
EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
12/12/24

Attendance:

Councillors: Councillor Cai Larsen (Chair)
Councillor Rhys Tudur (Vice-chair)

Councillors: Jina Gwyrfai, Dawn Lynne Jones, Elwyn Jones, Gareth Tudor Jones, Gwilym Jones, Beth Lawton, Dewi Owen, Gwynfor Owen, John Pughe Roberts, Richard Glyn Roberts, Huw Llwyd Rowlands and Sian Williams.

Co-opted Members: Colette Owen (The Catholic Church) and Elise Poulter (NEU).

Officers present: Geraint Owen (Corporate Director), Bethan Adams (Scrutiny Advisor) and Eirian Roberts (Democracy Services Officer).

Present for items 5 and 6: Councillor Dewi Jones (Cabinet Member for Education), Gwern ap Rhisiart (Head of Education Department), Debbie Anne Jones (Assistant Head of Education Department - Corporate Services) and Robert John Jones (Education Transport Manager).

The following were thanked for their service:

- Two former members of this committee, Councillors Dewi Jones and Llio Elenid Owen, were congratulated on their appointment as Cabinet Members.
- Karen Vaughan-Jones, Dwyfor Parent/Governor Representative.
- Former Cabinet Member for Education, Councillor Beca Brown. Reference was made to her wholehearted support for Foden's victims and her unwavering commitment to a thorough public inquiry into the matter. It was noted that the Chair would send her a message of thanks.

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Iwan Huws; Sharon Roberts (Arfon Parent/Governor Representative) and Gwilym Jones (NASUWT).

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declarations of personal interest were received.

3. URGENT ITEMS

None to note.

4. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee held on 17 October 2024 as a true record.

5. SCHOOL REVENUE BUDGETS

The Cabinet Member for Education, the Head of Education and the officers were welcomed to the meeting.

The Cabinet Member noted that:

- He too wished to echo the thanks to the former Cabinet Member for Education for her service and principled approach to undertaking the role over recent years, emphasising that he too would continue to follow the principled direction of Councillor Beca Brown in carrying out the role.
- As a former member of this committee, he hoped to form a professional relationship with the committee and wanted the scrutinisers to hold him and the Education Department to account.
- He wished to take the opportunity, as a new Cabinet Member, to apologise most sincerely for any suffering that took place at Ysgol Friars, Bangor. He further noted that the Council was fully committed to turning over every stone in order to understand exactly what went wrong at the school, and that we would do our utmost to ensure that this sort of thing never happened again.
- He would ensure that the Education Department and the Council responded fully and appropriately to any recommendations arising from the investigations currently underway.
- He called on the Welsh Government to commission a public inquiry to get to the root of what went wrong at Ysgol Friars.
- The Welsh Government's Draft Budget was published on 11 December and the Gwynedd settlement was inadequate and less than the national average. As such, the Council faced difficult decisions over the next few years.

Submitted – the report of the Cabinet Member for Education detailing School Revenue Budgets to ensure the committee's input and understanding of the impact of cuts, demography and grants on school revenue budgets.

The Cabinet Member set out the context and then gave members the opportunity to ask questions and offer observations.

Referring to paragraph 4.2.3 of the report, concern was raised that headteachers in the primary sector were reporting that they did not have the staff to offer specialist provisions and early interventions such as ELSA (Emotional Literacy Support Assistants). It was noted that children and young people's mental health problems were worsening and that early interventions of this kind were important in supporting pupil attendance and reducing referrals to external agencies such as CAMHS, which had long waiting lists. It was asked whether it was possible to look at alternative funding sources for this important work. In response, it was noted:

- That the point was a very valid one and that the work and the impact of the early intervention and child support work within the primary sector, and the secondary sector, was appreciated.
- That the work was taking place in schools, but that financial austerity meant that the opportunities and ability to offer sessions were decreasing.
- That the schools were looking at every possible avenue to be able to run these sessions, whether through group work, for example, rather than one-to-one work.
- That any additional grants available were allocated entirely to the schools to do the work, but as budgets shrank, the schools faced situations where it was

difficult, for example, to justify giving one child an ELSA session, and perhaps deprive the rest of the class of other provisions.

Referring to paragraphs 4.3.10 to 4.3.12 of the report, which elaborates on arrangements to fund support for a pupil with additional learning needs who moved school, it was asked whether the assistant moved with the pupil, or remained at the school. In response, it was noted:

- That the integration situation and the approach to supporting children with additional learning needs was currently changing in Gwynedd.
- That a decision was made during the current financial year to freeze the school integration budget, thereby doing away with the moderation panels and forums that used to allocate funding to schools in the form of hours for the appointment of temporary special needs coordinators.
- That historically, as a pupil left a school, the coordinator post at that school would come to an end, and those hours would be offered at another school.
- That the decision was made to freeze the integration budget this year in order to move to a new formula and a new way of allocating the funds, and also to try to rationalise the work for special needs coordinators in a school. Some schools had gained from that because the budget was frozen at the top of the wave, while other schools were at the bottom of the wave and regretted that the budget had been frozen in the first place.
- That the new model would take a snapshot of all the school's needs at a point in time and would allocate the integration funds for the year based on that. It was hoped that this would reassure staff that their job at the school continued should the pupil leave, and would also reassure the school in terms of planning the provision.
- That these changes did not mean that there would be any increase in the amount of money available, and if a child moved from one school to another, the schools would have to put up with that.
- That if a child came from outside the county, there was a pot of money available for children with more profound needs and to ensure that if a new case came forward, those needs could be met, but there would be nothing left in the funding pot afterwards.

It was asked what would happen to the capitation that schools received at the start of the academic year if a child was suspended early in the first term and moved to another school. In response, it was noted that the funding routinely moved with the child in the secondary sector, but that there would also have to be a discussion about the primary sector if the number of primary exclusions continued to increase.

It was emphasised that it was important that any salary increases were funded entirely from the centre.

It was asked how many Gwynedd schools only remained open because they fell into the safety net. In response, it was noted:

- That Gwynedd currently had just over 30 schools that fell into this category, and that this guaranteed a minimum of a headteacher and teacher.
- That there was a lower category than that, namely schools with fewer than 15 children, and that this guaranteed a minimum of a headteacher and assistant.
- That it was envisaged that Gwynedd would have five schools with fewer than 15 children next September, and that we currently had 16 schools with fewer than 30 children.

It was asked if it was time to look again at closing schools. It was noted that the question was asked in fairness to the children of the whole county, given that all the small schools of Bro Dysynni had already closed. In response, it was noted that it was necessary to agree an education strategy that looked at everything and set a direction for this field, and the input of the scrutinisers into the strategy would be appreciated when it was ready.

It was asked what the timescale was in terms of preparing the Education Strategy. In response, it was noted:

- That a number of engagement sessions had already been held with the heads of primary, secondary and special schools in relation to the direction.
- That a strategy had been prepared in draft form and would require the input of the new Cabinet Member.
- That following the engagement with the headteachers, there was an intention to go back to the schools to clarify what was envisaged as the way forward.
- That it was clear from the discussion with the schools that everyone agreed that the current system was unsustainable, but that no one agreed on the way forward.

It was asked how the consultation with the schools worked. In response, it was noted:

- That there had been no formal consultation with the schools to date in terms of any strategy, however engagement had taken place with them to listen to what people had to say about the way forward.
- That schools of the same size in the same area had been brought together as it was easier for people to speak openly in terms of their experiences with other headteachers who worked within the same context in terms of child numbers.
- That the exercise had been very valuable and a lot had been learnt about the mindset in the schools.
- That there had also been engagement with the secondary sector, but at more of an area level, and there had been a very open discussion with them too about the way forward. A discussion had also been held with the special sector as to the direction and it would also be necessary to go through the Strategic Forums, etc.

The Cabinet Member noted:

- That the desire was to bring the Strategy before this committee and through the correct channels when it was ready.
- That it was fully realised that this was a sensitive issue and it was wished to deal with this in the most sensitive way possible.
- That it was wished to assure the scrutinisers that the intention was to consult in full on the Strategy.
- That the data included in the report before this committee meeting showed that the current situation was unsustainable, as a result of 15 years of austerity and cuts.
- That there would be very difficult decisions to make in due course, but that the Department would do its best to be creative in finding solutions and would work with the councillors and the communities and people of Gwynedd.

It was noted that the county lost around 150 primary pupils each year and it was emphasised that this highlighted the need to have a strategy, or at least an interim strategy, in place. It was noted that the committee had scrutinised a draft strategy back in September 2023 and it was asked what had held the work back. In response, it was noted that because this would be Gwynedd's Education Strategy for the next 10 years, the Head of Education wished to have a document that not only highlighted the

headings and aspirations, but also detailed the direction and how those objectives were to be realised. The draft strategy submitted to the committee in September 2023 did not do this.

The report before this committee meeting was welcomed, as the alarming data in it enabled the scrutinisers to look at the problem in grim reality.

It was asked whether dates had been earmarked for the stages of the process of preparing and completing the Education Strategy. In response, it was noted:

- That the draft Strategy was to be finalised during the Spring Term, and consulted on at the end of the Spring Term/the beginning of the Summer Term.
- That other things were going to have to happen in the meantime and that would be visible over the coming weeks and months.

It was suggested that what we would face in the future would be fewer schools, fewer classes per year in those schools in the case of secondary schools, and those classes being bigger. Subsequently, it was asked how the plain and honest report before this meeting aligned with other reports and plans and the Gwynedd Yfory scheme, which mentioned offering education of the best standard, including access to a range of subjects, etc. It was asked whether it was propaganda to say that everything was wonderful. It was suggested that in the long term, we would witness a managed decline in the rural Welsh areas, with care homes in Dwyfor and Meirionnydd and schools in Arfon, and the young population in the centre of the county and the older population on the outskirts (a trend that had already started). In terms of the next few years, it was asked what impact all of this would have on the curricular range offered in the schools, specifically GCSE subjects such as French, Music and Computing, which were very important in enriching children's education. In response, it was noted:

- That the decline in the numbers of children was to be felt throughout Gwynedd, and not just in the rural areas. There had been a real decline in places like Caernarfon, Bangor and Bethesda.
- In terms of GCSE subjects, it was really challenging to maintain the desired range of subjects in schools for pupils in Years 10 and 11. It could be difficult to get enough pupils to choose the subjects to justify the cost of delivering the course. It was also a challenge to get specialists to teach the subjects. Since those specialists would not be able to teach their subject for five days a week, they would be extended to teach all sorts of other subjects, and not necessarily subjects of their choice.

It was asked whether consideration had been given to distance learning of traditional GCSE subjects such as French and Computing. In response, it was noted:

- That a scheme funded by the Welsh Government was already in place and was used by a number of schools in rural areas of Wales.
- That distance learning was not suitable for everyone and was thought to be more suitable for older and more mature children in terms of ability to concentrate on a task, etc.
- That a member of staff in the classroom and an online specialist were needed, so the costs despite being smaller, still existed.
- That to ensure the same experience for every child, everyone would be taught virtually, even if the specialist worked from another room in the same school as some of the pupils, but that didn't always meet with parents' approval.

The Cabinet Member noted that:

- He totally rejected the comments by a member about managed decline in rural Welsh areas and propaganda, and as a Cabinet Member, his priority was to

see Gwynedd Yfory give all the children of the county every opportunity possible.

- In having to re-structure and reconsider aspects, there was a real opportunity here to be able to provide a better education, and a wider range of education. It was also hoped that better provision and support could be looked at for children and young people with additional learning needs.

It was noted that the cumulative figures in terms of one school's budget for the next three years were concerning, and it was suggested that if that was the general situation across the whole county, we would be in quite a dire situation in about three years' time. In light of that, confirmation was requested that we would have a strategy that would work. In response, it was confirmed that the Strategy would work.

It was noted that sometimes reference was made to an Education Strategy and to a Schools Strategy, and assurance was sought that the two things were the same. Assurance was also sought that a draft strategy, and not the final strategy, would come before this committee in due course so that the scrutinisers could give their views on the content. It was further noted that Gwynedd had a very good Education Strategy about 15 years ago, which looked at schools across the county and formulated different options. However, nothing further had happened since then, and it was suggested that when opportunities arose, options such as federating schools, creating more lifelong learning schools or sharing a headteacher between two or three schools should be explored. In response, it was noted:

- That one Education Strategy existed and would include the drivers as to why we had to change and what our ambition was. It would also look at any opportunities that arose, how to respond to those opportunities in terms of the future of schools and how steps could be taken to share headteachers, etc. going forward.
- That the Education Strategy would be submitted to this committee in draft form.

It was asked whether schools that did not make full use of their inclusion money to include children, had a worse record in terms of excluding pupils than schools that made full use of the money, and perhaps gave a little extra from their main budget to ensure that children were fully included. In response, it was noted that:

- Since the closure of Ysgol Coed Menai and Bryn Llwyd Referral Unit in Bangor and Glan Wnion Referral Unit in Dolgellau, the secondary sector received around £1.2m of inclusion grant for the inclusion of children and to ensure that children were supported within schools, thereby reducing exclusions and improving attendance.
- Children's needs had changed over the years with schools now supporting more children with emotional needs and vulnerability in their ability to attend school, etc., so that there was little or no provision left for children with actual behavioural problems.
- Although children's needs had intensified, the grant had remained the same.
- The use of the grant was monitored to an extent. Further monitoring work was desirable because, in times of financial austerity, it could be tempting for many headteachers to use the money for other purposes within their schools, such as providing extra lessons to the higher tier. This was the sort of thing the officers would be asked to do next year.

It was asked whether there was a risk that some schools with a sixth form (which was funded by Medr – The Commission for Tertiary Education and Research) used money from their main budget to subsidise the sixth form. In response, it was noted that this could happen, but that it was up to school governing bodies to decide on the use of

their core funds. It was noted that it could also happen to the contrary with Medr grant funding subsidising the core budget to an extent.

Concern was expressed that Years 7-11 pupils could miss out if the school's core funds were used to subsidise the sixth form. In response, it was suggested that this was a matter for councillors who were members of school governing bodies to raise at their governors' meetings if they wished.

The Department was urged to try to ensure that additional learning needs schools were protected from any cuts once again, as they received far less money than other schools in Wales. In response, it was noted that while no promise could be given, the Department would do its best to ensure that.

It was noted that it was presumed that the reduction in child numbers would be significantly higher in Dwyfor and Meirionnydd compared to Arfon, which was more urban, and it was asked if it would be possible to share data on a school-by-school basis with members to see the extent of the decline in rural areas. In response, it was agreed to share the rolling data on child numbers across all sectors with members.

It was noted that some schools had managed to protect themselves from cuts in the past by using balances, but as their balances reduced, the situation would become more difficult. In response, it was noted:

- That a number of schools made use of balances to set budgets.
- That the Department advised schools on staffing changes well in advance and that the use of balances was helpful to facilitate the change.
- That schools were not allowed to set budgets using balances without having a meaningful discussion about their plans for the times when those balances ran out.
- That the conversation was becoming increasingly difficult as child numbers also fell.

The Department was thanked for the support given to headteachers going through the process of dismissing staff due to redundancy and also as they set their budgets year on year. In response, it was noted:

- That there was a lot of support and assistance available for the redundancy process, and that the unions and the finance, education and human resources officers were to be thanked for their exceptionally good work in supporting the schools.
- That the redundancy process now started in January, rather than November, so that the situation on the financial allocation was clearer.
- That there were still large balances in some schools and that this was good in the sense that those schools had been able to be prudent in their use of funding.
- That levels of balances in Gwynedd remained quite high overall, but not in all schools.

RESOLVED

- 1. To accept the report and note the observations.**
- 2. To ask the Education Department to share with committee members:**
 - (a) the rolling data per school;**
 - (b) regular updates on the development of the Gwynedd Education Strategy.**
- 3. That the Committee scrutinises the draft Education Strategy when timely.**

6. EDUCATION TRANSPORT

Submitted - the report of the Cabinet Member for Education:

- to explain the background and rationale for the historic overspending in education transport;
- to report on progress and the actions that have been taken in response to the situation; as well as
- to present options being considered in terms of future education transport arrangements to try to rationalise and reduce costs where practicable.

The Cabinet Member set out the context and then gave members the opportunity to ask questions and offer observations.

It was noted that it was recognised that there was a shortage of taxis in the Meirionnydd area in particular and that this was bound to be generating high costs for the Council. It was asked what was intended to be done in terms of that. In response, it was noted:

- That there was a shortage of transport providers in many areas which could lead to higher prices for provision as the driver or taxi had to travel from a greater distance to do the work.
- That the report referred to a number of practical steps that could be taken in relation to the situation and that the Department was looking at all possible options going forward.

With reference to the programme of work in paragraph 4.1.1 of the report which refers to revisiting the transport arrangements of Additional Learning Needs learners, the Department was asked not to put these children and young people in a box and to acknowledge that they had different disabilities, and not just physical disabilities. It was noted that children and young people with neurodiverse conditions needed to be considered, and to seek legal advice before formulating any criteria or plan for ALN learners. In response, it was noted:

- That the reference in the report to revisiting ALN learner transport arrangements was more to do with revisiting the timetable rather than the provision, so that provision could be tendered earlier for these children and young people in order to get the best price.
- That in terms of the wider comment on ALN transport, the needs of all children had to be considered of course and it was not thought that that would change in any arrangements that were made, but possibly that we were looking at a different and slightly more cost effective way of providing transport in the future.
- That a number of recent conversations had been held with Ysgol Hafod Lon in terms of identifying the needs of different children and identifying which children would be able to travel together, which children would not be suitable to do so and which children needed chaperones, etc.

It was noted that, looking at the plan, it had to be recognised that any minor change such as a taxi change could be harmful to ALN learners. In response, it was noted that this was going to have to be addressed going forward to ensure that the needs of the learners on the journey were met which is why, when going out to tender, we needed to be clearer about our requirements and expectations for those learners.

The Cabinet Member noted that:

- There was agreement with the comment that consideration also needed to be given to the needs of learners with neurodiverse conditions and that it was important to consult fully on this with experts in the field.
- Everything had to be done to avoid a negative impact on anyone, and to be flexible so that the routine could be adapted for individuals with different needs.

- If change had to be introduced, that change was to be communicated clearly and phased in so that the learner had time to become familiar with the change, and also be involved in the consultation.

It was noted that there was concern in south Meirionnydd that young people may have to pay for transport to Coleg Meirion Dwyfor and that the bus timetables did not correspond to the college day. In response, it was noted that there had been recent changes to the public transport timetables in Meirionnydd and that the Department would have to review the timetables again and see how locations could be better served in that part of the county.

Post-16 transport to the colleges was identified as being essential for young people in the Meirionnydd and Dwyfor area as there was no sixth form in the schools. It was suggested that the Cabinet Member for Education be requested to contact the Welsh Government in the context of introducing a free travel pass for young people 16-21 years old to reduce the pressure on the Council to provide free transport, and to facilitate travel to work, to college or sixth form. In response, the Cabinet Member indicated that he welcomed the request and that the young people of Gysda were also lobbying for a free travel pass to be introduced for young people.

With reference to paragraph 3.3 of the report, a further explanation regarding out-of-county transportation was requested. In response, it was noted that a very small number of pupils with profound needs attended educational specialist provisions across north Wales, and some with very profound needs travelled further than that. Taxi transport was provided to take them to the setting on Mondays and to bring them back home on Fridays.

It was asked why transport costs to special schools had doubled in a year. In response, it was noted that that was due to an increase in child numbers and provider cost.

It was asked whether the Council provided any non-statutory transport. In response, it was noted:

- That the Council's empty seats scheme was a non-statutory scheme that allowed anyone wishing to have a seat that was empty to pay for it, but as it was possible that that seat would not be empty the following year, that created problems for families and young people in terms of consistency and continuity of transport for individuals.
- That the other non-statutory element was the 16+ travel pass.

It was asked, as school budgets were under pressure, whether there was a risk that parents might try to move their children to a special school rather than keep them in a mainstream school, thereby creating more transport costs for the Authority. In response, it was noted that access to special schools was about the needs of the children rather than the desire of the parents and that there was a moderation panel and a very rigorous process for determining access to those schools.

It was noted that paragraph 3.5 of the report referred to a tendering process every five years for bus provision, but that paragraph 4.2 reported that there had been re-tendering to save money. It was asked whether that was fair to the local bus companies who had expected that their contract would last for five years. In response, it was noted that:

- As with any tender agreement, there was a clause within the documents that allowed the Council to re-tender the provision if circumstances changed, and that the providers were aware of those rights.

- The Council did not break any rules. There was possibly a knock-on effect on local companies, but the Council was required to provide a service in accordance with its needs.

It was asked whether it was possible to predict the extent of the reduction in child numbers over the term of the contract so that providers were aware when tendering that the demand for their service could diminish. In response, it was noted that the Integrated Transport Unit could predict up to a point, but circumstances beyond the Council's control could also change, for example, changes to public bus routes could abolish the need for the service as a public bus followed a similar route.

On a point of accuracy, it was pointed out that two figures in the table in paragraph 3.7 of the report needed to be corrected, and that the Department would send the correct figures to members.

RESOLVED

- 1. To accept the report, noting the observations, particularly the comment in respect of being aware of the specific needs of some groups of children when planning the provision.**
 - 2. To note the importance of the travel provision to the college for young people in Dwyfor and Meirionnydd.**
 - 3. To request that the Cabinet Member for Education contacts the Welsh Government in the context of introducing a free travel pass for young people 16-21 years old to reduce the pressure on the Council to provide free transport, and to facilitate travel to work, to college or sixth form.**
- 7. 2024-25 FORWARD PROGRAMME OF THE EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Submitted – the report of the Scrutiny Advisor inviting the committee to adopt a revised work programme for 2024/25 following a request from the Education Department to slip the 'Immersion Education System' item, scheduled for discussion at this meeting, to the 13 February 2025 meeting due to the evaluation of the system being carried out during this school term. It was noted that a draft report of the findings and any recommendations were anticipated to be available in the New Year. It was also noted that following consulting with the Chair, it was agreed to the request to slip the item to ensure that the item was scrutinised in a timely manner to enable scrutiny to add value.

Members were given an opportunity to ask questions and offer observations.

It was suggested that this Council was becoming more of an Arfon Council than Cyngor Gwynedd and a request was made for information on what the Council was doing to develop the economy of Dwyfor and Meirionnydd in particular. In response, it was noted that the item 'Gwynedd Economy Plan' was on the agenda of the 13 February 2025 meeting and that this could be one of the specific questions to ask the Department in advance.

The Chair noted that some members had already commented that no items on the economy had been included on the agenda for this meeting and he suggested that the item 'Gwynedd Economy Plan' appeared early on the agenda of the next meeting so that the subject could be duly addressed.

RESOLVED to adopt the amended work programme for 2024/25.

The meeting commenced at 10.30am and concluded at 12.10pm.

Chair