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## EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

11/12/25

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### Present:

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

Councillors: Beca Brown, Jina Gwyrfa, Dawn Lynne Jones, Elwyn Jones, Gareth Tudor Jones, Gwilym Jones, Beth Lawton, Dewi Owen, Geraint Parry, John Pughe Roberts, Richard Glyn Roberts, Huw Llwyd Rowlands, Dyfrig Siencyn and Sian Williams.

**Co-opted Members:** Colette Owen (Catholic Church), Sharon Roberts (Arfon Parent / Governor Representative), Gwilym Jones (NASUWT) and Gweno Glyn Williams (Dwyfor Parent / Governor Representative).

**Officers present:** Bethan Adams (Scrutiny Adviser) and Jasmine Jones (Democracy Services Officer).

**Present for items 5 and 6** - Councillor Dewi Jones (Cabinet Member for Education), Gwern ap Rhisiart (Head of Education), Debbie Anne Jones (Assistant Head of Education Services), Ffion Edwards Ellis (Assistant Head of Special Education Needs and Inclusion) and Alison Halliday (Assistant Head of Schools' Support).

**Present for item 7:** Councillor Richard Medwyn Hughes (Cabinet Member for Economy and Community), Sioned Williams (Head of Economy and Community), Roland Wyn Evans (Assistant Head of Culture) and Llyr Beaumont Jones (Assistant Head of Economy and Community).

**Present for item 8** - Councillor Huw Wyn Jones (Cabinet Member for Finance), Dewi Aeron Morgan (Head of Finance), Huw Ynyr (Assistant Head of Information Technology), Sian Pugh (Assistant Head of Finance – Sustainability and Developments) and Ffion Madog Evans (Assistant Head of Finance – Accounting and Pensions)

### 1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Gwynfor Owen.

### 2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

Councillor Gareth Tudor Jones and Sharon Roberts (Arfon Parent / Governor Representative) declared a personal interest in item 7 on the agenda. The members were of the opinion that they were prejudicial interests, and they withdrew from the meeting during the discussion on the item.

Councillor Beth Lawton declared a personal interest in item 7 on the agenda. The member did not consider it to be a prejudicial interest and did not leave the meeting during the discussion.

### **3. URGENT ITEMS**

None to note.

### **4. MINUTES**

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee held on 16 October 2025 as a true record, subject to adding the name of Councillor Dawn Lynne Jones to the list of apologies.

### **5. SCHOOLS' STRATEGY**

The Cabinet Member for Education presented the report, stating that the draft document before them covered the education department's vision on behalf of schools over the next few years. It was noted that the previous strategy was now dated and ended in 2025, and there was a need for it to be updated due to significant changes over the period. It was explained that the document tried to reflect the fact that the challenges facing the county had changed and had intensified, noting that the strategy referred to the impact of cuts, recruitment challenges and the far-reaching threat of demographic changes across the county.

During the discussion, the following observations were made: -

The member was thanked for the presentation. More details were requested regarding how the challenges of children who are vulnerable to poverty would be considered within the strategy, emphasising the importance that this cohort had a voice within the strategy. In response, it was noted: -

- That an audit had been carried out to try and get cost-friendly schools.
- That data has been collected on this issue and would be shared with schools within the month to enable them to respond and meet the challenges, and to escalate the issue to the top of the priority list.
- That the department recognised that the experiences of children from disadvantaged backgrounds were far worse if they were not supported through the schools.
- That there was room to put a specific heading in relation to children who are vulnerable to poverty, and to give attention to how the needs of children from disadvantaged backgrounds should be addressed, to what extent the current arrangements addressed this and how changing the arrangements would improve the situation.
- Many grants were given to schools to support children from disadvantaged backgrounds, but under the current arrangements headteachers and governing bodies were required to use additional grant monies to support everyone, not necessarily targeting individuals, as the situation was generally difficult.

Pride was expressed that the issue of safeguarding was addressed within the strategy. A view was expressed that safeguarding should be higher within the strategy than heading four, given the importance of safeguarding. It was asked how the 'Our Bravery Brought Justice' report had shaped the strategy. In response, it was agreed that safeguarding was an extremely important issue. It was noted that the list did not reflect any order of priority. It was acknowledged that there was room to change the order of the strategy to place safeguarding at the top of the list.

It was confirmed that this draft of the Schools Strategy had been produced prior to the publication of the 'Our Bravery Brought Justice' report. In relation to learning from the Children's Practice Review, emphasis was placed on the need for the authority and the safeguarding and well-being team to provide more support to schools. The challenge that existed for the department to support 94 schools of all sizes was further emphasised. It was noted that many schools fall into smaller sized categories, resulting in fewer resources and budget. It was stressed that more resources were needed to improve support for schools. It was noted that, following the publication of the report, it was possible to look at the Schools Strategy again through the lens of the report to enrich the strategy.

It was emphasised that this ten-year Schools Strategy would play a major role in restoring the confidence of the county's parents in the safety of their children in schools.

Questions were asked about the recruitment and retention of teachers, particularly in rural areas and in specialist subjects. It was asked whether there was a specific strategy or plan in place for the recruitment of teachers. In response, it was noted: -

- That the recruitment and retention of education staff was a national challenge and broader than Wales alone, the situation was therefore not unique to the county.
- It was difficult to fully quantify the impact of the shortage of teachers on learning and teaching standards across the county, but it was recognised that the shortage was impacting on learners' experience and on the ability of schools to maintain continuity.
- That some teachers, particularly in the secondary sector, face situations where more than one subject would need to be taught beyond their expertise and this could be a barrier to teacher recruitment and retention.
- Concern was expressed about leadership and that a shortage of leaders, deputy headteachers, headteachers and subject leaders in the next generation posed a risk to the resilience of schools.
- That the shortage of heads of departments in the secondary sector was particularly challenging and that the departure of a strong leader could quickly lead to a decline in standards.
- A recruitment challenge in some geographical areas was highlighted, and it was noted that a particular difficulty arose in filling short-term gaps when staff were absent due to illness.

- That arrangements existed in some areas such as Meirionnydd to consider staff who were not fluent in Welsh (but committed to learning) in order to fill gaps. It was noted that this was a concern for the department.
- There was a need to ensure continuous teaching for pupils and that plans were in place to support teachers' language and promote the use of Welsh as part of the response to the challenge.

Concern was expressed about safeguarding and anti-social behaviour, and it was asked what the procedure was when serious incidents occur on school premises, including incidents where there was a risk to safety. In response, it was noted: -

- That school communities generally were facing increasingly challenging behaviour.
- That clear arrangements were in place when there was a safety concern and that the natural step included ensuring immediate safety on school premises.
- That the police were contacted where necessary and this was part of the response when the situation demanded.
- That further action was followed by schools in accordance with arrangements and that support was available through support officers, safeguarding and well-being teams, health and safety teams, and relevant officers within the service.
- Challenging behaviour and incidents were often a reflection of wider social and community issues and work was needed with families and communities alongside the schools' work.

The need to protect teachers within the strategy was emphasised, noting that they were the backbone of our schools. It was noted that the strategy did not place sufficient emphasis on teachers' health and well-being, and that more support needed to be given to teachers within the strategy. The administrative burden was highlighted, and it was noted that workload, preparation, assessment and marking remained a significant issue across sectors. It was asked whether this administrative burden could be reduced to teachers. It was noted that a strategy needed to be looked at to attract more students from universities to become teachers, by ensuring that teachers received fair pay and that their working environment was welcoming and effective. It was questioned whether information could be used to monitor and see if there was an emerging pattern in teacher health in some schools, and whether that information could help target support. In response, the Head of Education noted: -

- That the well-being of teachers and assistants was a core theme of the strategy.
- That the strategy sought to improve the situation within schools overall, and this would consequently improve teachers' well-being.
- Workload challenges varied significantly between schools and expertise due to different circumstances.

- That the pressure of paperwork was mainly created by governing bodies and headteachers and the education department tried not to put extra work pressure on teachers.
- That a headteachers' well-being forum existed, which worked on creating strategies to reduce work pressure for headteachers.

The Cabinet Member for Education stated:

- That teachers and school staff were the backbone of education.
- That Plaid Cymru intended to fill the gap between what was offered to teachers in England and Wales if they were elected to the Senedd.
- That conversations were being held about the salaries of assistants, specifically those who were not paid during the holiday period, but it was stressed that this was a national issue.

They were asked about school governance and why there was no section in the strategy on the role of governors, particularly the role they can play in situations where a problem arises regarding headteachers or senior management. It was asked what the vision for the role of governors over the next decade was. In response, it was noted: -

- There was no intention to exclude governance from the strategy and that a review of school governance arrangements would take place in the next six months by the Welsh Government.
- That the recruitment of governors was a significant challenge as it was a voluntary role that created a huge burden in terms of time and responsibility.
- That governors' support arrangements needed to be empowered and that work was underway to fulfil this.
- That actions were to be taken to add support capacity, including the appointment of an additional School Support Officer.
- Governors often found it difficult to deal with human resource issues, fiscal aspects and safeguarding issues.
- That the value of the role of governors remained clear with the voices of parents and the local community contributing to the development of the curriculum and the direction of schools.
- That there was a willingness to add a specific section on governance to the strategy as it was fine-tuned, outlining the intention to develop the arrangements over the coming months and years.
- That national support was key to ensuring a more robust and less burdensome procedure for governors.

Mobile phones, cyberbullying and digital security were referred to as practical safeguarding issues, and examples of situations were identified where the police had to be involved in a school's response due to serious incidents relating to this area. It was noted that cases were mentioned where some children had to stay at home due to the impact of cyberbullying that started at school, and it was noted that the nature of cyberbullying meant that the impact continued beyond school hours. It was questioned whether the authority could support a county-wide arrangement to ban mobile phones in schools. It was

asked whether influencing should be considered at a national level. In response, it was noted: -

- The Authority did not have the power to ban mobile phones across schools, and it was noted that the implementation of such a policy was the decision of individual governing bodies.
- Support and advice would be available to any school who chose to implement a policy to restrict or ban mobile phones.
- There was no intention from the Welsh Government to introduce a national policy to ban the use of mobile phones in schools, and it was emphasised that responsible use was an essential part of the solution as phones were an integral part of everyday life.
- Banning mobile phones may seem simple but did not practically solve all problems, and examples had been identified of arrangements in other countries where locked pouches were used to store phones throughout the day, with some pupils responding by bringing more than one phone to school.
- There was a need to ensure that children and young people understand the impact of their actions on others and to be responsible when using mobile phones.
- It was recognised that the harm could be significant and often occurred regularly.

The document's demographic data was cited as an important basis for the discussion, and it was noted that the data portrayed the impact of depopulation and the consequences on schools. In response, it was noted that there was a 14.7% decrease in the population aged 16-24 in the county between 2011 and 2021. It was emphasised that the trend had a long-term impact on the ability to recruit within the education sector. It was noted that several young people were leaving to study and choosing not to return to work in the county.

The relationship between this strategy and the Language Education Policy work was questioned. It was questioned whether the recruitment situation was jeopardising the ability to realise the ambition of Welsh-medium education provision. The funding of the immersion system and the associated costs were questioned. It was asked whether more resources were needed for specific elements of the strategy to achieve the ambition. An opinion was expressed that the committee should scrutinise the teacher recruitment strategy soon as the challenge was enormous. In response, it was noted: -

- Grants were available to attract individuals to teach through the medium of Welsh, but it was noted that this did not necessarily give the county a unique financial advantage compared to other areas.
- That a greater proportion of the training provision and a means to attract Welsh-medium teachers was needed.
- The recruitment challenge was significant, particularly in some areas.
- That the draft Education Language Policy was a separate document and was about to progress through the decision-making processes.
- That concerns about immersion funding were shared and that there was a desire to see the system funded based on the actual cost.

- Many areas within education and the Council called for more funding, such as transport, and noted that there were significant limitations on the ability to operate without additional resources.
- That correspondence had been sent to the Welsh Government's Education Secretary inviting him to Gwynedd to see the immersion centres.

It was noted that a great deal of work was expected from governing bodies which was a great deal of work for volunteers to handle, especially in secondary schools. It had been noted that there was a great deal of pressure on governors' time and, to some extent, training added to this.

Views were expressed that the Schools Strategy was very commendable, but that there was some distance between the objectives and the reality of the situation in schools, in particular secondary schools. It was recognised that this reality was recognised within the strategy. Transport funding challenges were identified as a significant challenge to health and well-being objectives. It was requested that the impact of transport cuts on pupils going to school in terms of equality and inclusion was revisited, as this had a more significant impact on children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The view was expressed that there was a need to focus within the strategy on literacy as it was an important element to enable young people to succeed in the future.

It was noted that a shortcoming existed in terms of teacher retention. Data from the Education Workforce Council was cited showing that of the cohort of newly qualified teachers in 2015, 40% had left the education profession. It was expressed that hybrid jobs were much more attractive than stricter jobs. It was stressed that the challenge was not just money, but that the way education staff work also needed to be looked at, to attract and retain more teachers.

It was asked about the main advisory groups for the strategy, noting that Estyn should be added to this list. It was questioned why parents had not engaged in any formal way or through the questionnaire. Opinions were expressed that the input of the parents' voice in the school strategy, was not beyond the governing body. In response, it was noted that the strategy was in draft form and engagement was ongoing and schools were encouraged to complete questionnaires and submit responses. It was noted that regular communication had taken place with the schools to encourage involvement and there was a willingness to involve parents more directly in moving forward. It was agreed that the voice of parents was important for the direction of the work and there would be no barriers to involving parents in the next stage of fine-tuning.

An enquiry was made about the arrangements of the School Support Service following regional changes. For clarity, it was asked who was doing what, the capacity of the teams, and the implications of moving to a new system. It was noted that schools felt there was a gap after the end of the School Efficiency Service (GwE) in terms of challenging schools, supporting staff, developing leaders and providing relevant and quality training for teachers and assistants. In response, it was noted: -

- That it was the Welsh Government's decision to end the GwE regional service.
- A period of uncertainty had persisted while waiting for a new national framework to improve and support schools.
- That the new framework had been promised for weeks and was expected to be received before Christmas.
- That the direction of the system would change significantly.
- That the new system would move to a model where schools would be facilitated to support each other. This posed practical challenges given the shortage of leaders, the challenge of recruitment, and the time and resource constraints of school staff.
- It was felt that the new system would not be entirely suitable for Gwynedd and therefore that a team of support officers existed locally, but capacity remained a challenge due to a high number of schools and geographical dispersion.
- The situation in the secondary sector was more challenging due to the difficulty of appointing additional officers.
- Skills officers were available for areas such as literacy, numeracy and digital skills, and it was noted that this arrangement had been adopted to safeguard expertise and meet schools' demand for subject-specific support.
- Uncertainty remained about whether the capacity was sufficient to support all schools in the long term.
- That a briefing note be prepared for Members to explain the arrangements and roles, and it was noted that this responded to the need for practical clarity.

Opinions were expressed that the principles within the strategy were too vague. It was questioned whether this was intentional given the numbers of pupils, and that there was no reference to the number of ages teachers should teach within a single class.

It was agreed that too many responsibilities were placed on the shoulders of governors and this hampered the authority to plan strategically across the county, particularly in relation to headteacher appointments. It was suggested that there was room for a working group level conversation about the experiences of governors.

The need to include faith schools in the discussion was highlighted and their perspectives were relevant to complete the strategy. In response, it was noted that discussions were already taking place with faith school leaders and their views would be included in moving forward.

Views were expressed that the strategy should be more specific identifying measures of success and measuring what had been achieved. In response, it was accepted that there was a lack of certainty and integrity regarding how this would be achieved within certain periods as school situations were dynamic. It was noted that there was an intention to review the school estate as indicators were reviewed and compared every January.

Views were expressed that elements of the strategy would transform how education was delivered to many young people. It was anticipated that the strategy would have a positive impact on the levels of children who de register, particularly within working-class families. Learners with additional learning needs were highlighted and it was noted that the voice of this cohort, and of their parents or advocates, needed to be ensured and was a robust part of the strategy. In response, it was noted: -

- Engagement with children and young people was already happening through a children and young people's forum.
- That it was intended to ensure that a wide range of children from different backgrounds and challenges could contribute.
- That the Children's Commissioner was satisfied with the actions the department was taking to ensure that the child's voice was central.
- That the number of engagement officers needs to be increased.
- That a challenge existed regarding the receipt of adequate additional learning needs resources.
- That the numbers of pupils with additional learning needs were increasing nationally.

An appeal was made for a more prominent space in the Welsh language strategy, noting that it was at the bottom of the values page, it had not been included in the vision on page six, there were no measures of success for the language, and there was no mention of the Welsh language under the sector principles.

It was noted that all the data within the strategy was based on population trends up to the year 2026, but that the Office for National Statistics (ONS) website showed some progress in the trend in 2032 and 2042. It was noted that wider links exist between housing, the economy and the numbers of children, and it was noted that significant developments were needed to reverse the decline. Views were expressed that there was a need to look towards the future in terms of the population data. The need to protect small rural schools who are in trouble, because of the demographic decline, from being closed was emphasised. In response, it was noted: -

- That the demographic trend was stable, and therefore it was necessary to plan according to the reality of the situation.
- It was acknowledged that there was room to strengthen attention to the Welsh language, but it was emphasised that the Language Education Strategy was a separate and an extremely ambitious document.
- More and more schools were falling into the protection policy.
- There was a feeling of unfairness from the perspective of some larger schools compared to the circumstances of smaller schools, as part of their budget funds schools within the protection policy. It was stressed that the strategy sought to address those sentiments through a fair planning approach and principles.
- That the demographic context made the discussion difficult but necessary.

It was asked about the possibility of having a Pupil Referral Unit in south Gwynedd. In response, it was noted that there was a plan in the pipeline for an additional location in south Gwynedd.

It was noted that the use of digital systems to identify safeguarding concerns was excellent practice in the majority of schools in the county, and it was confirmed that this was expected to be the case across all schools by March 2026. It was questioned whether the education department would fund these. In response, it was confirmed that the Education Service would fund these digital systems.

## **RESOLVED**

- 1. To welcome the strategy and accept the report noting the comments.**
- 2. That the Scrutiny Committee recommended to the Cabinet Member for Education that further information on safeguarding, poverty, social equity, faith schools, access to parents' voice, inclusion, the Welsh language, staff well-being and governance needed to be included in the Schools' Strategy.**
- 3. That information about the Schools Support Service would be distributed to members.**
- 4. Request that the Education Department ensured that safeguarding was integrated into the department's planning.**
- 5. That the Cabinet was aware of the importance of staff well-being to attract and retain staff and should do all that is possible to promote well-being and favourable conditions.**
- 6. To ask the Education Department to give full consideration to the Welsh Government's new recommendations regarding governance when they are received.**

## **6. PERFORMANCE REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR EDUCATION**

The Cabinet Member for Education presented the report. During the discussion, the following observations were made: -

Questions were asked about the Immersion System's data, specifically how many start the 10-week course but don't complete it. Data on how many withdraw from the process and how many applications are rejected was requested, stating that this would give a more complete picture than the current skill level focused information at the end of the course. In response, it was noted that the data would be provided and there was currently no evidence that withdrawal was a major problem, but it was acknowledged that individual circumstances could vary.

It was asked whether there were plans to develop smaller settings or more bespoke provision for learners who find it difficult to cope in mainstream arrangements due to neurodiversity, mental health or anxiety. It was asked whether it was possible to combine any such units with smaller school sites that face challenges in terms of numbers. In response, it was noted: -

- That inclusion was a core principle, and the vision did not involve moving learners into separate units as an automatic solution.
- The starting point was to strengthen the capacity of mainstream schools and adapt provision, with appropriate staffing levels and training to be able to provide effective support.
- That more resources were needed to adapt mainstream schools to make them suitable for children of all abilities.
- That it was becoming harder to support children of all needs within mainstream schools for a variety of reasons, such as increasingly intense needs.
- Transportation costs and the child's experience of mixing with others are important factors when considering separate provision.

It was asked why there was no obvious reference to the 'Our Bravery Brought Justice' report within the document before them, noting that this was the first education and economy scrutiny meeting since the report was published and the lack of direction could cause public concern. In response, it was noted:-

- That the response to the report currently took up over 80 percent of the department's time, with a focus over several teams responding to the report.
- That other things the department was doing at the same time with the same level of resources, made it increasingly challenging to accomplish these.
- That additional resources had been secured in response to the report and that reporting arrangements to the Programme Board were in place, with further scrutiny of the Programme Board's work due to take place shortly.
- There was a need to ensure that the response work was more visible within formal reports.
- The Committee had an opportunity to discuss the response to the report in full in early January 2026.

The increase in home education since the pandemic was questioned, with concern expressed about safeguarding and how it could be ensured that children receive suitable education. The possibility was raised that the trend could continue to increase. In response, it was noted: -

- That the increase in deregistration levels was a national trend and that Gwynedd's situation was similar to the median nationally.
- That a change in the social contract following the pandemic has played a part.
- Situations where children refuse to attend or find it difficult to cope can lead to parents choosing to deregister as the easier option.
- That a cohort of home education parents do so for the right reasons and do it appropriately, but it was acknowledged that a cohort deregister for a variety of inappropriate reasons, such as avoiding poor attendance outcomes.

- Visits were held and support was offered where possible but there were limitations when families do not engage. The Council did not have powers to enforce entry into a child's home.
- That the department shared the concern about the increase and was doing everything within its powers to mitigate the impacts, and to question why parents were deregistering children and to prevent this from happening initially.
- That the increase raised safeguarding concerns and the department would welcome any action by the government to give the Council more powers to be able to visit children within the home to communicate with them directly.

It was asked whether children being educated at home were mainly from local families or from families who had moved to Gwynedd. It was noted that no definitive answer could be given in the meeting to this question.

It was asked whether the fact that around 30% of pupils do not take advantage of free school meals was a cause for concern, questioning why the measure had been shown as green within the report. It was asked whether the pattern varied between schools or was consistent across the county. In response, it was noted: -

- That there was a wish for every child to take advantage of the offer to ensure they had a nutritious meal every day.
- The indicator was green due to an improvement since the previous year, but it was acknowledged that there was obvious room for improvement.
- There were several possible reasons, including individual preferences and varying patterns where some pupils take school lunch on some days and their own food box on others.
- Patterns varied across the county.
- Arrangements were in place to gather pupils' views and satisfaction about the meals, but responses had been low recently, and it was noted that there was an intention to boost the work to understand barriers and improve provision.

Confusion was noted as to who the author of the report was. In response, it was noted that the Cabinet Member for Education was the author of the report and the information in the document would be amended.

A suggestion was made to send information termly and occasionally to Councillors who are governors, to enable governors to question headteachers about important educational issues and direct them to address a specific area at a governors' meeting, to enable them to act as a critical friend highlighting key areas such as safeguarding, well-being, inclusion and additional learning needs. In response, it was noted that this was a valid point and that there was an opportunity to strengthen this connection. It was noted that the request would be prioritised by the new year.

Concern was raised about the possible link between increased attendance and increased deregistration. The impact of prosecuting families in court, because

of low attendance, was questioned, citing the risk that vulnerable families could choose to deregister after receiving warnings, with further implications for support and safeguarding. It was stressed that many parents were deregistering their child as there is no suitable provision for them within schools. In response, it was noted: -

- There was an understanding that some parents were in very difficult situations and felt that they had no other option.
- That the welfare team needs to exercise the ability to take legal action as a last resort, stressing that this does not happen lightly and that broad consideration would be given to medical, mental health and other factors before reaching this stage.
- That there was an increase in attendance following prosecution in many cases, although that would not be true in all cases.
- The aim was to ensure that children are safer by attending regularly.
- Officers within the welfare team carry out visits and offer support to families of children who have deregistered.
- Families who contact us to get support are often able to have a more robust support pathway towards returning to school, where appropriate.
- That arrangements were made to work with other agencies to identify families who are not engaged, and contact would be made with Children's Services as required.
- That building trust with families was a central part of the journey and the work continued to develop.

Concerns were raised about the Youth Service, questioning how much monitoring was taking place in relation to the community clubs. It was questioned why there were low numbers attending some community clubs, and whether it was because the clubs did not offer the most appropriate provision for children in the community. It was questioned how high satisfaction percentages should be interpreted in relation to the participation figures, and whether the service only gets feedback from children who attend rather than children within schools who choose not to attend. In response, it was noted: -

- That the percentages reflected the satisfaction of those who have engaged with the service.
- Participation figures were relatively high in the context of the current population of young people, noting the impact of the demographic decline, but it was acknowledged that there was room for improvement and that there was a desire to increase engagement.
- That work was being done through schools to understand what young people want from the provision, and it was noted that the activities included a social and recreational element as well as an educational element.
- Historic errors had occurred, but improvements were being seen, with an increase in the number of community clubs and work underway to extend provision to more areas.
- There was a need to ensure that provision matched the wishes of young people.

## **RESOLVED**

1. To accept the report noting the questions on home education, de-registration, use of units, school meals, monitoring arrangements, youth clubs and safeguarding.
2. To note the importance of giving a high-profile for safeguarding in documentation for the purpose of providing comfort to the public, and that the matter was prioritised by the authority.
3. To ask the Cabinet Member for Education to:
  - consider carrying out an exercise to find out why so many children were not taking advantage of free school meals.
  - consider whether there were ways of effectively informing governors about how to ask question at meetings of school governing bodies.
  - ensure that all steps were taken to avoid de-registration in our schools.

## **7. PERFORMANCE REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR THE ECONOMY**

The Cabinet Member for Economy and Community presented the report noting that since June, services continued to make good progress towards the Council's priority targets and projects within its portfolio. It was noted that several of the projects were on track to deliver results before the end of the financial year.

It was noted that joint work had been taking place with the Welsh Government and neighbouring local authorities to prepare a report for consultation to introduce and establish a tourism levy from March 2026. It was noted that it was intended to hold a more detailed discussion with the Scrutiny Committee in February after assessing the impact of any proposal on the economy and communities of Gwynedd. It was noted that customer satisfaction levels with library and archive services remained high, and it was noted that grants of up to £300,000 had been offered to 69 organisations across Gwynedd to promote culture and events. It was noted that regeneration and community support services had secured an investment of £9.8m for various projects across the county, and it was noted that £370,000 had been allocated through a pilot town and community councils funds under a tight Government timetable. It was noted that 55 councils had responded to the scheme, and it was noted that it was hoped that the fund would be available again in 2026-27 with more notice for councils to be able to respond.

It was noted that Gwynedd Business Week in October provided an opportunity to listen to issues that were important to businesses during a challenging economic period and to celebrate the successes of businesses both large and small. It was noted that £900,000 had been allocated in grants to businesses, and it was noted that the next round would be announced the following week. It was noted that employment support work had helped 48 people in Gwynedd to overcome barriers to work. It was noted that the United Kingdom (UK) Government had announced that the North Wales Artificial Intelligence Zone application had been successful and that the Trawsfynydd site had been named as part of the application. Subject to obtaining planning permission, the Welsh Government would offer the same benefits to the site as the free port sites on Anglesey. It was noted that this development boosted the development

of the science park at Trawsfynydd. It was noted that the details of the business case would be presented to the Committee in the new year.

It was noted that good progress had been made with the Parc Padarn developments and that a tourist information centre had been completed, but that a decrease in the number of Byw'n lach users was a cause for concern. It was noted that the Byw'n lach Board was responding proactively by adapting the facilities and the proposal. It was noted that a decrease in the number of children receiving swimming lessons through school continued to contribute to an overall reduction, and it was noted that joint work with Byw'n lach and the Education Department continued to encourage schools and children to attend, noting that there had been a slight increase in recent months. Maritime and harbour staff were thanked for working hard through the winter storms to ensure the county's coasts and ports were safe.

During the discussion, the following observations were made: -

The reality of the employment prospects associated with the science park at Trawsfynydd was questioned, and it was asked whether the establishment of a Small Modular Reactor (SMR) site such as Wylfa would have brought more jobs to the area. In response, it was noted: -

- That historical proposals had been linked to the possibility of SMR development on the site.
- That the policy picture had changed, with the UK Government moving in a different direction in terms of funding and prioritisation, meaning that there was no short-term proposal to develop a SMR in Trawsfynydd.
- The current work focus was on preserving and ensuring the continuation of decommissioning work on site over the next few years, with approximately two hundred jobs currently associated with this work.
- That the decommissioning programme extended to circa 2060.
- That the development of the science park hub was seen as an opportunity to innovate, attract new ideas and identify various opportunities to create future employment, using the infrastructure and skills already on site.
- There was an opportunity to share further details with the Committee on the plans in the coming year.

It was asked what else the service was doing to attract employment to Gwynedd, specifically about the development of a food centre on the Glynllifon site under the North Wales Growth programme. It was further asked whether the opportunities would offer living wage jobs rather than low-wage jobs. In response, it was noted: -

- That the scheme was progressing but needed to be modified for two reasons, namely planning considerations and changes in organisational circumstances.
- Planning feedback had indicated that the on-site food unit element of the original proposal was unlikely to be supported due to an impact on

biodiversity and wildlife, but it was noted that this did not mean that this element would disappear completely as alternative site options would be considered outside Glynllifon.

- The proposal was now being developed through three phases, with the first phase relating to new technology for a milking parlour.
- That there was significant investment (around £2m) in the milking parlour to educate young people and local farmers about future technology.
- Phase two of the development included the establishment of a sheep milk centre, noting that it would be the first of its kind in Wales, with the intention of encouraging the growth of a sector that was expanding in parts of Europe.
- Phase three of the development included the development of a rural innovation hub, with the planning application nearing completion, and it was noted that this centre would be next door to the college and would specialise in technology for agriculture in the future.
- That the whole scheme was an investment of over £10 million.

In terms of attracting investment more widely, it was noted: -

- That the economic strategy sought to identify areas of growth over the next few years to create a basis for attracting investment.
- Developments such as an artificial intelligence zone were likely to increase the interest of companies to locate in the area.
- That discussions were taking place with several companies interested in locating in Gwynedd.
- That skills needed to be made available locally, and the intention to work with colleges to ensure that enough young people were prepared for these fields had been identified.

Questions were asked about monitoring and influencing the quality of jobs within grant schemes, referring to expectations such as paying the living wage and promoting the Welsh language in supported businesses. In response, it was noted that certain conditions were being set as part of the Council's grants, and it was noted that two key conditions included the payment of the living wage and the promotion and use of the Welsh language. It was noted that these were monitored while the programme was live, but it was noted that further monitoring could not be carried out after the grant period (approximately three years) had ended. It was noted that the grants provided a level of influence on businesses, but it was noted that there was uncertainty about the continuation of the funds after March.

An enquiry was made about large and community events across the county noting that some events had grown to such an extent that health and safety requirements, operational arrangements and the reliance on volunteers made it difficult to hold the events, despite their economic benefit to local areas. It was asked whether the department could support the groups organising these events across the county. In response, it was noted: -

- That the service had recognised the importance of events when they were managed safely.

- That an event co-ordinator had been appointed to support organisers through the process of ensuring safe arrangements, including referral to the event safety group where necessary.
- That the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) was available to support events across the county, and this also influenced the promotion of principles such as local volunteering, bilingualism, and sustainable tourism.
- There was uncertainty about funding after March, noting that the Council's internal budget was not to support events in the next term, and the situation would depend on the UK Government's decisions.
- Training sessions had been held to support organisers, including a session on severe weather, and it was noted that another session would be held on mountain and coastal safety in partnership with the rescue services.
- That organising events was a challenging area with a number of barriers, and the advisory role was important to help organisers navigate the requirements and liaise with the right departments, noting that a cross-departmental group discussed events to ensure a balance between benefit and risk.

Concerns were noted about the impact of changes to agricultural payments and the implications for rural village economies, citing pressures on the dairy industry from international imports, price uncertainty, and the impact on businesses that depend on agriculture. It was suggested that the department set up a task and finish group in the new year to look at the implications for Gwynedd. In response, it was noted that concerns were regularly raised by agricultural unions and the economic strategy reflected the value of the sector to the Gwynedd economy. A willingness to further discuss what action a local authority can take within the context of international commercial factors that are beyond local control, was noted.

The need for local training to support employment opportunities relating to Wylfa was emphasised, and a personal experience of the need to travel long distances for training in the past, was noted. In response, it was noted that an engineering and construction specialist centre had originally been developed in Llangefni in connection with Wylfa and that the facility was there to support training for construction and engineering for the nuclear sector. It was noted that an officers' meeting regarding Wylfa was scheduled for the following week, and the points about local training would be raised in those discussions.

A question was asked about the development of 10 new units in Minffordd. In response, it was noted that construction had begun and enquiries had been received, but formal agreements would not be given until the construction work was completed. It was noted that there was also a potential link between Minffordd and the science park at Trawsfynydd, and that the two developments could create opportunities for businesses to co-locate. It was noted that local businesses were continuing to look for additional space and historically there had not been enough sites available in the area. Hope was expressed that the units would be suitable to meet the demand.

Questions were asked about the maritime service at Morfa Bychan, in particular the problems of overnight parking on the beach and the fact that officers did not have enforcement powers. It was asked whether there was a possibility of introducing a by-law to control the situation. In response, it was noted that the beach at Morfa Bychan was among the busiest in the county, and it was noted that seasonal wardens helped to reduce some of the problems over the summer. It was noted that a significant lack of enforcement powers continued, and it was not expected that it would be realistic to introduce a by-law in the short term as the process was lengthy and complex. It was noted that other arrangements would need to be considered noting that there was no easy solution, especially over the winter months although the pressures tended to decrease. It was stressed that an investment to improve the infrastructure and increase capacity on the site was planned for the beginning of the new year to minimise the impact on the village. It was elaborated that the service would regularly review the options in preparation for the next season.

Views were expressed that there was a contrast between the demographic picture showing a significant reduction and the simultaneous discussion of high numbers of jobs being created within the construction and engineering sector. Concern was expressed about the potential for workforce inflow and the impact on housing and community planning. It was questioned whether the county was in a position to plan ahead for this possibility.

In response, it was noted that the developments needed to be put into context, and it was noted that plans on the scale of Wylfa were not envisaged in Gwynedd in the coming years. It was noted that the science park at Trawsfynydd, was in the early stages, and was likely to result in much smaller numbers of jobs, with a more realistic short-term target relating to creating opportunities for local people in the face of an expected reduction in decommissioning over time. It was noted that the development of a potential data centre was being considered, but that construction would take place over a period of about six to eight years, rather than immediately. It was stressed that workforce and skills planning was a critical factor in all plans and that such developments would not be feasible unless the workforce was available. It was confirmed that developments on Ynys Môn were likely to have an impact on the surrounding areas, and that this was part of the wider consideration.

Concern was expressed about the impact of recent tax rulings on tourism and hospitality businesses, citing examples of significant increases in tax bills and the risk of job losses and local supply chain disruptions, including food producers and suppliers. In response, it was noted that the matter was real and affected rural businesses. It was emphasised that what the Council could do in practice was to use the evidence as part of a clear business case for a larger support package for businesses. It was noted that business grants were expiring and there was no certainty of funding after April, and that the combination of the end of grants and tax pressures strengthened the argument for seeking a business support fund in the coming year.

## **RESOLVED**

- 1. To accept the report and note the observations.**
- 2. To ask the Economy and Community Department to convene a group early in the new year to consider the challenges facing the agricultural industry.**

## **8. PERFORMANCE REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE**

The report was presented by the Cabinet Member for Finance, highlighting the red and amber indicators. It was noted that one measure within the Income Service remained in the red category, namely the balance of the value of variable debts over six months old at the end of October 2025, and the figure was identified as just under £3.2m. It was elaborated that this was an increase of £1.377m since the end of the previous month and that £1.2m of that increase derived from debts from the Health Board and another local authority. It was noted that the other local authority's debt resulted from an administrative error within the Council when an incorrect order number was given on an invoice. It was confirmed that this issue had been resolved and the debt had been paid.

It was noted that the Health Board's debt continued to be a challenge and the adult service was in discussions with the Health Board in the hope that the debt would be reduced. Attention was drawn to the tax collection service's performance meter 'Current Year Council Tax Collection Rate' which reported in amber and noted that the service had faced significant problems due to the number of staff on long-term sickness. It was elaborated that the situation was improving and the service appeared to have turned a corner and was getting back on track. Concern was expressed that the council and non-domestic tax collection rates were lower in Gwynedd than historically and compared to other authorities in Wales, but doubts were expressed as to whether the way the statistics were reported reflected the full picture. It was noted that, from the internal information, the basic rate of collection of council tax was fairly normal, but it was noted that the shortcomings mainly related to the collection of the council tax premium on long-term empty properties and second homes. It was emphasised that this could change the overall figures. The intention to look at the issue over the coming weeks and months was noted to give a more balanced picture of the situation.

It was noted that, in terms of the Digital Plan, work was progressing well, but particular concern was noted about the risks related to software licensing costs, particularly given the expected increased use of artificial intelligence. A wider expectation within the information technology sector was noted that prices could rise after consumption stabilised, and it was noted that this was an issue that the service would keep a close eye on in the future.

The Head of Finance stated that he was satisfied with the overall performance of the department, although there were a few challenges in some services. It was stressed that plans were in place to address those challenges with the hope that better outcomes would soon follow.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:

A question was asked about the Health Board's debt. It was questioned whether the problem stemmed from conflicts over invoicing or debt agreements, or whether it reflected poor processes or payment delays. In response, it was noted:-

- That the problem had existed for years.
- That there was an element of delay related to systems, but also that most debts relate to the Adult Service.
- Disagreement regularly arose about who should pay what portion of an individual's care.
- That there were rules and contracts to determine the contributions of the Council and the Health Board, but that discussions on these contributions accounted for much of the debt.
- Officers within the Finance Department and the Adults Service were working to maintain the relationship and to put pressure on the Health Board.
- Experience across the six authorities in North Wales had shown that the Health Board, at times, paid the authority that put pressure to bear on that day, leaving the rest waiting.
- Discussions at the level of chief executives and directors of social services were taking place to ensure that the six authorities work more closely together to put constant pressure on the Health Board.

It was asked whether there was any real hope that the debt would reduce given that it was worse than in previous years, or whether it would lead to the eventual writing-off of debts. In response, it was noted: -

- That some debts were close to the threshold where they could come under statutory arrangements for writing-off due to their age, and that was why the service was trying to keep the debts alive to avoid that situation.
- This could be frustrating as the negotiations could appear close to a resolution and then the situation could slip back.
- There was a significant risk of having to write-off some of the Health Board's debt, but even without the Health Board debt, the total debts were still higher than desired.
- That a team of Ffordd Gwynedd support officers and one other officer were working on improving the arrangements and effectiveness of debt collection.
- There was hope that the debt would decrease as these measures came into effect.

Questions were asked about the use of artificial intelligence and whether an action plan and protocol were in place for its use within the Council, noting the possibility of using the technology to provide services more cheaply and efficiently. It was questioned whether the Council was already using artificial intelligence for tasks such as producing complex reports, and the desire for

clear control over its use and a plan to embed it in the future was noted. In response, it was noted:-

- That artificial intelligence was becoming more stable within the Digital Plan and that a specific project had been triggered in recent months.
- That the project sought to create case studies on the use of artificial intelligence within the Council's services, with the intention of developing those cases initially and then carrying out more detailed work to ensure safe use and use that made business sense.
- That the work was being carried out in collaboration with a third-party company and that up to six case studies were expected to be developed.
- Limited use of artificial intelligence was already taking place, with a small number of officers using Microsoft Copilot.
- The service had been cautious in the beginning due to doubts about the software's ability with Welsh, but it was noted that this had now improved significantly.
- Technical officers had created a few solutions to read and categorise emails to prioritise work faster.
- That research and testing was ongoing but that use had not yet been widely extended, indicating the intention to move forward gradually.
- That the case study project was intentional to create a business case and to identify potential savings opportunities over time.
- That additional funding had been earmarked to move forward with this work before applying further for funding to expand this.

It was asked about a slippage in some projects within the Digital Plan and questioned whether any project was of greater concern than others, including an example where the project failed to recruit to showcase the Council as a digital employer. In response, it was noted:-

- The Digital Transformation Trainee post was advertised twice to seek the appointment of an officer at postgraduate level, but it was noted that the necessary experience was not available in the market at the time.
- That the degree apprenticeship programme continued and the service was now on the seventh apprentice, and that it was intended to go out again the following year to try and secure the specific resource that had previously failed.
- The project that would cause the most concern should it slip was the human resource and salary management system, noting that it was essential to be able to pay staff and members.
- That the current system expired at the end of December 2026 and detailed preparation and planning work had already been done.
- That letters are sent to potential providers and that there is then a period of silence before confirming an appointment.
- That it was expected for this to be confirmed before Christmas with the intention of starting installation work immediately in the new year.

- The companies considered were experienced companies who had worked with a number of councils, and confidence was expressed in the quality of the options seen.

The completion rate of internal audit work within the 2025-26 work plan was questioned, noting that 47 pieces of work were within the plan, with 16 completed by 31 October (34%). It was asked whether this was in line with what was expected for the period. In response, it was noted that the profile of the scheme was different as much of the work was linked to community councils by agreement. It was noted that the early months of the financial year tended to focus on that work before then focusing on the work of Cyngor Gwynedd. It was therefore noted that the rate did not follow a straight line throughout the year. Confidence was expressed that the scheme would be completed. It was stressed that the Governance and Audit Committee would be monitoring the work.

A question was asked about a milestone stating that the Chief Executive, directors and Head of Finance should meet quarterly to manage the effects of national fiscal cuts, noting that this had not happened in the first half of the year. It was asked whether there was a risk to the Council as a result. In response, it was noted that it was not thought that there was a significant risk, and it was noted that reports on the situation continued to be submitted. It was elaborated that a report had gone to Cabinet and the Governance and Audit Committee in October, and that further reports would go to both committees in January. It was noted that the delivery of the savings plans over the past few years had been high in percentage terms, although it had not always reached 100%. It was stressed that the practical work was continuing in the background, although the desire was to hold more formal meetings.

A question was asked about the recent news regarding the Council's funding, whether an estimate could be given of how it would change the financial outlook. In response, it was noted that the situation needed to be reconsidered following the recent announcements and that each department had been asked to consider what savings would be possible. It was noted that the understanding was that implementing the changes in April 2027 could be more realistic than April 2026, due to the time needed to deliver the plans. It was noted that it was intended to hold workshops in the new year to work proactively with Members. It was emphasised that the budget-setting process would go to the Governance and Audit Committee on 5 February, to the Cabinet on 10 February, and to the Council in early March. It was noted that in terms of the level of increase in council tax, more work needed to be done before a final figure could be given, but the possibility of being around 5% without having to make significant cuts was noted. It was noted that, prior to the recent statements, there was a possibility that around 12% would need to be looked at without making cuts, but that the picture had now improved.

There was concern that many farmers were struggling to meet the 182-day threshold for self-catering properties to qualify for non-domestic rates. It was acknowledged that various people had appealed against this, and it was

questioned how successful these appeals were and whether this was going to be more of an issue in the coming years. In response, it was noted: -

- That the threshold had changed recently, noting that the previous system allowed a change to the non-domestic rates system after letting for 70 days a year.
- That the Welsh Government had increased the threshold to 182 days, meaning that a letting would be for about half a year to be within the non-domestic rates system; otherwise, the property would revert to council tax arrangements.
- That the first appeals were continuing and the decision as to which list applied would be made through the District Valuer's Office and therefore it was not a Council decision.
- A report would be submitted to the Governance and Audit Committee in January on possible additional exceptions.
- A reference to a policy under provision 13A approved by Cabinet in November, noting that this allowed the Council to look at possible additional exemptions that the Council may choose to introduce, having regard to the risks.
- That the work was being addressed by the finance and the legal service.

**RESOLVED**

**To accept the report and note the observations.**

The meeting commenced at 10:30am and concluded at 3:30pm

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Chair