 December 2023, and the current pupils to transfer to an alternative school nearby, namely Ysgol Bontnewydd or Ysgol Llandwrog, according to the parents' choice, from 1 January 2024.
- b) To approve transport arrangements for the transition phase only, where free transport would be provided for those pupils who are currently enrolled at Ysgol Felinwnda and living within the catchment area of Ysgol Felinwnda, to Ysgol Bontnewydd or Ysgol Llandwrog, for the remainder of the learner's time in either of those schools, in accordance with Cyngor Gwynedd's transport policy.
- c) To allow further consultation to take place on the future of the current catchment area of Ysgol Felinwnda to agree what school, or schools will serve as a catchment area school in the future for the children of the existing Ysgol Felinwnda catchment area.

2. THE REASON FOR THE NEED FOR A DECISION

- 2.1 Based on the PLASC (Pupil Level Annual School Census) January 2023, Ysgol Felinwnda is the school with the lowest number of learners in the county, with a total of 8 learners. Consequently, the Education Department submitted a report to Cabinet on 11 July 2023 requesting permission to hold a statutory objection period on the proposal to close Ysgol Felinwnda in accordance with the Schools Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013 and the statutory Welsh Government Code (School Organisation Code 011/2018).
- 2.2 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 provides as follows:

"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."

Since there are only 8 registered learners at Ysgol Felinwnda in the January 2023 PLASC, the School Organisation Code allows the authority to follow a streamlined procedure to close the school. Specifically, the requirement for general consultation is waived. In accordance with the requirements of the School Organisation Code, the authority was only required to publish a statutory notice and undertake the normal objection period, and then to consider any objections received before reaching a final decision.

Following the submission of a report to Cabinet on 11 July they:

- a) Approved the commencement of the process to close Ysgol Felinwnda on 31 December 2023 under Section 43 of the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013.
- b) Approved to issue 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 School Organisation Code 011/2018, and to transfer the current pupils to an alternative school nearby, namely Ysgol Bontnewydd or Ysgol Llandwrog, according to parents' choice, from 1 January 2024.
- c) Approved transport arrangements for the transition phase only, where free transport would be provided for those pupils who are currently registered in Ysgol Felinwnda and living in the catchment area of Ysgol Felinwnda, to Ysgol Bontnewydd or Ysgol Llandwrog, for the remainder of the learner's time in either of those schools, in accordance with Cyngor Gwynedd's transport policy.
- d) Subject to the Cabinet's decision regarding the proposal to close Ysgol Felinwnda, to allow a consultation to be held on revising the catchment area boundaries of schools that border Ysgol Felinwnda's current catchment area.

3. STATUTORY OBJECTION PERIOD

In accordance with the Cabinet's decision, a Statutory Notice was issued (**Appendix A**) on 5 September 2023, commencing the objection period of 28 days. The notices were posted on the school gates and on the Council's website with the background to the proposal, a link to a report submitted to Cabinet on 11 July 2023, along with an explanation of how to submit objections. All the relevant stakeholders received an e-mail with a link to the website, informing them that the objection period would commence on 5 September 2023.

The Schools Organisation Code 011/2018 notes:

In the case of schools where some pupils remain, proposers must make sure that the closure notice is brought to the pupils' attention, that its meaning is made clear to them, and that appropriate steps are taken to enable these pupils to respond to the notice if they so wish. It is essential that pupils are provided with the opportunity to contribute to the decision-making process and proposers must ensure that full account is taken of any views they express before a final decision is taken.

In accordance with the Code, a session was conducted on 26 September 2023 with learners at the school to discuss the proposal to close Ysgol Felinwnda. The report on the session can be seen in **Appendix C**.

The objection period ended on 4 October 2023, and 4 objections were received.

Following the objection period, the Cabinet is required to consider a formal report on the objections together with the Council's response to them prior to reaching a final decision to implement the proposal or otherwise. **Appendix B** contains an analysis of the objections received and the Council's response to those objection comments.

4. OBJECTIONS

The purpose of this part of the report is to present a summary of the objections received during the objection period, together with the Council's response to them. All the objection comments with the Council's response to them are set out in **Appendix B** of this report.

4.1 Responses to the proposal from the learners of Ysgol Felinwnda

A session to discuss the proposed closure of Ysgol Felinwnda was held with all Ysgol Felinwnda learners on 26 September 2023. Appropriate documentation was prepared for the learners following consultation on their content with the Headteacher. Arrangements were made for the Headteacher to take the lead on discussing the proposal with learners, with administrative support from an officer from the Modernising Education Team, to ensure that they understood what was being proposed and to give them an opportunity to state their views on the proposal.

These were the main points raised during the consultation with the learners:

- The proposal saddened all the learners.
- The loss of friendship and the sense of Ysgol Felinwnda as a family should they attend a new school, worried each one of the learners.
- Many were worried about the future of the school building and its contents and didn't want it demolished should it be closed.
- Some learners were concerned about the support they would receive at an alternative school.
- Each one conveyed that friendly teachers and friends, creating memories, along with a safe building and environment are the most important things to them in any school.

Ysgol Felinwnda learners' comments during the session conveyed a tendency towards opposing the proposed closure.

Should the proposed closure be implemented, there will be a choice for current school learners to transfer to either Ysgol Llandwrog or Ysgol Bontnewydd. Ysgol Llandwrog is familiar to learners because of the collaboration that has existed between the two schools for some time. In addition, a number of Felinwnda catchment learners already attend Ysgol Bontnewydd.

The Authority recognises that this period is one of uncertainty that could lead to stress and impact on learners. However, if the proposal was implemented, the Authority would make every effort to assist the learners to transfer and settle into their new school.

4.2 Impact on the community

Some comments indicated concern about the future of Canolfan Bro Llanwnda and the Cylch Meithrin there, if the school closes. In addition, comments were received stating that the Llanwnda, Dinas and Saron area will lose an invaluable community resource through the closure and asked what long-term support the Council will be willing to invest in ensuring the prosperity of the local

community.

Cyngor Gwynedd has seen a substantial decline in the number of learners at Ysgol Felinwnda in the past 10 years, from 31 in 2012 to 8 in 2022, with only 3 of these learners living in the Ysgol Felinwnda catchment area.

In accordance with the Schools Organisation Code (011/2018), an impact assessment was undertaken regarding the impact of the proposed proposal on the community. Further consideration has been given to the impact of the proposal on the community following the receipt of the above objections. It is stated in the latest community impact assessment that there is no community use of the school. Canolfan Bro Llanwnda is located next door to the school and hosts a number of activities including the Cylch Meithrin and Cylch Ti a Fi. For this reason, it is not anticipated that the closure would have a directly significant impact on the school as a community resource for the Felinwnda community, but it is recognised that it may have a partial impact on the Cylch Meithrin and possibly on the Cylch Ti a Fi.

In relation to the concerns about the future of Canolfan Bro Llanwnda, should the school close, it is noted that supporting communities is something the Council's Community Support Service does, and we will direct your enquiry about support for the centre to them.

4.3 Cylch Meithrin

A comment was received that the Cylch Meithrin had been an initial educational link for many of the school's learners, and the Cylch would have an uncertain future without a school nearby.

Learner numbers have been fairly consistent at Cylch Meithrin Dinas and Llanwnda over the years. However, comparing the numbers of Cylch Meithrin learners with the number of learners in Ysgol Felinwnda's Nursery and Reception classes, it will be seen that the majority of children in the Cylch have not transferred to Ysgol Felinwnda. It is therefore likely that the closure of Ysgol Felinwnda would have a partial effect on parental choice to send their children to the Cylch.

The Council's Early Years Service is available to support the Cylch Meithrin with any childcare placements matters.

4.4 The Statutory Process

Comments have been received expressing disappointment that no consultation was held before an objection period was held on the proposal to close Ysgol Felinwnda.

At the outset of discussions on the proposal to close Ysgol Felinwnda, officers from the Education Department made it clear that any statutory process is carried out in accordance with the Welsh Government's 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."

However, after listening to local concerns about the original intention of holding an objection period on the proposal to close Ysgol Felinwnda and offering a place for children in the catchment area at

Ysgol Bontnewydd, the Cabinet Member for Education decided to defer taking the report on the proposal to Cabinet in March 2023. Subsequently, and as an additional step to the requirements of the Schools Organisation Code and in response to the aspirations of the community, officers from the Education Department and the Cabinet Member for Education held engagement sessions in Felinwnda, Bontnewydd and Llandwrog to explain that the Council now intended to hold an objection period on the proposed closure of Ysgol Felinwnda, and, subject to the Cabinet's decisions, to hold a separate consultation on a review of the catchment boundaries of schools adjoining Ysgol Felinwnda's existing catchment area.

4.5 The reasons for the proposal to close

Comments indicated that pupil numbers and budget, namely data and money, formed the basis of the proposal rather than a proactive vision to enable vulnerable rural Welsh communities to continue and thrive.

The Authority is proposing to close Ysgol Felinwnda as it is faced with a number of challenges, specifically:

- The number of learners at the school is causing concern, with only 8 learners attending the school,
- Learner number projections remain vulnerable,
- The class sizes are small - 2 classes with 3 pupils in one and 5 in the other (January 2023),
- There is an age range of 3 years or over in both classes

The Council is of the opinion that implementing the proposal to close Ysgol Felinwnda would provide better experiences for pupils to socialise and collaborate on a daily basis with peers and mean that children are taught in more suitably sized classes.

No community use is made of Ysgol Felinwnda with Canolfan Bro Llanwnda used for community events. Occasional use of the Centre is made by the school. As a result, it is not anticipated that the closure would have a directly significant impact on the community use of Canolfan Bro Llanwnda.

4.6 The impact of constructing the Caernarfon and Bontnewydd bypass.

One comment noted that no consideration had been given to a negative impact experienced by the school during the construction of the Caernarfon and Bontnewydd bypass and that this had influenced new parents to take their children to other schools nearby.

The number of learners in the Ysgol Felinwnda catchment choosing to attend other schools was high before the construction of the Caernarfon and Bontnewydd bypass began. For example, here were 50 learners attending other schools in 2019 and 46 learners attending other schools in 2017 and 2018. We can therefore conclude that the construction of the bypass did not have a negative impact on the number of learners.

4.7 Ysgol Bontnewydd Plans

One comment stated that he was suspicious of the coincidence of a Welsh Government announcement to fund £12 million to build a new 'district' School for Bontnewydd and that it

looked like a deliberate attempt to undermine and jeopardise the future of the area's rural schools in order to justify a new large school.

The Education Department was successful in a national competition, namely the Welsh Government's Sustainable Schools Challenge, to secure a substantial capital investment in Ysgol Bontnewydd. The success of the application was not certain as it was a competitive process. The investment in Ysgol Bontnewydd is a project that responds to the needs of that particular school's catchment area.

4.8 Education Strategy

Comments have been received asking whether the new Education Strategy will provide an operational and credible strategy for the County's small and rural schools in the future.

The Authority is in the process of formulating an Education Strategy and as part of this work, a public consultation is planned. There will be an opportunity to give an opinion on the content of the draft Education Strategy as part of the proposed consultation.

5. 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:

- Impact Assessment on the Equality Characteristics of Welsh and Socio-economic Disadvantage
- Impact Assessment on the Well-being of Future Generations Act
- Community Impact Assessment Report
- Language Impact Assessment Report
- Assessment Report on the Probable Impact on Travel Arrangements
- Quality and Standards of Education Assessment Report

Further consideration was given to the above assessments, following the objection period. It is considered that the findings of the assessments are still current and relevant to the recommendation. The latest assessments have been included in **Appendix D**.

6. SPECIFIC FACTORS WHEN CONSIDERING CLOSING THE SCHOOL

Although a process to close a school that has fewer than 10 pupils waives the requirement for general consultation, the Schools Organisation Code 011/2018 states that relevant matters included in the Code must be considered. It notes that when considering whether a school closure is appropriate, special attention should be given to the following options:

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;

With only 8 learners, Ysgol Felinwnda is facing an increasing challenge to set a balanced budget as the school will receive an allocation based on the number of learners, and this, along with a protected sum allocated to them which enables them to employ a headteacher and assistant only. Because of this, Cyngor Gwynedd is of the opinion that consideration cannot be given to the establishment of multi-site schools as a means of keeping the school open.

b. Whether alternatives to closure, such as clustering, collaboration or federation with other schools, might be considered or the reasons for not pursuing these as an alternative.

As clustering, collaboration or federation with other schools, would mean continuing with the existing school, and therefore there would be a high likelihood that the current challenges would continue and intensify over the next few years, therefore the Council is of the opinion that these options do not address the challenges facing Ysgol Felinwnda now and in the future.

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

Since Canolfan Bro Llanwnda is located next door to the school and holds a number of activities including the Cylch Meithrin and Cylch Ti a Fi it is not anticipated that there is a need for another community resource in the area. However, should the proposal be implemented, Cyngor Gwynedd has a school building after-use policy, and this policy would be followed when considering the site's future.

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

Observations were received regarding the impact of the school's closure on the local community and Canolfan Bro Llanwnda following the objection period. The full responses can be seen in **Appendix B** with a summary in **4.2** above.

In accordance with the Schools Organisation Code (011/2018), an impact assessment was undertaken regarding the impact of the proposal on the community. Further consideration has been given to the impact of the proposal on the community following the receipt of the above objections. It is stated in the latest community impact assessment that there is no community use of the school. Canolfan Bro Llanwnda is located next door to the school and hosts a number of activities including the Cylch Meithrin and Cylch Ti a Fi. For this reason, it is not anticipated that the closure would have a directly significant impact on the school as a community resource for the Felinwnda community, but it is recognised that it could have a partial impact on Cylch Meithrin and Cylch Ti a Fi.

In relation to the concerns about the future of Canolfan Bro Llanwnda, should the school close, it is noted that supporting communities is something the Council's Community Support Service does and we will direct your enquiry about support for the centre to them.

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

To mitigate against any potential negative impact on learners, we would encourage discussions between the alternative school, or schools, and the parents of learners at Ysgol Felinwnda so that they can take advantage of their facilities and after-school activities, and to encourage collaboration between the school and the community of Felinwnda.

7. CONCLUSION

Although the authority received 4 objections to the proposal to close Ysgol Felinwnda on 31 December 2023, following consideration of all objections received, the Council remains convinced that this proposal is the most appropriate response to the challenges faced by the school.

The analysis of the comments and objections received is addressed in *Section 4* of this report and the comments and responses are fully available in **Appendix B**.

It is anticipated that the closure of Ysgol Felinwnda on 31 December 2023, and offering current learners to transfer to a nearby alternative school, namely Ysgol Bontnewydd or Ysgol Llandwrog, in accordance with parental choice, from 1 January 2024 will solve the challenges of low numbers, small classes and high costs by:

- offering education in classes of a more suitable size
- offering education in classes with more children of the same age
- reducing the cost per head

There will be improved educational environments for future learners in the school / schools that will serve Ysgol Felinwnda's catchment area following the completion of the consultation on which school, or schools, will serve as a catchment school for the children of Ysgol Felinwnda's current catchment area in the future.

8. IMPLICATIONS OF THE PROPOSAL

8.1 Current learners

Should the Cabinet decide to implement the proposal, Ysgol Felinwnda will close on 31 December 2023 and current learners will transfer to an alternative school, in line with parental choice, from 1 January 2024.

8.2 Transport

Should the Cabinet decide to implement the proposal, Ysgol Felinwnda will close on 31 December 2023 and transitional transport provision would be available for existing Ysgol Felinwnda learners (who also live in the school catchment area) to either Ysgol Bontnewydd or Ysgol Llandwrog, in accordance with the County's Schools Transport Policy, at an annual cost of between £7,600 - £22,800, depending on parental choice and the mode of transport..

8.3 Staffing Considerations

Should the proposal be implemented, it is anticipated that staffing implications would lead to redundancies. Cyngor Gwynedd 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 implementing any proposals.

Discussions have already begun with staff and Unions to give them prior warning of the objection period on the option to close Ysgol Felinwnda and we will meet with them following the Cabinet's decision to discuss the next steps.

8.4 Canolfan Bro Llanwnda and the Cylch Meithrin

Should the proposal to close Ysgol Felinwnda be implemented, we will refer concerns about the sustainability of the centre and Cylch Meithrin to the Council's Community Support Service and Early Years Service to assist them with any issues.

9. RECOMMENDATION

Following consideration of the objections, it is recommended that the Cabinet:

- a) Approve the decision sought, of final confirmation of the proposal under Section 43 of the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013 given via statutory notice, to close Ysgol Felinwnda on 31 December 2023 and offer learners a place at either Ysgol Llandwrog or Ysgol Bontnewydd from 1 January 2024, subject to parental choice.
- b) Approve transport arrangements for the transitional phase only, where free transport would be provided for those pupils who are currently registered at Ysgol Felinwnda and living in the Ysgol Felinwnda catchment area, to Ysgol Bontnewydd or Ysgol Llandwrog, for the remainder of the learner's time in either of those schools, in accordance with Cyngor Gwynedd's transport policy.
- c) Permit a consultation to take place on the future of the current catchment area of Ysgol Felinwnda to agree what school, or schools will serve as a catchment area school for the children of Ysgol Felinwnda's current catchment area in the future.

By undertaking the consultation on the future of Ysgol Felinwnda's current catchment, the Council will gather the views of key stakeholders locally before reaching a decision on which school, or schools, will serve Ysgol Felinwnda's catchment area in the future.

The consultation will take place early in the Spring 2024 term before a report on the consultation is brought back to Cabinet for a final decision.

Subsequently, the area served by Ysgol Felinwnda from September 2024 would form part of alternative school, or schools, catchment areas, and access to the school, or schools, would be offered in accordance with the county's access policy, and transport would be provided to the school or schools in accordance with the County's School Transport Policy.

10. NEXT STEPS

Subject to the Cabinet's decision, these are the next steps together with an outline timetable:

November 2023	<p>Share the decision with all relevant stakeholders.</p> <p>Offer a place to those learners currently enrolled in Ysgol Felinwnda, who live in the catchment area of Ysgol Felinwnda, at Ysgol Bontnewydd or Ysgol Llandwrog, offering them transport in accordance with Cyngor Gwynedd's transport policy for the remainder of the learner's time at one of those schools.</p> <p>Offer a place in an alternative school to those learners currently enrolled in Ysgol Felinwnda and living in other catchment areas.</p> <p>Hold discussions with staff at Ysgol Felinwnda.</p>
31 December 2023	Implementation of the proposal to close Ysgol Felinwnda.
January - February 2024	Consult on the future of Ysgol Felinwnda's current catchment area to agree which school, or schools, will serve as a future catchment school for the children of Ysgol Felinwnda's current catchment area.

March - April 2024	Return to Cabinet for approval on a preferred option on which school, or schools, will serve Ysgol Felinwnda's catchment area in the future.
---------------------------	--

11. VIEWS OF THE STATUTORY OFFICERS

The Monitoring Officer:

The report has been the subject of advice from Legal Services. No observations to add in relation to propriety

Head of Finance Department:

From a financial perspective, I cannot see that there has been any change in the situation since the Cabinet discussed this matter in July and the process of closing the school was started. Ysgol Felinwnda's current situation is not sustainable, and the previous report showed that an assessment had been carried out of the options available, and I was satisfied with the robustness of the financial estimates contained therein. I support the decision sought."

The Local Member:

I note the recommendation presented to the Cabinet, which is to approve the closure of Ysgol Felinwnda from 31 December 2023, following the publication of the Statutory Notice on 5 September 2023.

The closure of a school that has served the local community and provided good education in a homely atmosphere since 1895 is a sad event.

However, the school's current numbers are very low, with no forecasted increase. It must therefore be accepted that difficult decisions must be made by Cyngor Gwynedd's Cabinet.

Moving forward, what is important is that the comments received as part of the objection to the Statutory Notice, and during the statutory process are addressed.

These include the effect of closing Ysgol Felinwnda on Canolfan Bro Llanwnda and Cylch Meithrin Dinas and Saron.

I welcome what Cyngor Gwynedd says when responding to the objections received, that is, that there will be support from Cyngor Gwynedd's Community Support Service and the Early Years Service for Canolfan Bro Llanwnda and the cylch meithrin.

Cyngor Gwynedd will hold a consultation on the future of Ysgol Felinwnda's catchment area, and it is important to ensure that this process will be one that succeeds in gathering the opinions of residents and the local community through a thorough and sincere process.

I, and many in the community, are of the strong opinion that the Felinwnda catchment area should be reshaped so that pupils in the catchment area go to Ysgol Llandwrog, rather than Ysgol Bontnewydd. Felinwnda and Llandwrog schools have worked closely together over the years and the rural nature of the two schools is very similar. This would also help to protect the future of Ysgol Llandwrog which provides good education in the local community.

I know that Cyngor Gwynedd is in the process of developing a draft education strategy, which will be subject to consultation. As the demographics of Gwynedd's pupils for the future are fragile, I would like to emphasise how important it is for this strategy to be workable and credible, in the context of small and rural schools in Gwynedd. It should propose a procedure that explains what part these schools have in terms of protecting Gwynedd's rural and Welsh communities for the future. It should also ensure strategic planning by catchment area rather than closing schools when the numbers reach a certain threshold, without consideration of the wider picture.

Appendices

Appendix A: Statutory Notice

Appendix B: Analysis of objection comments

Appendix C: Responses of Ysgol Felinwnda learners to the proposal

Appendix D: Impact Assessments

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS - All relevant background documentation on the proposal is available on the Council's website via the following link [Ysgol Felinwnda \(llyw.cymru\)](#)