

CYNGOR GWYNEDD – Report to Cyngor Gwynedd Cabinet

Title of item:	Performance Report of the Cabinet Member for Education
Cabinet Member:	Cllr Beca Brown, Cabinet Member for Education
Relevant officer:	Gwern ap Rhisiart, Head of Education
Date of meeting:	17 September 2024

1. Decision Sought:

To accept and note the information in the report.

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

In order to ensure effective performance management.

3. Introduction and Rationale

3.1 Background / Introduction

The purpose of this report is to update you on what has been achieved in the field that I am responsible for as Cabinet Member for Education. This includes addressing the summer results, outlining the latest with the pledges made in the Council Plan; the Department's day-to-day work; as well as the latest in terms of savings and cuts schemes.

In the first instance, I would like to congratulate our learners and our schools on the positive results in the GCSEs and A-Level examinations this summer. This year's qualification arrangements were the final step in a gradual return to normal processes, with the assessments being graded in line with pre-pandemic years without any additional considerations. I wish all young people in Gwynedd the very best as they step forward into the next exciting chapter in their life, be it to further or higher education, training, apprenticeships or employment.

We are implementing the Council Plan 2023-28, and herein I report on progress to the end of August 2024, recognising that it is still early days in the context of some of the pledges that are new in the document since April this year. Nevertheless, all matters have been the subject of discussion and have been scrutinised by myself at a performance challenging meeting, and I am incredibly happy with the Department's performance, and will elaborate on the progress in the report.

3.2 The reasoning and justification for recommending the decision

Performance on the Council Plan Pledges

Transform education for children in their early years

The admissions policy for Gwynedd schools will change from September 2025 onwards and will state that children attending Nursery class in schools in Gwynedd will be expected to be fully toilet-trained before they start. Work has commenced to prepare parents for this, and resources have been shared with every childcare setting and on social media. Furthermore, we are working with the Libraries service and the Environment Department to produce toileting packs with eco-friendly nappies.

The work of extending the childcare provision for two-year olds to new areas is almost complete, with 22 providers now offering Flying Start extended childcare. After holding interviews with the providers that are part of the extension scheme, very positive feedback was received in terms of the quality of the provision at present. Parents can apply for the childcare provision through the Gwynedd Families Hub.

Modernise buildings and the learning environment

It is pleasing to be able to declare that the new building and campus for Ysgol Treferythyr in Cricieth has opened its doors to learners at the start of September this year. This follows years of work, and an investment of over £8m to secure the highest quality learning environment and resources for up to 150 learners in the area. There will also be a childcare provision on the site, and also an ABC Unit. The Department will arrange an official opening very soon.

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

It is also proposed to make major improvements to Ysgol Hirael, and in the spring term of this year, the Welsh Government approved a Business Case to release the funding to realise this commitment. We are currently in the process of appointing consultants to lead this work.

We have also committed to making major improvements to Ysgol Tryfan in Bangor and are in the process of appointing an architect who will work with the Department and Ysgol Tryfan to try to address the vision for this investment. We are aiming to submit a Business Case to the Welsh Government early in 2025 to release the funds to realise our

aspirations for securing major improvements and the best possible learning environment for the learners.

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

After securing £4.9m from the remaining budget of the Condition and Suitability project, I am pleased to state that work began during the summer holidays this year to improve the condition and suitability of up to 11 primary and secondary schools in Gwynedd. The purpose of this project is to improve the condition of our existing school buildings, and make alterations to the buildings in order to ensure that they are fit for purpose and make the best use of the space available.

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

This project is one of the main priorities for me as Cabinet Member for Education, and I am particularly grateful to all the headteachers, staff, learners and parents who have responded to the questionnaires in order to help us identify the challenges and costs attached to attending school. Analysis of the questionnaires reflects the daily challenges that families face, with the costs of school uniform, school trips, and the costs of dinner/break (secondary schools) cited as the main challenges for families. The schools will now be sent the results of the questionnaires, with the aim of establishing a working group to steer the joint-working in an effort to reduce the costs and establish a charter. We will also formulate recommendations for the schools to consider in order to reduce the costs and lighten the financial burden on families. To this end, all schools have received a template of an Equality Plan for them to consider and to revise its aims in accordance with their context and needs locally. I look forward to reporting further next time on the progress of the project and working group for reducing the cost of attending school.

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

The Youth Service is taking steps to ensure that the voices of the young people of Gwynedd are central to the planning and developing of the service's provisions. Young People's Voice forums have been established to include young people directly in the process of identifying their needs, raising awareness of their democratic rights, and developing learning pathways alongside the youth workers of the future. In addition, it is planned to advertise for the role of Engagement Coordinator to establish and run a Gwynedd Youth Forum, ensuring that young people's input is an integral part of strategic decision-making. The work of mapping the county's youth provisions is currently being undertaken to identify any gaps in provision such as in education, employment, health and well-being, and leisure. Based on the findings of the engagement and mapping work, a report will be produced to highlight areas of success and areas requiring improvement. Actions will include the development of new education programmes, responding to young people's feedback, working alongside partners, improving access to services, and providing continual training to staff – these will be key elements to develop, which will be a means of ensuring that youth services continue to meet young people's needs effectively.

Modernise and extend the immersion provision for teaching Welsh to children

On 6 July 2021, the Cabinet approved a new vision for a modern Immersion Education System in Gwynedd. This new vision also includes a capital investment of £1.1 million from the Welsh Government for the purpose of establishing new immersion education sites in Bangor and Tywyn, as well as improving existing facilities at the Eifionydd site, Porthmadog. The work has already been completed on the Eifionydd and Bangor sites, and I am very pleased to be able to announce that work has started on the Tywyn Secondary School site over the summer.

After receiving confirmation of the success of the Business Case for the second phase of capital funding worth a further £1.1m to invest in the three primary immersion education sites located in Caernarfon, Pwllheli and Dolgellau during the Spring term this year, work is about to begin on establishing an immersion education provision on the Ysgol Cymerau site in Pwllheli, relocating the current provision from Llangybi. During the Autumn term, work will also take place to expand the immersion education provision in Dolgellau, and also relocate the immersion provision within the site of Ysgol Maesincla in Caernarfon. I look forward to reporting on the progress of this investment next time.

The Welsh Government's Late Immersion revenue grant also enables us to modernise the immersion provision in our centres. The Aberwla immersion scheme has now been developed, which is a differential scheme that bridges the primary and secondary sectors. To accompany the scheme, we have the innovative digital project which places

the Aberwla scheme and its characters on the VR stage of the virtual world, and we further expand and enrich this immersion resource annually through grant aid from the Welsh Government. These contemporary resources that have been developed through the Gwynedd Education Department's vision and the Welsh Government's financial support are now being trialled on a cross-county basis.

Review the Gwynedd Education Language Policy

I am very pleased that we have been able to appoint Meirion Prys Jones as a freelance consultant to work with the Department to revisit the Education Language Policy. A timetable has been drawn up for engaging with key stakeholders during the Autumn term 2024, and I look forward to hearing observations from this discussion, with the aim of presenting the findings to the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee early in the Spring term of 2025.

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

The evaluation of the Immersion System is also currently underway – Bangor University Education Department won the tender to work alongside the Education Department on conducting this evaluation. Once more, I am looking forward to receiving a report on the findings of the evaluation and any recommendations for improvement. Again, the aim is to present a report on the findings and the recommendations to the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee in spring 2025.

The Department's day-to-day work

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

Catering

Since 1 September 2023, I am very proud that every primary age learner from Reception to Year 6 in Gwynedd is able to receive free school meals, a year ahead of the national timetable. During the 2023-24 academic year, on average, 4,646 free school meals were provided on any given day. I am extremely proud of this achievement, and I am also keen for the Department to promote the offer further amongst children and families to

encourage more families to take advantage of the offer during the 2024-25 academic year.

As well as this, over the summer holidays this year, the Food and Fun scheme was held in four primary schools in Gwynedd. Food and Fun is a school-based education programme that provides food and nutrition education, physical activity, enrichment sessions and healthy meals to children during the summer holidays, and it is fully funded by the Welsh Government. This summer, many children benefited from the scheme, with up to 40 places available every day for children in the four schools, namely Ysgol Glancegin, Ysgol Hiraef, Ysgol Bro Lleu and Ysgol Penybryn, Tywyn.

The Sustainable Schools Challenge

I am very excited about the success of the bid to the Sustainable Schools Challenge fund, Welsh Government, which means that we will build a new school that will be a community, environmentally-friendly and sustainable campus, to the value of £12m in Bontnewydd, near Caernarfon. Over the summer, local residents will have seen cabins arriving on the school site, and work being carried out on the old school which is now a community centre, in order to prepare for establishing a temporary school for the learners of Bontnewydd while the existing school is demolished, and a new, sustainable, environmentally-friendly school being built on the site. I am looking forward to report on the further progress of this very exciting project next time.

Additional Learning Needs and Inclusion (ALN&I)

I am extremely proud considering the challenges that so many young people are facing these days, that the ALN&I service has managed to reduce the number of days that young people have to wait for a counselling service from 51 days to 23 days since the beginning of the last educational year. Furthermore, during this year's summer holidays, work has been undertaken to adapt some classrooms at Ysgol Pendalar in order to ensure that sufficient capacity is available in the school for those learners who need admission to a special school in Arfon.

The attendance area remains a concern for us as the levels have not returned to what they were before the pandemic. Average attendance over the last academic year was 89.1% and up from 88% over the same period the previous year. (The Wales rate for 2023-24 was 89%, up from 88.5% last year). The Service and I recognize that it is not a significant increase, and raising the rates to pre-pandemic levels remains a priority. Over the next few months there will be a campaign to encourage a change in behaviour towards attendance along with continuing targeting work.

Another area that has received attention over the past year is an increase in specific and permanent exclusions as a result of challenging behaviours within our schools. During

November/December 2023 a detailed survey was commissioned on the Inclusion Service and recommendations were presented on how to strengthen the provision. One of the main recommendations was the need to jointly develop a clear strategy with schools to support pupils with finding suitable locations for provision outside the school and considering Pupil Referral Unit status adoptions which had also been brought to our attention by Estyn.

Before concluding, I would like to acknowledge the significant challenges of the past year as a result of Neil Foden's crimes, and that all our thoughts have been, and continue to be, with the victims. The Department and the Council have been providing support to Ysgol Friars staff and learners over the past year and continue to do so. In addition, the Department and the Council are committed to co-operate fully with the independent review in accordance with the national Child Practice Review Guidelines and are ready to act on any findings or recommendations when they are known. I also welcome the intention of the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee to carry out a Scrutiny Investigation into the safeguarding area and the Department will once again be ready to co-operate fully with this investigation as well.

3.3 The Savings and Financial Situation

The Department has two savings schemes in 2024/25 within the field of inclusion that are worth £41,000, and there is a risk that they might not be delivered. The field is currently undergoing a strategic review, and it is therefore premature to cut the resources available at this point, with the possibility of additional resources being needed. With the exception of these schemes, current savings schemes to the value of £410,560 for 2024/25 have been programmed, and all of them have been delivered or are on track to be delivered in a timely manner.

A neutral financial position was reported at the end of the 2023/24 financial year, following the use of £361k worth of departmental funds. By making use of the funds and one-off underspend on other headings within the Department, we were able to remove the £1.5m overspend on pupil transport, with this heading being subject to a strategic review to try to manage the increase in expenditure. A bid has been accepted for 2024/25, with a permanent and temporary element, to enable the Department to identify opportunities to implement savings where possible. The heading is also being monitored monthly to try to respond quickly to any anticipated increase in spending, there has been no significant increase to date.

A comprehensive financial breakdown of the Department's position will be reported to a meeting of the Cabinet on 15 October 2024.

4. Views of the Statutory Officers

4.1 Chief Finance Officer

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

4.2 Monitoring Officer

“No observations to add in relation to propriety.”