

CYNGOR GWYNEDD - Report to Cyngor Gwynedd Cabinet

Title of Item:	Education Department Performance Report
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Dewi Jones, Cabinet Member for Education
Relevant officer:	Gwern ap Rhisiart, Head of Education
Date of meeting:	21 January 2025

1. Decision sought:

To accept and note the information in the report.

2. The reason why the Cabinet needs to make the decision:

In order to ensure effective performance management.

3. Introduction and Rationale

3.1 Background / Introduction

The purpose of this report is to update you on what has been achieved in the field that I am responsible for as Cabinet Member for Education.

We are implementing the Council Plan 2023-28, and herein I report on the progress up to the end of December 2024, recognising that it is still early days in the context of some of the pledges that are new in the document since April this year.

3.2 Rationale and justification for recommending the decision

3.2.1 Performance on the Council Plan Pledges

3.2.2 Transforming education for children in their early years

The admissions policy for Gwynedd schools will change from September 2025 as children attending Nursery class in Gwynedd schools will be expected to be fully toilet-trained before they start. We continue to share resources with parents and share information through social media.

The work of extending the childcare provision for two-year-olds to new areas is operational, with 21 childcare locations providing a service for two-year-olds through the medium of Welsh or bilingually. The Team of Advisory Teachers and the Childcare Officers are supporting the new settings through visits, support and start-up grants to invest in bespoke resources to ensure they can raise standards to meet Flying Start requirements.

3.2.3 Modernising buildings and the learning environment

It is nice to be able to announce that the new building and campus for Ysgol Trefferthyr in Cricieth has opened its doors to learners at the start of September this year. This follows years of work, and an investment of over £8m to secure the highest quality learning environment and resources for up to 150 learners in the area. In addition, there is childcare provision on the site, as well as an ABC Unit. The Department will arrange an official opening early in 2025.

There is also an intention to build a new school for Our Lady's School on the Ysgol Glanadda site (now closed) in Bangor. The work on the Ysgol Glanadda site began during the summer holidays this year, and I look forward to sharing an update on the progress of this construction work next time.

There is also an intention to make significant improvements to Ysgol Hirael, and in the spring term of this year, the Welsh Government approved a Business Case to release the funding to realise this commitment. We have appointed consultants to lead the work, and improvements to the Byw'n lach car park which will become a multi-purpose car park for the use of Ysgol Hirael will start in early 2025.

We are also committed to making significant improvements to Ysgol Tryfan in Bangor, and during this term, we have appointed an architect for the projects who is working with the Department and Ysgol Tryfan to try to address the vision for this investment. We are aiming to submit an initial Business Case to the Welsh Government in January 2025 to release the funding to realise our aspirations for securing major improvements and the best possible learning environment for the learners.

Ysgol y Faenol has also received a substantial extension. However, discussions regarding land transfers are continuing and, consequently, we cannot complete the work on the school's car park at present. However, through the cooperation of Pentir Community Council, since September this year, we have managed to secure temporary use of the Penrhosgarnedd Community Centre car park for peak times when children are dropped off and picked up from school every day during the school term, to make it easier for parents and families to escort their children to Ysgol y Faenol daily. I am aware of the local concerns and frustration about the situation, and I wish to confirm that the Department and the Council are doing everything within their ability to try and resolve the situation and complete the project, which includes a new community centre.

I am very pleased of the investment of £4.9m of the remaining budget from the Condition and Suitability project to improve the condition and suitability of up to 11 primary and secondary schools in Gwynedd. This project commenced during the 2024 summer holidays, and the work of ensuring investment and improvements in 3 of the schools has already been completed. The purpose of this project is to improve the condition of our existing school buildings, by making alterations to the buildings in order to ensure that they are fit for purpose and make the best use of the space available.

3.2.4 Promote the well-being of children and young people and reduce the cost of sending children to school

Following responses from a substantial number of parents, learners, staff and school headteachers, the financial challenges of sending children to school is clearly highlighted. Every day, families face the costs of school uniform, school trips and the costs of dinner/break (secondary schools) and the findings of the questionnaires highlight this.

The schools have received a detailed analysis of the findings and a working group is about to meet to establish a Cost Friendly School Charter. This charter will include many recommendations for schools to follow to be recognised as a 'Cost Friendly' School. In addition, Gwynedd Secondary Schools have responded to an EBSA (Emotionally Based School Avoidance) Survey which has highlighted the increasing challenges within this field. This has led to the psychology team hosting a series of workshops for the designated EBSA person within schools on how to support and increase the coping and resilience skills of pupils who experience EBSA.

3.2.5 Extending opportunities for play and socialising for the county's children and young people

I am pleased to report that the Youth Service has now recruited an Engagement Coordinator to lead on developing young people's voice forums across the county to ensure that young people's input is an integral part of the Council's strategic decisions. We have presented the operational plan to the Education Management Team, as well as a group of councillors with the intention of presenting our plan with heads of departments across the council in the new year.

The work of mapping the county's youth provisions has been undertaken and will identify any gaps in provision in the education, employment, health and well-being

and leisure fields. Based on the findings of the engagement and mapping work, a report will be produced to highlight areas of success and areas requiring improvement.

The Youth Service Questionnaire has been shared with the schools, colleges, third sector organisations and partners. The Youth Service wants to better understand young people's experiences, opinion and needs to improve the support that we offer. This questionnaire will provide young people with an opportunity to openly share their ideas and opinion, helping us to draw up services which reflect what is truly important to them.

The Gwynedd Support Services Forum for Young People 11-25 years old was re-established this term to bring third sector organisations together to better identify and respond to young people's complex needs. By establishing a Support Services Forum for Young People 11-25 years old, the young people of Gwynedd are able to receive better integrated and purposeful support, nurturing their potential and enabling them to succeed.

3.2.6 Modernising and extending the immersion provision to teach Welsh to children

On 6 July 2021, the Cabinet approved a new vision for a modern Immersion Education System in Gwynedd. This new vision also includes a capital investment of £1.1 million from the Welsh Government for the purpose of establishing new immersion education sites in Bangor and Tywyn, as well as improving existing facilities at the Eifionydd site in Porthmadog. The work has already been completed on the Eifionydd and Bangor sites, and the new language immersion unit at the Tywyn Secondary School site has now been completed and is opening its doors to newcomers of the area in January 2025.

Following receiving confirmation of the success of the Business Case for the second phase of capital funding to the value of £1.1m, we will invest in the 3 primary immersion education sites located in Caernarfon, Pwllheli and Dolgellau. There is a comprehensive and detailed work programme to ensure the completion of the work on the 3 sites by the end of the financial year in March 2025. The unit in Llangybi is relocated into a purposeful cabin at the Ysgol Cymerau site in Pwllheli. Work will also take place to expand the immersion education provision in Dolgellau, as well as relocating the immersion provision within the Ysgol Maesincla site in Caernarfon.

The Welsh Government's Late Immersion revenue grant has also enabled us to modernise the immersion provision in our centres. The Aberwla immersion scheme

has now been developed and trialled at two of our units. This differential scheme which bridges the primary and the secondary will be operational in every immersion unit from January 2025 onwards. To accompany the scheme, the Aberwla innovative digital project has also been completed. This is a valuable educational resource to normalise the Welsh language on the virtual platform. Initial discussions have taken place between Cwmni Adnodd, Animated Technologies and the Authority's officers to consider the future of Aberwla and the possibility of creating a 'Work Board' version which will provide every child in Wales the access to use it.

3.2.7 Review the Gwynedd Education Language Policy

I am very pleased that we have been able to appoint Meirion Prys Jones as a freelance consultant to work with the Department to revisit the Education Language Policy. The engagement meetings with key stakeholders have taken place during the autumn term of 2024 and I look forward to hearing observations from these discussions, with the aim of presenting the findings to the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee early in the spring term of 2025.

3.2.8 Undertake an evaluation of the Immersion System to ensure that all education policies and services provided to children and young people in Gwynedd set a firm foundation for the Welsh language

The evaluation of the Immersion System is also currently underway - Bangor University Education Department won the tender to work alongside the Education Department on conducting this evaluation. Members of the University's research team have undertaken observations in the Immersion units and followed the learners in the mainstream. In addition, they have hosted focus groups with the Immersion System staff, a representation of teachers and headteachers in mainstream schools across the three regions within the county, as well as the learners. Once more, I am looking forward to receiving a verbal report on the findings of the evaluation before the end of February and then the full written report which will include recommendations for improvement at the end of March 2025. Again, the aim is to present a report on the findings and the recommendations to the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee in the spring term of 2025.

3.2.9 Additional Learning Needs and Inclusion (ALN&I)

Considering the challenges that so many young people face these days, I am extremely pleased that the ALN&I service has managed to reduce the number of days to wait for counselling service from 51 days to 21 days since the beginning of the educational year. There has been an increase in the number of primary learners being referred, and we are trying to respond to this demand by adapting counselling time for the

primary. We have also extended the type of provision offered. We are continuing to look at the capacity of our special schools and centres. Furthermore, during the summer holidays this year, work has been ongoing to adapt some classrooms in Ysgol Pendalar to ensure that sufficient capacity is available in the school for those learners who need access to a special school in Arfon.

The attendance field remains a concern for us and the levels have not returned to what they had been before the pandemic. The average attendance for the last academic year was 89.1% and up from 88% over the same period the previous year (Wales' average for 2023-24 is 89%, up from 88.5% last year). The average attendance for the academic year to date is 91.2% (Wales' average is 91.8%) and for the same time last year, Gwynedd's attendance was 91.3%. We acknowledge that this is not a significant increase and increasing the rates to the levels before the pandemic remains a priority. In recent months, work has been carried out with the data unit so that attendance percentages for specific groups are reported. Over the coming months, there will be a campaign to encourage change in behaviour towards attendance, as well as continuing with targeting work.

Another field which has received attention over the last year is an increase in specific and permanent exclusions as a result of challenging behaviours within our schools. During November/December 2023, a detailed survey was commissioned on the Inclusion Service and recommendations were presented on how to strengthen the provision. One of the main recommendations was the need to jointly develop a clear strategy with schools to support pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, as well as find suitable locations for provision outside the school, giving consideration to adopting a Pupil Referral Unit status which has also been brought to our attention by Estyn. This work is currently ongoing and on track to be operational by September 2025. I look forward to report on the progress in my next report.

3.2.10 The Department's day-to-day work

Over the past year, the Department has been working on designing a 10-year Education Strategy for Gwynedd. An initial draft of the strategy was submitted to the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee on 14 September 2023, and discussions also took place within the Headteachers Strategic Groups, and there have been more recent discussions with headteachers during informal sessions. I look forward to continuing with the engagement and the informal discussions on the content of the Strategy in the spring term, before consulting on it publicly and submitting it to the Cabinet.

The Sustainable Schools Challenge

Following the success of the bid to the Sustainable Schools Challenge, Welsh Government, it is a pleasure to report on the progress of the project which places the input of all stakeholders central to the vision of building an eco-friendly school and community facilities. Ysgol Bontnewydd learners, as well as the staff and members of the community, benefit from valuable experiences with the architects and construction consultants to present their ideas to the design process for this innovative building.

By now, all the cabins have arrived at the Ysgol Bontnewydd site and the work of creating two classrooms in the community centre has been completed. Over the next period, there will be an opportunity for all school learners in their turn to take part in activities with the contractors who will enrich their understanding and their appreciation of sustainable building. I am looking forward to visiting the site when the opportunity arises and to report on further progress of this very exciting project next time.

Catering

Since 1 September 2023, I am very proud that every primary age learner from Reception to Year 6 in Gwynedd is able to receive free school meals, a year ahead of the national timetable. Since September 2024, on average, 4,851 free school meals were provided on any given day, and this reflects progress compared to the figure reported on any given day during 2023-24. I am extremely proud of this achievement, and I am also eager for the Department to further promote the offer amongst children and families to encourage more families to take advantage of the offer.

4. Savings and Financial Position

The Department has two savings schemes in 2024/25 within the field of inclusion that are worth £41,000, and there is a risk that they might not be delivered. The field is currently undergoing a strategic review, and it is therefore premature to cut the resources available at this point, with the possibility of additional resources being needed. The Department is aware of the challenges in this field and, as a result, it would be difficult to implement the savings in the field currently. Consequently, the Education Department will find an alternative plan to address the sum of the cut.

With the exception of these schemes, current savings schemes to the value of £410,560 for 2024/25 have been scheduled, and all of them have been delivered or are on track to be delivered in a timely manner.

A neutral financial position was reported at the end of the 2023/24 financial year, following using £316k worth of departmental funds. By making use of the funds and also one-off underspending on other headings within the Department, we were able to remove the overspending on pupils' transport worth £1.5m, with this heading subject to strategic review to try to manage the progress in the spending. A bid has been accepted for 2024/25 for pupils' transport, with a permanent and temporary element, to enable the Department to identify opportunities to implement savings where possible. Furthermore, the heading is being monitored monthly to try to respond quickly to any anticipated increase in spending, with the situation improving as plans are implemented.

The Department's financial performance is reported upon in a separate item to this meeting of the Cabinet, with projections that the Department will underspend by the end of the 2024/25 financial year. This follows the department's efforts to cut spending where possible, as a result of the financial situation.

5. Views of the Statutory Officers

5.1 Chief Finance Officer

I am satisfied that the report is a fair reflection of the financial situation of the Education Department.

5.2 Monitoring Officer

No observations to add in relation to propriety.