

EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
21/03/24

Attendance:

Councillors: Councillor Elwyn Jones (Chair)
Councillor Paul Rowlinson (Vice-chair)

Councillors:- Jina Gwyrfai, Iwan Huws, Dawn Lynne Jones, Dewi Jones, Gareth Tudor Jones, Gwilym Jones, Cai Larsen, Beth Lawton, Dewi Owen, Gwynfor Owen, Llio Elenid Owen, John Pughe Roberts, Richard Glyn Roberts, Huw Llwyd Rowlands and Rhys Tudur.

Co-opted Members: Colette Owen (The Catholic Church), Manon Williams (Arfon Parent / Governor Representative), Elise Poulter (NEU) and Gwilym Jones (NASUWT).

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

Present for item 5:- Llyr Beaumont Jones (Assistant Head of Economy and Community Department), Elgan Sion Roberts (Low Carbon Energy Programme Manager, Ambition North Wales) and Nia Medi Williams (Senior Operations Officer, Ambition North Wales).

Present for item 6:- Councillor Beca Brown (Cabinet Member for Education), Gwern ap Rhisiart (Head of Education), Gwyn Tudur (Assistant Head: Secondary), Rhys Glyn (Head of Gwynedd Immersion Education System) and Debbie Anne Jones (Assistant Head: Corporate Services).

Present for item 7: - Councillor Beca Brown (Cabinet Member for Education), Gwern ap Rhisiart (Head of Education), Llion Williams (Assistant Head: Well-being and Equality) and Debbie Anne Jones (Assistant Head: Corporate Services).

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Sasha Williams and Dyfrig Siencyn (Council Leader).

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

Manon Williams (Arfon Parent / Governor Representative) declared a personal interest in item 7 because she has children who attend a primary school in Gwynedd and benefit from free school meals.

The member was not of the opinion that it was a prejudicial interest, and she 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 25 January 2024 as a true record.

5. NORTH WALES GROWTH DEAL - QUARTER 3 2023/24 PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Assistant Head of Economy and Community Department and Ambition North Wales officers were welcomed to the meeting.

Submitted – the report of the Leader that presented the Quarter 3 report of the Growth Deal and the Portfolio's Risk Register and invited the committee to scrutinise the performance of Ambition North Wales in implementing the Growth Deal and to accept that mitigation measures were in place to respond to the risks.

After the Assistant Head of Economy and Community Department said a few words at the beginning, the Senior Operations Manager gave a short introduction setting the context and summarised the information submitted in the written report. She explained, as we were nearing the end of the financial year, that the report looked further than Quarter 3, by looking back on the progress of the last year, and was also looking ahead to the coming year. The Low Carbon Energy Programme Manager then gave an overview of the Energy Programme.

The Senior Operations Officer apologised that Alwen Williams, Ambition North Wales Portfolio Director could not be present at the meeting.

Members were then given an opportunity to ask questions and submit observations.

An enquiry was made as to how many of the 4,200 additional jobs referred to in the presentation would come to Gwynedd. In response, it was explained that the 4,200 jobs were across all projects and programmes. The answer was not at hand, but the figures could be provided to members.

It was emphasised that the number of jobs for Gwynedd, and possibly Conwy and the Isle of Anglesey, were of interest to members of this committee. It was noted that the Peblig Ward, Caernarfon was amongst the poorest 10% in Wales and that the Bevan Foundation's latest report on Poverty in Arfon noted that more jobs that paid well were needed in the area to tackle poverty. It was asked whether there was real hope that any plans would come to the Parc Bryn Cegin site in Bangor, especially with the advent of the Free Port in Anglesey and establishing a new Economic Investment Zone in the east. It was noted that Anglesey could offer many more incentives to businesses than we could offer in Gwynedd, and it was asked how we could ensure investment in this part of Wales.

In response, it was noted that:-

- The Ambition North Wales officers collaborated very closely with the Isle of Anglesey Council within the partnership, and that there was a working relationship between the Leaders of both county councils through the Ambition Board. It was noted that the Ambition North Wales Team received updates from the Isle of Anglesey Council on the Free Port.
- The Ambition North Wales have now committed to a Joint Venture Agreement with the Welsh Government to carry out the Parc Bryn Cegin project and the Welsh Government had appointed a consultation team to take the project through the planning permission stage. Work was ongoing on the high-level costs and on amending the plan for the plot and main plan, and it was believed that a final draft of the outline business case would be available by May.
- The Growth Deal projects had to include a strong benefits plan that indicated how the projects would create jobs locally and promote local skills. It was noted that Ambition North Wales had collaborated very closely with the Regional Skills Partnership, and also with the colleges and universities, with the aim of ensuring that the skills provision was available locally when the projects were progressing.

- It must be acknowledged that the Growth Deal was a regional plan and the type of projects that were suitable for the investment were capital projects that led to direct growth, and therefore, would possibly favour urban areas where the market was at its strongest.
- The concern was expressed regarding the possible impact of the Free Port on Gwynedd. It was understood that there was an intention to try and avoid any *displacement* from other areas into the Free Port areas, but knowing how to achieve this was required.
- Planning permission had been granted during the previous year to develop some of the other plots on Parc Bryn Cegin. It was hoped that this highlighted that the private sector also had an interest in the site, and that ensuring an investment or two on the site would be a huge step in the right direction to make the most of the potential the site offered.
- The work of developing the Gwynedd Economy Plan would proceed over the next year and there was no doubt that aspects from the Growth Programme would also be incorporated in that, namely wider aspects than the specific type of investment only relevant to the Growth Programme.

In response to further questions regarding the units on Parc Bryn Cegin, it was noted that:-

- There was an intention to take advantage of the opportunity through the Growth Deal to provide ready-made units on Parc Bryn Cegin.
- The number of units that would be constructed on the site could not be confirmed until the preparatory work in terms of developing the requirements of the market etc. had been completed. It was also noted that there was a desire to try and trial units that would meet future environmental requirements.
- It was hoped that the preparatory work would be completed by the Autumn.

The honest opinion of Ambition North Wales officers was requested regarding the impact of the Free Port. It was noted that there were no answers for us in Gwynedd in terms of how to avoid *displacement* because of the tax advantages offered to businesses that were established in the Free Port area. It was further noted, as we were overdependent on the public sector in Gwynedd, that there was a real need for investment from the private sector. More information was also requested regarding the Tourism Talent Network Programme, as well as an explanation why the RAG status of the Agri-Food and Tourism Programme was orange overall. In response, it was noted that:-

- It was not considered that the officers in the meeting were the best people to convey the official opinion of the Ambition North Wales regarding the Free Port, and it was possible to return to the members at this point after consulting with the Portfolio Director.
- David Mathews, Land and Property Programme Manager - Ambition North Wales, had a very close working relationship with Isle of Anglesey Council officers through the Holyhead Port project.
- The Free Port's figures in terms of creating jobs were very high, and there was no doubt that some of these jobs would go beyond the boundaries of Isle of Anglesey only.
- The Isle of Anglesey Council was currently going through the business plan process for the Free Port, and as a result of that, more details would be coming through on the content of the proposal etc. In the meantime, the Team in Ambition North Wales had received regular updates on the process to be able to try and identify opportunities to collaborate with the Isle of Anglesey.

- Close connections already existed with some of the Growth Deal's projects, namely Holyhead Hydrogen Hub, Morlais and Energy Project that was located within the Free Port area.

As the member that asked the question regarding the Tourism Talent Network Programme and the performance of the Agri-Food and Tourism Programme lost connection with the meeting before the question was answered, the Chair asked the Senior Operations Officer to provide a written response for him.

It was noted that:-

- It was not understood why the Ambition Board was called '*North Wales Economic Ambition Board*', instead of '*The Ambition Board of the North*' and perhaps that message should be conveyed to the new Minister for the Economy in the Welsh Government.
- In reality, it was an Ambition Board for the A55 because the travel time from large parts of Gwynedd to Caernarfon was longer than from Caernarfon to Deeside. The officers had acknowledged that the Growth Deal favoured urban areas, but wards such as Harlech and Llanbedr did not include urban areas, and they were not close to any urban areas.
- It was disappointing that the Council Leader and the Ambition North Wales Portfolio Director could not be present at the meeting to answer scrutinisers' questions.
- There was also a wish to express disappointment regarding the content of the report as there was no reference to Meirionnydd, except for Trawsfynydd (Cwmni Egin), which was currently very far away. Statements were seen in the press noting that the First Minister of Wales, in his previous post, gave money towards developments in Llanbedr airfield, but there was no reference to this in the report. It was suggested that an enquiry should be made to the new Minister for the Economy to see whether they would continue to look at having developments in Llanbedr airfield. It was noted that the old Development Board for Rural Wales was missed, it was highly praised for its work in the Meirionnydd area, but unfortunately, it was not believed that the Growth Deal would bring any benefits to that part of Gwynedd.

In response to the last observation, it was noted that a fund of £25m would be available under the Smart Local Energy Project to support local / community projects and small businesses to de-carbonise more effectively and that the Digital Programme projects that looked at improving digital connectivity would also help the less populated areas.

It was enquired whether the UK Government's recent statement regarding purchasing the Wylfa site would impact the Trawsfynydd Project. In response, it was noted that:-

- As well as making a statement regarding purchasing the Wylfa site, the UK Government had also undertaken a consultation on the new National Policy Statement to localise nuclear energy generation stations after 2025, that gave developers the opportunity to put themselves forward, instead of the Government naming the sites.
- It also seemed that the policy looked at more alternative ways to come into the market, and possibly open more options for private companies, such as Cwmni Egin, to come in.
- It was difficult to say what impact this could have on the Trawsfynydd Project unless there was more confirmation from the UK Government regarding which SMR technologies were intended to be used, and whether those technologies would suit Trawsfynydd or not.
- It was believed that the Trawsfynydd Project still had an opportunity, as the sites that the UK Government currently looked at, as well as other sites such as

Trawsfynydd, would not be enough to achieve the Government's target in terms of developing nuclear capacity.

It was noted, in the previous meeting of the full Council, the matter of apprenticeships in the construction field etc. in Grŵp Llandrillo Menai colleges and the cuts that were going to be presented in the number of courses provided had arisen. It was enquired, following the members' observations, and considering the 4,200 jobs that would be created, how much collaboration was there with the educational providers in the short-term to prepare our young people for these jobs. It was suggested, despite the expression and the desire, that the type of situation seen recently with Grŵp Llandrillo Menai, for example, did not suggest that this discussion had occurred in a cohesive and consistent way. In response, it was noted that:-

- This was a point that was very much alive for Ambition North Wales. The Ambition Board had sent a letter of concern regarding the situation and Ruthin's Jones Bros Company, developers of the Former North Wales Hospital Project, Denbigh, had also expressed concern regarding the same matter.
- There was a very close connection between the Growth Deal programmes and the skills and employment element as the Regional Skills Partnership was part of the Ambition North Wales Team. Also, the Skills Partnership had specifically contacted Grŵp Llandrillo Menai to prepare and try to produce courses where there were current gaps to ensure that workers were available when the work opportunities arose.
- The Skills Partnership would release an annual report detailing the cross-section of jobs, not only the innovative things, but also the necessary crafts, and look at the numbers that would come through.

It was enquired, considering the current pressures on the public sector and the difficult environment in terms of the private sector, whether there was a risk that not much of what was in the Growth Deal would be achieved due to a lack of inward investment. In response, it was noted that:-

- The economic circumstances had substantially changed since the Growth Deal was agreed in 2020, but Ambition North Wales had an agreement with both governments that the £1bn investment must be attracted to North Wales, and that being through contributions from the public sector and the private sector, and that all of this had been broken down for each project.
- As part of the business plan process, very detailed financial work would be made to ensure that the investments originally outlined would happen, or that it would be possible to find other sources if the circumstances changed.
- Ambition North Wales worked very closely with the private sector through the Business Delivery Board, which had many connections and broad experiences within the business sector in the north.
- The Ambition Board had approved a new Investment Strategy for North Wales to attract a Growth Deal and wider economic development in North Wales, that included investment principles and was based on research completed jointly with Savilles Company and the Business Delivery Board.
- The Investment Strategy would be a key document in terms of ensuring investment into the region. It was noted that an investment had already been made through the Digital Signal Processing Centre (DSP) in Bangor University and it was also hoped to see an investment from the Enterprise Engineering and the Optic Centre Project which are now operational.
- The projects that had been originally assessed and developed attracted the type of investment that might mean private investment, or jointly. It was noted that there was a risk associated with this, and it had been presented as a risk in the risk

assessment, but an integral part of the Growth Deal was to consider what were the opportunities for the private sector.

- One of the challenges was that the work of developing outline strategic plans, the outline business plans and the full business plans meant very thorough work in terms of the detail of the proposals, but the advantage in doing so would be to reduce the risk by ensuring that the details were robust.
- Developing the details, by considering the requirements of the markets and the practical and management risks etc. for each work stream, was likely to create the conditions that would attract an investment from the private sector, and responded to the real living risk highlighted.

It was noted that it was a difficult period for local energy companies because the price of renewable energy had reduced to 6 pence per kilowatt, and that there were also challenges associated with transporting energy from the local area to the National Grid due to people's objection to pylons etc. In response, it was noted that:-

- A shift was anticipated in terms of developing local energy, from supplying the Grid to generating energy locally for local need. This would also allow energy companies to sell the electricity on a slightly larger scale to local customers, that would save money compared to if they bought it from the big companies.
- It was attempted to help local communities and businesses to be a part of such projects. Ynni Cymru would also work in this field to develop projects that would hopefully be able to be copied across the north.

It was asked whether Ambition North Wales collaborated with Mid-Wales Growth, considering that south Meirionnydd had more connections with mid-Wales than the north. In response, it was noted that:-

- Ambition North Wales collaborated closely with Mid-Wales Growth, and that many of mid-Wales and the north's projects were similar to each other.
- Any opportunities to collaborate and share good practice, for example in the digital field, was taken advantage of, and Robyn Lovelock, Ambition North Wales' Agri-food and Tourism Programme Manager, had jointly led with officers from mid-Wales on the Agri-food Launchpad following the announcement in the UK Government's Spring Budget. Additional information could be provided to members if they wished.

Concern was expressed that the Growth Deal projects did not move forward as fast as they should, and it was asked whether there was a risk that the plans would slip, for example, the Glynllifon Rural Economy Hub Project, because the timetable was too lengthy to bring the plans to action. In response, it was noted that:-

- The point was understood, but although the Partnership had been established in 2012, the Growth Deal was not signed until 2020 because of the work of establishing the Growth Vision for North Wales.
- The situation of the economy, planning matters etc. and the need to collaborate with other agencies had led to slippages on some projects.
- The fact that two projects were now operational was a big step forward for the Team and it was hoped to deliver more projects this year.
- The Growth Deal was a long-term plan of over 15 years and each project would not commence at the same time.
- The business planning process, which was a requirement from the Government, was an extremely detailed and complex process that meant that each project had to go through a strategic business plan, an outline business case and a full business case that looked in detail at five cases, including the economic case, the commercial case and the financial case.

- The Team in Ambition North Wales had been trained to do the work, and tried to go through the process as fast as they could. A report was received last year that noted the need for the Team to focus more on moving towards being operational, and that gave the officers a big focus. Resources were diverted to projects to be able to move some projects forward faster and the Team looked at projects that were more or less ready to go and worked daily to move the plans forward to get the approval of the Ambition Board to be operational.

It was enquired what other projects were expected to be delivered in the next year or two. In response, it was noted that it was hoped that more projects would come forward before the end of this year, including the 4G+ Project, Former Denbigh North Wales Hospital Project and the Tourism Talent Network Project.

It was noticed that paragraph 2.2.4 of the report noted that procurement activities on Connecting the Last Few % Project had been suspended until the UK Government had confirmed the launch date of their new intervention, and it was asked whether they had received confirmation of that as the report noted that it was expected to be confirmed in Q3 23/24 to be launched in 2024. In response, it was noted that it was not believed that the UK Government had given a response, but that could be checked with Stuart Whitfield, the Digital Programme Manager, by providing a written response to the members if there was not an update on the matter.

Concern was expressed regarding the Glynllifon Rural Economy Hub Project, that was noted in red in the RAG status column in the performance table, and the potential of this project moving forward was enquired. It was also noted that there were no projects in Dwyfor and that local projects, and projects in the agricultural world, were important to the rural areas of Gwynedd. In response, it was noted that:-

- Ambition North Wales continued to support the Glynllifon Project and acknowledged the detrimental impact that the project would have on Gwynedd and on the sector and the economy regionally.
- The timetable had slipped, mainly due to planning matters, but also because of the statutory designations, that meant that surveys had to be prepared over a period of a few months, instead of a short period of time.
- Should a planning application be submitted, it would be the subject of observations by Natural Resources Wales and Cadw because of the statutory designations, and the site was therefore very complex.
- The College had appointed a comprehensive team to address these matters and had invested in the preparatory work, with a meeting arranged for the next month to get an update on the work.
- It was hoped that the mitigation measures identified to respond to the biodiversity matters, and also perhaps in terms of the historical assets within Glynllifon, were sufficient to be supported in terms of planning.
- As Parc Glynllifon's owner, the Council worked closely with the College to try and develop a long-term vision for Glynllifon and saw the College's plan as an important part of the vision for the Parc.

It was expressed that they hoped that the new generation who would need to adopt skills would be able to do so locally in this area in the future. In response, it was noted that:-

- Ensuring a local workforce for the future was an important part of the business plan and the business management plan that come from the Growth Deal projects.
- Many energy projects would be created in the next few years, such as sea projects, nuclear projects and wind and solar projects, and a great deal of work had been done to look at what would be the requirements of these sectors.

- The Regional Skills Partnership had undertaken a great deal of work surrounding the green skills needed in the north, and had worked closely with the colleges and universities to ensure that it was possible to provide this.
- Many of the skills needed in places such as Trawsfynydd or Wylfa, such as mechanical and electrical skills, would be very similar to numerous other projects, and there would be many opportunities for individuals to learn those skills and move forward from one project to the next.

It was enquired whether the Growth Deal was on track to achieve the target of investing £1bn by 2027/2028, as noted in the Portfolio's profile in 2021. In response, it was noted that:-

- There was an amended profile in the Committee's papers, and since then, another profile had been approved by the Ambition Board in their meeting on 15 March.
- The new figures were not to hand, but a link could be shared with the members to the amended paper on the budget.

RESOLVED to accept the report and to note the observations, and accept that mitigation measures were in place to respond to the risks.

6. PROGRESS REPORT ON THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE GWYNEDD CATEGORY 3 SECONDARY SCHOOLS SCRUTINY INVESTIGATION

The Cabinet Member for Education and officers from the Education Department were welcomed to the meeting.

Submitted – the report of the Cabinet Member for Education detailing the action plans in response to the recommendations of the Category 3 Secondary Schools Scrutiny Investigation report.

The Cabinet Member set out the context noting that:-

- She wished to thank the members of the Investigation for their work on the report and for bringing the recommendations forward.
- Meirion Prys Jones was commissioned to collaborate with the Department to revisit the Gwynedd Language Policy and national changes would also drive this field, such as the effort towards a million speakers, the new curriculum, the new categorisation arrangement, and whether that would become statutory or not, and also The Welsh Language Bill, which still needed to complete its journey through the Senedd.
- She had complete faith in Meirion Prys Jones and his desire to convene a wide range of stakeholders to feed into the work, and wished to see the scrutinisers putting their ideas into the mix when the opportunity came.
- Important work needed to be done surrounding bilingualism, bilingual learning and our expectations of that learning in Gwynedd. That would, in its turn, make our standpoint as a county, very clear to parents, and hopefully addressed what was noted in Recommendation 5.
- There had been a lot of good collaboration with Gwynedd Language Initiative, Say Something in Welsh, Coleg Cymraeg and individuals such as Anni Llŷn and Tara Bandito to create community events and also in schools.
- Progress in two specific fields had been difficult for the time being, namely the recommendations that dealt specifically with GwE, because the supporting schools landscape was being re-imagined, and the transitional schools, due to the challenging and unprecedented situation that had been, and continued, in one transitional school.

The Chair of the Investigation, Councillor Paul Rowlinson, thanked the Cabinet Member for her response to each of the Investigation's recommendation, noting some observations, as follows:-

Recommendation 1 - It was important that schools' language medium data was reconciled and checked when the Department was in a situation to do so as there was uncertainty at the moment whether it was collected on a regular basis between the different schools.

Recommendation 2 - It was very important to implement this recommendation when the new Education Language Policy was operational and they looked forward to seeing the outcome of Meirion Prys Jones' work on this. Everyone knew that Gwynedd was the foremost county in terms of Welsh-medium education, but because there was always a risk of being self-satisfied and of slipping back, it was important that this was implemented.

Recommendation 3 - They wished to thank the Department for writing to the WJEC and it was enquired whether any responses had been received to their letter.

Recommendation 4 - This was the key recommendation, and the Department was thanked for commissioning Meirion Prys Jones to collaborate with them.

Recommendation 5 - It was accepted that schools' arrangements must be followed, but it was believed that the schools were asking for more support from the Department, and the Cabinet Member's response satisfied the recommendation.

Recommendation 7 - The response referred to many ways of promoting the advantages of studying through the medium of Welsh, but that these events must continue regularly.

Recommendation 9 - The Cabinet Member's response satisfied the recommendation, but the recommendation also referred to providing support to classroom teachers, as well as staff in the immersion centres, on how to present the curriculum to latecomers that could not speak Welsh or English.

In response to some of the observations from the Chair of the Investigation, it was noted:-

Recommendations 1 and 2:-

- As a result to the Council's current Language Policy and the schools' bilingual curriculum, that some things were not black and white, and the schools were required to interpret them, such as the number of pupils studying five GCSE subjects completely through the medium of Welsh.
- The data was provided by the individual schools, and not the Department, and a headteacher confirmed the accuracy of the data.
- It was possible that the sentence '*The Department is not currently in a situation to be able to check the situation*' suggested that there had not been any action, but the Department had discussed with the headteachers and had tried to reconcile and standardise the data. It was confirmed by the Department that the data was current for each school across a large number of indicators.
- In terms of setting targets, there was no intention to be self-satisfied at all, but as the Education Language Policy was being amended, there were many targets that could be set.

Recommendation 3 - a response had not been received by WJEC to date and the Department would go back to them following this meeting, reiterating that the committee members were also expecting to hear the response.

Members were then given an opportunity to ask questions and submit observations.

Referring to recommendation 1, it was noted that the difficulties were understood, but it was asked how the Department intended to check the provision's data. In response, it was noted that:-

- It was a difficult question to answer without a robust and clear policy in place.
- The Department trusted the schools to report on the medium of the provision, and to get that correct. It was not believed that the Department needed to release an officer to go and check the accuracy of the data and the honesty of our schools' leaders.
- Clear guidelines were required that set the expectations for everyone so that it would be possible for the governing bodies to hold them to account in accordance with the correct governance arrangements that were meant to be in a school.
- A step was taken back to take forward steps to bring people with us and to listen to stakeholders' concerns regarding the opportunities, and also the challenges, that came as a result of the Education Language Policy.

The opinion was expressed that checking the data was an important element of Recommendation 1, and it was suggested that this should be done for at least one or two years to ensure that each school interpreted the data in the same way and that everyone was on the same path. In response, it was noted that:-

- If it was seen that any data presented by a school was inconsistent with the curricular data that the Department had about that school, the officers would chase that immediately.
- The headings in the spreadsheet in terms of the data collected was quite robust from schools, such as the number of year 10 pupils in two different fields studying three or more subjects through the medium of Welsh, or how many sat Welsh first language etc.
- The Department had good knowledge of the schools through the curricular groups etc. and the data from the schools was robust and powerful.
- The element added as a result of the categorisation arrangement, and was not an act as yet, was the number of children that reached the 70% threshold. Good knowledge of all schools was required to fully check that, and the headteacher of each individual school knew this.

The member who asked the question stated that they were not happy with the answer.

Referring to Recommendation 16, it was noted that the work with the Association for Schools in favour of Welsh Medium Education (CYDAG) had clearly been a good thing, but it was asked what connection had there been with the Welsh Government regarding the lack of study resources through the medium of Welsh, not only for Gwynedd, but also for other counties in Wales, and what did they have in mind to ensure improvement. In response, it was noted that:-

- The report explained what was in place, including Adnodd company's commitment to provide the best possible resources to the curriculum bilingually and to ensure that those materials were released in Welsh and English at the same time.
- There was a challenge in having resources that arose on a daily basis, such as the news of the day etc. bilingually, but the formal, official resources that came from the Welsh Government were bilingual.
- Everything on the Welsh Government's HWB platform was bilingual and the Government had also established the Adnodd company to commission standard resources to support the Curriculum.

It was noted, although action on Recommendations 2 and 6 could be slowed down because the Welsh Language Bill would not be submitted to the Senedd until May, this should not prevent any steps from happening at all. In response, it was noted that:-

- Recommendation 2 referred to setting specific targets, but if there was not anything specific in a policy that set the target, it was not possible to measure it and schools were asked to increase and empower the data when moving forward.
- Recommendation 6 involved both Category 3T schools in Gwynedd, and although there had been consistent work with Ysgol Tywyn, it was not currently possible to challenge Ysgol Friars to the same extent as that school faced an exceptional challenge this year.
- A responsible specific plan was required to move Bangor forward in the appropriate way, but it would take time to fulfil this.

It was enquired what exactly would be Meirion Prys Jones' role and what was the work's timetable. In response, it was noted that:-

- It was intended to host specific sessions with different cohorts of people over a period to get their opinion regarding the current situation and the direction they wished to move towards.
- The Department was currently working on a timetable with Meirion Prys Jones, looking at the most reasonable use of his time and where to host the events.
- There was an intention to try and host some events at the end of the Summer Term to be able to move forward and build on the work that would have happened during the Autumn Term.
- A definite timetable would be shared with the members in due course.

It was noted that the members would appreciate seeing the timetable, as well as any information regarding the events.

Reference was made to the observations in the response to Recommendation 1 that paid attention to the Welsh language and the schools' ethos in each visit hosted for schools, and it was enquired whether this arrangement had been formalised, whether that was by the Authority or GwE. In response, it was noted that the Welsh aspects should possibly be a specific point on the agenda of each school visit.

By accepting that the Department had decided not to act on Recommendation 2 until the new Education Language Policy for Gwynedd had been drawn up, it was asked whether there was an intention to look at interim targets. In response, it was noted that there was no intention to do this currently and the intention would be to continue with the situation as it was during the consultation period, and to empower the targets following that. That would also give an opportunity for other things that were on the horizon, such as the Welsh Language Bill, to work its way through the Senedd.

Referring to Recommendation 12, it was noted that the plan to provide Welsh lessons for teachers was praiseworthy, but it was enquired whether it was possible to do more to promote the offer, instead of providing application forms for schools only. In response, it was noted that this was a fair point, but that people needed to wish to scrutinise the language and do so voluntarily. However, it could be discussed further and see to what extent people could be encouraged to be a part of the plan, instead of leaving it to chance, as the sentence in the report highlighted.

It was noted that:-

- The format of the report was welcomed that included brief observations opposite each recommendation.
- They wished to congratulate the Department on commissioning Meirion Prys Jones, who was a very experienced language acquisition specialist, and that the scrutinisers looked forward to collaborating with him.
- A member had previously noted dissatisfaction with the officer's response to their observation regarding Recommendation 1, and it was emphasised that schools'

language medium data needed to be authenticated, reconciled and corrected for today, and not to wait until the new Education Language Policy was in place.

- It was said in the Council meeting on 6 July 2023 “*From looking at the whole-school figures across the county, in line with the definition of the categorisation system, over 70% of the secondary children in Gwynedd undertake at least 70% of their curricular and extra-curricular school activities through the medium of Welsh. Without the two transitional schools, the 3T ones, over 90% of Gwynedd secondary children undertake at least 70% of their curricular and extra-curricular school activities in Welsh*”. However, it was doubted whether that was true.
- The response to Recommendation 1 noted that the Department already collected language medium data for secondary schools annually and the data for the current year had been collected and collated, and it was asked to see this data before the next meeting of this committee, including not only the activities, but also the lessons and the subjects through the medium of Welsh throughout the county.

In response, it was noted that the officers would share the data with the scrutinisers following this meeting, as long as the schools were comfortable with that.

It was noted that:-

- Members welcomed the data and it was demanded that it was checked in some way or another. Without reliable data, targets could not be set, and waiting for the advent of the new Language Policy would mean that a whole year of data and an opportunity for people to move forward would have been lost.
- There was concern that the new Language Policy was used as some sort of excuse to delay and not do anything.
- There was concern having understood that departmental capacity to monitor detailed individual targets was low, and it was necessary to start planning to secure this capacity.
- The examples of collaborating with other organisations and Gwynedd Language Initiative that was referred to in the response to Recommendation 11 was rather ad-hoc and a formal programme of activities should be provided as there was immense scope to collaborate for the benefit of the Welsh language.

In response, it was noted that:-

- In terms of capacity, it was a requirement for the Department to revisit its structure as part of the current review of the middle tier under the Welsh Government's guidance. The comment that the Department would look at it whilst moving forward was understood. However, it was believed that the response was a reflection of the current situation in terms of capacity, instead of being a reflection of where we wished to be whilst moving forward and re-structuring the Department.
- In terms of the discussion regarding the activities, there was a discussion in the Language Forum in terms of one of the outcomes of the WESP (Welsh in Education Strategic Plan) that related to the use of the language socially etc. and enhanced the opportunities. It was very early days in that discussion, but the observation that a structured programme of activities should be planned, instead of leaving it to chance, was quite a fair one. This was the type of thing discussed in the Language Forum anyway, and although assurance could not be given that an activity programme would be available immediately, it was hoped to build on that from this point forward.

It was suggested that a third column should be included in the report noting the next steps. It was agreed to do this.

A member noted that he had faith in the data presented by the schools and he was happy with the answers given by the officers.

It was noted that:-

- In terms of Recommendation 11, that related to opportunities to socialise through the medium of Welsh, it was important to offer these types of opportunities to young people outside the education system and the changes in the Department's structure would put the service in a good place to undertake that work.
- Perhaps Recommendation 11 should be looked at in more detail by drawing up the work programme of this committee.
- In terms of capacity, the need to try and allocate more resources to check the data was questioned, when there was no need to check it anyway, and that might be at the expense of other work, such as increasing the provision of social activities for young people through the medium of Welsh.
- By having a robust and clear policy, there would be less need to check the data, and by allocating our schools in Gwynedd as Welsh schools as far as possible, there would be less need for monitoring, as Estyn would do the work for us.
- Recommendation 4 referred to re-visiting Gwynedd Education Language Policy as a result of national changes in the field, but it was not those policy changes that caused concern, but the language shift that was happening in society.
- Recommendation 7 should be completely removed if there was no need to promote the benefit of studying through the medium of Welsh when there was a robust policy in place.
- Recommendation 8 was only relevant to young people who were going to university, and therefore to a large extent, was irrelevant with a view on the language policy as there was not a language shift amongst the high middle class. The language shift in Gwynedd happened amongst children on a level lower on the social hierarchy, as the statistics from the Census indicated that there were twice as many children from working class Welsh homes that could not speak Welsh compared with children from middle class Welsh homes. Therefore, this recommendation referred to providing resources where they were not needed.
- The response to Recommendation 14 referred to including headteachers in the process 'whilst' reviewing the Language Policy, but was their role not to implement the policy, instead of drawing up the policy?
- In terms of Recommendation 16, it was not believed that the medium of the study resources was neither here nor there and our focus should be on the oral medium of learning.
- In terms of Recommendation 11, that the collaboration to increase the provision of Welsh-medium social activities for young people was to be welcomed.

In response to some of the observations, it was noted that:-

- The challenge in terms of scrutinising the language and the use of the language within schools was a genuine challenge that schools faced every day. It was agreed that the language shift should be included in the response to Recommendation 4, whilst also giving attention to it as the work with Meirion Prys Jones moved forward.
- In terms of Recommendation 14, there needed to be discussions with the schools and bring them along with us on the journey whilst ensuring that they understood what drove the change and what guidance was given by the Authority to the work.
- The headteachers were important stakeholders and it was considered that it would be unwise not to include them in the process of drawing up a policy as they understood the challenges in the schools.
- It was agreed that the use of the language in the classroom was much more important than written resources, although those study resources were also extremely important.

The Chair of the Investigation was invited to submit closing observations. It was noted that:-

- Emphasis was given in the report to resources because the school pupils reported that the lack of resources was one of the reasons why they, or their friends, chose the medium of English.
- He wished to thank the committee for their observations, that gave more material to the Cabinet Member and the officers to consider when moving forward, and they looked forward to seeing the new Education Language Policy.
- One of the key matters that arose during the Investigation was that the definitions of Welsh language education was a barrier to the schools, and the need to act on this without delay, without waiting for the outcome of Meirion Prys Jones' work was emphasised.
- The members of the Investigation did not doubt the professionalism and honesty of the staff collecting the language medium data, but they believed that inconsistent interpretations between different schools suggested that the data was not completely reliable.

RESOLVED to accept the report and to note the observations and ask the Education Department to provide language medium data provision from the secondary schools to committee members.

7. FREE SCHOOL MEALS

Submitted - the progress report of the Cabinet Member for Education on the free school meals project as a result of extending the scheme across the primary sector.

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

It was noted that they wished to thank the Welsh Government for bringing this project to fruition, through an agreement with Plaid Cymru, and Cyngor Gwynedd was congratulated for distributing the scheme so quickly to every school in Gwynedd. The Service was also thanked for the work of adapting / upgrading the schools' kitchens, and especially to all kitchen staff and cooks for their hard work.

It was noted that there was no motivation for the parents of children eligible for free school meals to submit an application to the Authority because every child was now eligible for free school meals, and therefore the school or the county missed out financially. In response, it was noted that:-

- The point was valid, but the application from parents was for general benefits, including school uniform grant, resources etc. instead of only being an application for school meals.
- In terms of the way the Authority was funded, the schools received a sum of money per head for learners who were eligible for free school meals.
- The review from last summer had highlighted that Gwynedd was the county with the lowest level of children eligible for these benefits.
- A Team within the Department contacted families to ensure that everyone who was eligible to be registered for free school meals did so.
- Some parents were not aware of free school meals, but more and more people had come to know about it by now.

It was noted that it was important to emphasise to parents that applying for free school meals opened the door to other advantages.

It was noted that it was encouraging to see from the report that some headteachers believed that pupils' behaviour, dedication and attainment had improved in the afternoons as a result of receiving school meals.

In terms of the challenge of recruiting staff to the Catering Service, it was enquired whether the plan to package jobs, for example, working in a school kitchen over lunchtime and providing care in the afternoon, had come to fruition. In response, it was noted that:-

- Recruiting was complex as fields such as Education and Care tried to attract staff from the same pool of people.
- The possibility of creating a purposeful plan to package jobs was very low in this difficult situation, but an element of that already happened as people chose to work in more than one job to increase their hours. However, it became more difficult to find people who were happy to travel from one work situation to another, and possibly without a car.

It was asked whether there was an intention to put political pressures on the Welsh Government to extend the free school meals project to the secondary sector. In response, it was noted that:-

- This was a priority for the Cabinet Member for Education, and she would apply pressure in any way that she could, including in the regular meetings between the Minister for Education and Education Portfolio Holders in the North.
- There was concern that families of a generation of children, that have no recollection of paying for school meals, would be hit by that as their child reached Year 7.

It was enquired what would happen after the current plan came to an end in 2025. In response, it was noted once again that this was a priority for the Cabinet Member and any undermining of the proposal now would cause her a lot of concern, and would be a huge backward step.

It was asked whether consideration was given to the quality of the school meals, whilst also keeping the benefit local. In response, it was noted that:-

- Regular questionnaires were provided regarding the quality of the food.
- Local scrutiny was not always productive in terms of cost, but effort was made to do so within the rather strict procurement rules that were currently in place.

The Department was congratulated on presenting the school meals project before the timetable.

It was noticed that the report noted that 17% of the meals provided were eFSM (Eligible for Free School Meals) since presenting the proposal to every school in September 2023, and it was enquired whether it was possible to track this figure over the last five years, whilst continuing to track it in the future so that any reduction in the numbers were highlighted and steps were taken to reach those families. In response, it was noted that, because financial factors in terms of funding schools and support for education services were based on the number of learners eligible for free meals, the Authority had already carefully tracked the data to ensure our share of any budgets available to support the most vulnerable learners in the county.

It was suggested that the Cabinet Member could ask the Minister for Education to consider whether free school meals would continue to be an appropriate measure considering that school meals were available free to everyone by now.

It was noted that the Finance Department looked at facilitating their arrangements in terms of claiming different benefits and it was suggested that applications for benefits in the field of education could be included as part of this.

RESOLVED to accept the report and to note the observations.

The meeting commenced at 11.00am and concluded at 3.10pm.

Chair