

MEETING	Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee
DATE	13 February 2025
TITLE	Immersion Education System
REASON TO SCRUTINISE	Council Plan 2023-28 - A Welsh Gwynedd - To receive an update on the evaluation process
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CABINET MEMBER	Cllr Dewi Jones

1. Why does it need to be scrutinised?

- 1.1 The vision for the system was scrutinised at the Committee meeting on 10 June 2021.
- 1.2 Committee members identified the need to scrutinise the implementation of the new system when timely.
- 1.3 An evaluation of the system following submitting the new arrangements in January 2023 will be held during the year.
- 1.4 A request was received from Councillor Rhys Tudur to scrutinise the impact of the cut in the number of days in the immersion period. Also, to look in detail at the timing of the immersion period as well as the language impact of the cut.

2. What exactly needs to be scrutinised?

- 2.1 This report is intended to provide an update on the evaluation process in the context of the Evaluation of the Immersion System.

3. Summary of the Key Matters

- 3.1 This report presents an update regarding the Evaluation of the Immersion System.

4. Background / Context

- 4.1 Gwynedd has always been recognised as a stronghold of the Welsh language, and the Council prides itself on its strong vision and ambition to ensure that all pupils in the county become bilingually proficient citizens and full members of the bilingual society of which they are part.
- 4.2 The county's Language Policy is the vehicle responsible for promoting this ambition in the county's schools, and to ensure that policy is inclusive, language immersion units were opened in Gwynedd forty years ago in 1984. At that time, there were four centres for immersing latecomers in the Primary sector. Following the huge success

of these centres, twenty years later a centre for Secondary learners was opened on the site of Ysgol Eifionydd. The primary and secondary centres have served and supported thousands of children to acquire the Welsh language over the years.

- 4.3** However, at their meeting on 16 July 2021, Cyngor Gwynedd's Cabinet Members decided that it was timely to reorganise these centres and create a new first-rate Immersion Education System to include six immersion units, three of which are for primary learners from years 2 to 4 and a further three centres transitioning between primary and secondary for learners from years 5 to 9. These centres were located in strategic areas linguistically across the regions, Maesincla and Tryfan in Arfon, Pwllheli and Eifionydd in Dwyfor and Dolgellau and Tywyn in Meirionnydd. In addition, a new staffing structure was adopted to include a Head, Deputy, 6 Teachers and 6 Senior Assistants.
- 4.4** A key factor behind this decision for change was the well-being of learners and the need for them to keep in touch with their peers and the mother school during the course. To this end, the immersion courses were modified to include one day every week in the mainstream with the support of immersion unit staff.
- 4.5** Following the Welsh Government's capital funding investment, the Immersion Education System in its new guise was established in January 2023. The System is considered fundamental to create new Welsh speakers in Gwynedd by:
- providing pioneering and outstanding immersion education to new-comers to the County which will enable them to thrive with their peers in our bilingual education system and consequently they will be able to blend into the Welsh and Welsh-speaking society of their local school without feeling that they are 'different' or excluded from the usual experiences of their peers;
 - providing support for families to embrace the Welsh language, support the education of their children, and benefit from cultural and community experiences through the medium of Welsh;
 - supporting and equipping our schools to nurture our learners' skills and confidence in the Welsh language;
 - supporting and equipping our schools to nurture positive attitudes towards the Welsh language.

5. Commissioning

- 5.1** Following a highly competitive process, the Bangor University Research Team was selected to evaluate the Immersion Education System in Gwynedd. See below for the research plan in its entirety. The 4 questions below highlight the lines of enquiry that will set a direction for the Evaluation.
1. How suitable and effective is the model in ensuring pupils' use of the target language when they return to the mainstream school? (4 days in the immersion units and a transition day in the mainstream)
 2. How effective is the model in terms of enabling learners to acquire Welsh adequately and to its full potential?

3. Are there opportunities to further strengthen the Welsh language in the Immersion System and in the mainstream Schools?
4. How suitable and effective is the model when considering pupils' well-being during the immersion period?

5.2 Research team: Dr Lowri Mair Jones (Principal Investigator), Dr Margiad Williams, Dr Anwen Jones, Professor Enlli Thomas.

6. Introduction

6.1 The aim of this comprehensive case study is to evaluate the impact and scrutiny of the provision of the current Immersion Education System to see if it delivers on the promise and provides pupils in Gwynedd with the necessary foundation to acquire Welsh when embarking on their linguistic journey to becoming new speakers.

7. Literary Review

7.1 Undertake a detailed literature review examining current international trends in language immersion education, focusing on the effectiveness of immersion models in promoting language acquisition and bilingualism. The literary review will frame the research methodology, including:

- Observation Tool Design
- Questionnaire Design
- Direction of Enquiry Design focus groups
- Thematic Analysis

7.2 Explore studies specifically relating to immersion programmes in Welsh and minority languages.

7.3 Identify gaps in current research that this study seeks to address.

8. Policy Review

8.1 Analyse relevant educational policies and initiatives relating to Welsh language immersion education and immersion education in minority languages within the international context.

8.2 Evaluate the link between policy objectives and the implementation of immersion programmes, identifying any challenges or barriers in implementing policies effectively.

9. Research Design

9.1 Case Study

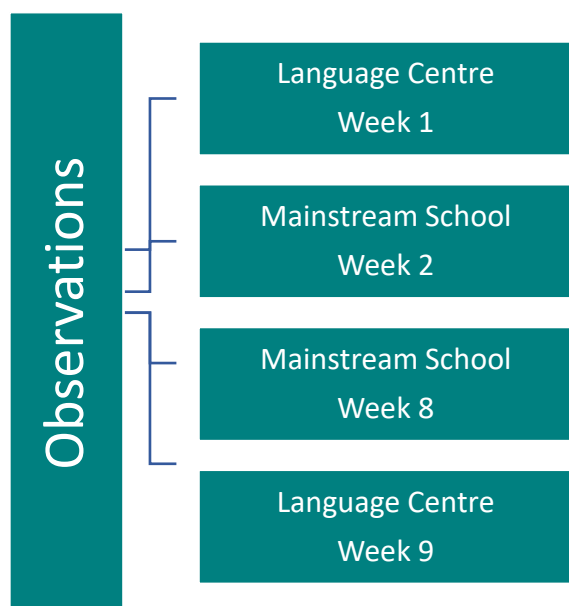
9.1.1 A detailed Case Study will be undertaken to be able to draw holistic data that will provide a comprehensive picture of the immersion model and its impact on pupils' language use, as well as the attitudes of parents, pupils and educators.

9.1.2 A structured case study drawing on natural data (Bailey, 1978) will be drawn up. The case study will involve mixed data collection, which will provide a detailed evaluation across the four immersion centres.

9.2 Step 1: Observations

9.2.1 Observe the journey of three pupils through the immersion model at the four different Language Centres. Each round of observation will consist of three formal observations, see Figure 1.

Figure 1 - Observation process of the Ten-week Immersion model



9.2.2 Observe pupils at four points within a ten-week period. Two of the observations will take place at the Language Centre and two observations will take place at the mainstream school.

9.2.3 Look at the following aspects specifically when observing to get a holistic picture of pupils' use of the target language in different contexts, along with different stakeholders' attitudes towards immersion provision.

- Develop an evidence-based Observation Tool to scrutinise the following:
- Relationship with peers
- Influences on language use in a formal and informal context

- Continuity of use of the target language when developing along the immersive journey
- Aspects of pupil well-being

9.3 Step 2: Focus Groups (Teachers)

9.3.1 A focus group will be held with centre teachers, and three focus groups will be held with mainstream school staff.

9.3.2 The focus group will examine the perceptions of Staff within the Immersion Centre and the Mainstream School of the efficiency of the immersion model and the development and well-being of pupils receiving immersion education as part of the 10-week model.

The focus group will examine educators' perceptions of:

- Pupils' use of the target language
- Effectiveness of the immersion model (4 days in the immersion units and transition day in the mainstream)
- Staffing Model
- Any other research lines that come up during the Case Study.

9.4 Step 3: Focus Groups of Pupils who follow the immersion programme

9.4.1 Conduct a focus group with three pupils involved in the immersion provision, exploring their experiences and perceptions of being part of the immersion programme. The focus group will explore:

- Attitudes towards the language
- Attitudes towards the immersion programme
- Attitudes towards attending two education settings for a period of time
- Attitudes towards informal use of the language
- Attitudes surrounding well-being.

9.5 Step 4: Questionnaire examining parental attitudes

9.5.1 We will share a questionnaire with parents/guardians, focusing on their perspectives of the immersion programme and their children's language development and well-being as they go through the immersion journey.

9.6 Step 5: Quantitative Data

9.6.1 Scrutinise available quantitative data, which shows the progress of pupils receiving immersion education in Gwynedd. Scrutinising this data will enable the researchers to triangulate any quantitative results against qualitative data, to produce a complete

and comprehensive case study of the immersion provision. It is shown in the table below how the research methods explore the research questions.

Research questions	Methods:
How suitable and effective is the 4-day model in the immersion unit and 1 transition day back in the mainstream, in ensuring pupils' use of the target language when they return to mainstream school?	Observations Focus Groups
How effective is the 4-day model in the immersion unit and 1 transition day back in the mainstream in terms of enabling learners to acquire the Welsh language adequately and to its full potential?	Observations Focus Groups Parents' questionnaire Quantitative data
Are there opportunities to further strengthen the Welsh language in the Immersion System and in the mainstream Schools?	Focus Groups Parents' questionnaire
How suitable and effective is the model when considering pupils' well-being during the immersion period? (4 days in the immersion units and a transition day in the mainstream)	Observations Focus Groups Parents' questionnaire

9.7 Data Analysis Methods

- 9.7.1** Present a comprehensive case study analysing the qualitative data through thematic analysis.
- 9.7.2** Draw on any trends in the quantitative data to offer a complete picture to answer the research questions.

9.8 Possible Outcomes

- 9.8.1** The final report will provide robust research evidence on the efficiency of the immersion model in Gwynedd, along with recommendations for potential developments and improvements in Gwynedd and beyond in the future.
- 9.8.2** The design of the research provides a comprehensive framework for investigating the effectiveness of the immersion model in Gwynedd, together with further considerations highlighted in the research questions.
- 9.8.3** The brief may be revised as needed during the implementation period to meet any unforeseen challenges or opportunities.

9.9. Cyngor Gwynedd's Expectations

9.9.1 To ensure value for money, we will ask council staff for support in communicating with the language centres to co-ordinate visits, and to share questionnaires / arrange interviews.

10. Timetable

	Action
August 2024	Literary and Policy Review, development of the observation tool and parent questionnaire
August-October 2024	Observations in Language Centres and Mainstream Schools
November 2024	Focus Group Interviews
December 2024	Data analysis
January–February 2025	Write the Report
March 2025	Submit a Complete Report

11. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015

11.1 The aim of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 is to improve the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales. The Act places a well-being duty on public bodies which is aimed at delivering the seven well-being goals by following the five ways of working.

11.2 The Act places a well-being duty on the Council to carry out sustainable development work by working in cooperation with the 'sustainable development principle'. This means that the impact on people in the future must be considered when making decisions.

11.3 In terms of **collaborating and involving** others, we have already held focus groups with Gwynedd's parents, learners, staff and school headteachers and received comments from individuals representing Language Organisations.

11.4 Conducting an evaluation of the Immersion System is **recognising the need to identify strengths and matters for improvement** to ensure the best possible service for Gwynedd residents.

11.5 Ensuring that Gwynedd's children and young people develop into confident bilingual citizens improves opportunities for them educationally, economically, culturally and socially in the **long-term** and enriches their experience of living and working through the medium of Welsh in Gwynedd.

11.6 Empowering the county's Immersive Education System lays a solid foundation for the development of bilingual citizens and conforms to the status of the Welsh language in the context of Public Bodies.

12. Impact on Equality Characteristics, the Welsh Language and the Socio-Economic Duty

12.1 An Equality Impact Assessment is not required in response to the engagement work relating to the Evaluation of the Immersion System. However, it will be expected to produce an Equality Impact Assessment on any decisions made by the Council as part of evaluating the Immersion System. We will take into account all comments received as part of the engagement.

13. Next Steps

13.1 Following the Evaluation process, officers from the Education Department will produce an Action Plan to respond to the recommendations of the final report.

13.2 It is intended to submit the Improvement Recommendations Action Plan and detailed timetable to the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee on 10 April 2025.

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Additional Questions

Appendix 2 - Mainstream teacher and headteacher interview questionnaire

Appendix 3 - Focus Group Tool

Appendix 4 - Parent Questionnaire