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**EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**  
**17/10/24**

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**Attendance:**

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

Councillors:- Jina Gwyrfai, Iwan Huws, Dewi Jones, Elwyn Jones, Gareth Tudor Jones, Gwilym Jones, Beth Lawton, Dewi Owen, John Pughe Roberts, Huw Llwyd Rowlands and Sian Williams.

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

**Officers present:** Bethan Adams (Scrutiny Advisor) and Eirian Roberts (Democracy Services Officer).

**Present for item 6:-** Gwern ap Rhisiart (Head of Education), Ffion Edwards Ellis (Assistant Head: Special Educational Needs and Inclusion) and Ellen Rowlands (Inclusion Manager).

**Present for item 7:-** Gwern ap Rhisiart (Head of Education) and Sioned Owen (Early Years Service Manager).

**Present for item 8:** - Councillor Menna Trenholme (Cabinet Member for Corporate Services), Catrin Love (Assistant Head of Corporate Services Department) and Gail Warrington (Health, Safety and Well-being Advisory Services Manager).

**Present for item 9:-** Rhys Glyn (Head of Gwynedd's Immersion Education System).

The Chair referred to the news that had just been announced that the Leader of the Council, Councillor Dyfrig Siencyn, had resigned. He noted that the Leader used to attend the meetings of this committee in his role as Chair of North Wales Economic Ambition Board, and he thanked him for his work. He also noted that Councillor Beca Brown, who used to attend this committee regularly in her role as Cabinet Member for Education, had also resigned, and he thanked her for her work, as well as Councillor Elin Walker Jones, who had intended to be present in this meeting in her role as Cabinet Member for Children and Supporting Families, but had also resigned.

**1. ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIR**

**RESOLVED to elect Councillor Rhys Tudur as Vice-chair of this committee for 2024/25.**

**2. APOLOGIES**

Apologies were received from Councillors Dawn Lynne Jones, Gwynfor Owen, Llio Elenid Owen and Richard Glyn Roberts.

**3. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST**

No declarations of personal interest were received.

#### **4. URGENT ITEMS**

None to note.

#### **5. MINUTES**

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee which took place on 18 July 2024, as a true record.

#### **6. PROGRESS REPORT ON RESPONSE TO ESTYN RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Head of Education and the officers were welcomed to the meeting.

Submitted - a report detailing the progress of the Education Department in response to recommendations from the Estyn Report on education services in Cyngor Gwynedd (June 2023) in relation to pupils' behaviour and attendance in the county's schools.

The Head of Education gave a brief summary of the content of the report, noting that they had intended to report to the committee later on the progress in response to Estyn's third recommendation in relation to moving forward on the Department's strategic priorities.

Members were given an opportunity to ask questions and offer observations.

Referring to paragraph 4.3 of the report, it was enquired whether the Welsh Government's Attendance Grant to target attendance improvements for specific individuals within schools was likely to continue. In response, it was noted:-

- In terms of the Welsh Government's grants, no assurance had been given further than one year at a time. However, as the discussions nationally with the Government highlighted that this was a national problem and that it was a national priority to get children into school, it was very unlikely that this grant would come to an end in a year.
- Despite this, the Department was required to prepare for the possibility that the grant could come to an end, and the main discussions regarding this focused on the team's capacity and how schools responded to lack of attendance.
- It was not possible to address the lack of attendance on the current scale with a team of 10 welfare officers, and that everyone was required to work as one to explain to the schools what their duties were to ensure that the Welfare Team could then work with a specific cohort of children whose attendance were lower than a specific threshold.

The main reason for the low attendance levels in schools was enquired. In response, it was noted:-

- That illness was mainly reported by schools. Following the lockdown period, parents tended to keep children home from school with minor illnesses such as a cold or a headache, and it was very difficult for the Authority and the schools to challenge that.
- The policy was revised to be able to highlight the steps that schools could take to respond to illness, especially in connection to continuous, extended or regular absences, and through the monitoring arrangement, it could be possible to identify patterns and send a welfare officer in to discuss with the parents if needed.

It was suggested that it would be useful for guidelines to be available to help parents come to a decision regarding when to keep their children at home and when to send them to school. In response, it was noted:-

- That parents' mindset regarding when to keep their children home from school had changed since Covid, and there was more awareness by now of the possibility of spreading diseases.
- More people worked from home since Covid and it was therefore easier for some parents to keep their children home from school.
- At the end of the day, this was a decision for the parents to make, but the Authority could support the schools in terms of the messages given to parents to get to grips with that.

It was noted that the number of exclusions in Arfon was substantially higher than other parts of the county and it was enquired whether this was a general pattern or whether there was a small number of schools in Arfon pushing that figure up? It was noted that it would be beneficial to see the data per school to see what was behind this. In response, it was noted:-

- That Arfon's population was much higher than Meirionnydd and Dwyfor combined and the percentage was looked at per thousand pupils.
- That the Authority tracked 5 schools, 4 in Arfon and one in Meirionnydd.

Referring to an earlier observation in the discussion that parents' mindset towards sending children to school had changed since Covid, it was enquired whether this was also true within the schools. In response, it was noted:-

- That there was certainly nervousness amongst school staff, which did not exist previously, in terms of the impact that sick children could have on them and the rest of the school community.
- However, attendance was back on the top of individual schools' priorities list by now, with those schools celebrating high attendance and encouraging parents to send their children to school.
- That the situation was much better by now with the percentage of attendance increasing, but it was not increasing as quickly as they had wished.

It was enquired whether attendance levels raised quicker in the primary sector or the secondary sector. In response, it was noted:-

- That attendance levels in the primary sector were substantially higher than the secondary and were also quite stable.
- A small increase was seen in the secondary sector compared to the previous year but it was acknowledged that there was more work to be done on this. The Department worked very closely with the schools to prioritise increasing attendance to the pre-Covid level, and higher than that.
- To be able to increase the attendance percentage of the county, attention must be given to the bulk of school population which had an attendance percentage under 90%, instead of the individual cases that might be 30% or 40%, as those numbers were low and the individuals in question received support from welfare teams etc.
- That the Head of Education had sent a letter to all parents in the county emphasising that attendance must be a priority. The responses received by parents were very mixed, but perhaps it highlighted the confusion amongst some parents regarding the importance of sending their children to school. However, throughout, people understood that they must change gear in terms of attendance, otherwise the children would not thrive academically.

The fact that schools gathered quite thorough data in terms of absence tracking and used it to refine the implementation then needed to increase the attendance figure was welcomed. In response, it was noted that the use of data was good in schools. However, it was believed that parents who contacted the school to say that their children were sick needed to be challenged more, as it was not possible to prosecute parents based on lack of attendance if that absence was authorised by the school, and this was the type of messages being put forward to the school by now.

It was noted that the findings of Mrs Caroline Rees, who was commissioned to conduct a detailed survey of the Inclusion Service, reflected Estyn's recommendation that there was a need for suitable locations for provision outside of school, and it was enquired whether there was an update regarding that. In response, it was noted:-

- That Mrs Caroline Rees' report had helped the service to create a foundation in terms of the direction in the inclusion field and the behaviour support field, especially to the increasing number of children who were unable to cope, or who could not be included in mainstream schools.
- That the basic principle in Gwynedd was that children should be included within the mainstream schools, but that it was a challenge to do so every time, especially as the children's behaviour intensified as the years went by.
- That establishing a Project Board was an important step forward to get the opinion of schools' headteachers on the direction of the Inclusion Service over the next few years, as it was the headteachers who made decisions relating to excluding an individual. Therefore, it was essential that the headteachers were part of the solution to ensure that the provision outside of the school was fit for purpose.
- That detailed work was achieved examining good practices in other counties etc., but as the financial situation in the Department was difficult, they looked at how better use of the funding that already existed could be made to create a model that provided better support for the same cost. This was challenging because caring for children with intense behavioural needs was costly, with the ratio of staff to child, for example, costing much more than if those children were in a mainstream school.
- That the Department's wish was to see as little pupils as possible out of education and the provision for them was excellent and provided good value for money. That it was not possible to provide for hundreds of children exempt from education in Gwynedd as the county's geography meant that it was not possible to provide one centre in the middle for everyone.

The honesty of the report was welcomed, for example, referring to the need to change gear in terms of attendance. Referring to the table in paragraph 4.4 of the report, it was realised that there was an increase in the attendance of 56% of the targeted groups, and the Welfare Officers were thanked for their work. However, whether the increase in the attendance levels since the Estyn visit in June 2023 was sufficient was enquired. Referring to the attendance per local authority, the fact that Gwynedd's figures had increased from 88.7% in 2022/23 to 89.1% in 2023/24 was welcomed, but it was noted that the figures of some other counties were higher, namely Wrexham (90.1%) and Monmouthshire (90%), and it was enquired whether there were any lessons to be learnt from those councils. In response, it was noted:-

- That the increase in attendance levels in Gwynedd was insufficient, but it was clear that the vast majority of councils also had trouble achieving this. The Department intended to continue to look into this matter relentlessly, until the attendance figures had returned to where they should be.

- That the Department's officers discussed with their colleagues across the region, and also held national discussions, and it was believed that Gwynedd worked on the right things.
- As well as the national campaign that was on its way from the Government, there was also an intention to conduct a campaign locally to promote attendance on the Council's social media. Gareth the Orangutang was also asked to do work on promoting attendance with school children.
- That the Department looked at whether there were any lessons to learn from other counties, but in some situations, other counties looked at Gwynedd as an example of good practice and considered what they could learn from us.
- That the main weakness at present was the fact that the data on authority level arrived late and without being analysed to the level that we would have wished. This put the Council on the back foot in terms of targeting specific groups of learners etc. However, the Department was working urgently to get to grips with this.

It was noted that Mrs Caroline Rees agreed with Estyn's recommendation that the Authority needed to work with school leaders to jointly draw up an effective inclusion strategy across the county. It was enquired how many discussions had been with the schools regarding that and whether anything had been achieved. In response, it was noted:-

- That the headteachers worked with the Department from the start to bring a plan together and that they were also part of the visits to see good practice.
- In terms of the inclusion challenges, that the work with other agencies and other departments within the Council was part of that.
- They looked at solutions such as holding a workshop to look at what services also worked with young people outside of the school. This was not only a school solution but was something that also needed to be done on a wider scale in terms of the community.

It was enquired whether the Department encouraged headteachers to remind the staff to fill the register to avoid gaps in the data. In response, it was noted that this message had gone out to schools several times and that it would be sent out once again to remind the schools of the importance of registering children twice a day in a timely manner, in accordance with the legal requirement.

It was enquired whether the Department monitored if the school had managed to register every pupil in a timely manner. In response, it was noted:-

- That the Department could monitor whether a school had registered children twice a day, but it was not possible to monitor if that had been done in a timely manner.
- That it was the school's responsibility to ensure that children had been registered in a timely manner and the Management Team of any school, especially secondary schools, was expected to be aware if staff had not registered children on time and to address this.

It was enquired whether there were secondary schools that had not excluded at all in two years. It was also noted that it would be beneficial to see comparative figures of other counties. In response, it was noted:-

- That comparison with other authorities was complex with a number of different factors feeding into this, and that there were even exemptions within individual authorities.

- In Gwynedd, with 12 secondary schools and 2 all-through schools, there were 14 headteachers making decisions in terms of excluding children, and the Authority did not intervene in that decision unless necessary.
- That other authorities had a smaller number of schools, their inclusion provisions were possibly different too.
- That a small county geographically, where everything was close to each other, could have provision in the middle that would include a number of the children before they reached the point of facing exclusion.
- Gwynedd could have a higher number of exclusions, but a low number of pupils out of education, and other counties could have a low number of exclusions, but a substantially higher number than Gwynedd of year 11 children out of education within mainstream schools.
- Despite all of this, the number of exclusions in Gwynedd was too high. It could be concluded that children's behaviour in Gwynedd was similar to children's behaviour in other counties, but it seemed from the figures that those other counties did not exclude as much as us, and that was the message conveyed to the schools very recently.

Referring to the observation previously in the discussion regarding tracking schools, the type of support and challenge given to those schools was enquired. In response, it was noted:-

- That the support given to individuals with a high number of exclusions included looking at the barriers and tracking individuals who received a lot of exclusion periods to be able to support them.
- Although the number of continuous exclusions were extremely high and required attention, only 10% of all exclusions had led to continuous exclusions during the period in question.
- That the Authority had an agreement with the schools to try to do everything to avoid continuous exclusions.
- That the Authority had provision outside of the school should it be required to move urgently in the case of an individual receiving continuous exclusion from one school facing continuous exclusion from another school.
- That the Department was confident that they were completely aware which schools excluded the most, who were the pupils and where resources were required to support them, despite the associated financial challenges.

It was suggested that it would be beneficial to have an update in a year on the progress of the 5 schools in Gwynedd that were being tracked.

Concern was expressed that children dealt with drugs outside secondary school. It was enquired whether this was also a problem within the schools, and what was being done about it. In response, it was noted:-

- That it was sad to report that there were individuals taking drugs into school, and there were exclusions associated with that.
- That they managed to attract additional funding to appoint 2 officers located within the Youth Justice Service, but who worked in partnership with the Education Department, to visit the schools and to work with individuals who have been excluded for bringing drugs into the school.

It was noted that it was a great comfort to see the Department giving consideration to the drug problem that was intensifying within our community.

## **RESOLVED**

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

## 2. Request an update to the Committee on future progress.

### 7. TRANSFORMING EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN IN THEIR EARLY YEARS

The Early Years Service Manager was welcomed to the meeting.

Submitted – the report inviting the committee to scrutinise:-

- What were the steps intended to take to transform education for children in their early years?
- What was the timetable and the key milestones to transform the service?
- How was it intended to fund the transformation of the early years service?

The Early Years Service Manager provided a brief summary of the content of the report.

Members were given an opportunity to ask questions and offer observations.

Disappointment was expressed regarding the progress of the work thus far. It was noted that the barriers in terms of staffing and funding was understood, but it was emphasised that the early years was the most important period in a child's development.

It was enquired how much close collaboration happened between the Education Department and the Children's Department because, according to the Government's definition, the early years included 0-7 years old, but there was no reference in the report to the period after the children started at school. In response, it was noted that the Early Years Unit's work programme focused on the pre-school period mainly, which was nursery education and the plans for children under 4 years old.

Reference was made to the new policy that would be coming into force next year regarding toileting, and it was enquired how they intended to pay for the provision. An enquiry was also made regarding whether a child that was not toilet trained could be deprived from going to school with their peers. In response, it was noted:

- That the policy would expect parents to teach their children about toileting, with support provided to do so.
- That the plan was welcomed by the schools as it re-defined the relationship between parents and school, to ensure that parents were parenting and schools were educating the children.
- That the commitment of the Education Department and the Children's Service to the early years was substantial in terms of time and in terms of what was attempted, and was also challenging as they had to try to overturn complex systems, incorporating the health services into it too.
- That the schools themselves paid to dispose of nappies, which was very costly for them. There would be no cost for the schools as a result of introducing the new policy as the children would be required to be toilet-trained before coming to the school, but the cost of the support through the health service etc., would come from the grants available.

An enquiry was made as to why there was not much reference to the *Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin* and the health service in the plans. In response, it was noted:-

- That the relationship with the *Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin* was good. However, there was more work to be done to further develop that relationship, and that was part of the work currently achieved by the Early Years Unit.
- It could be argued that Gwynedd had more *Cylchoedd Meithrin* than other counties, and that was due to the nature of the language etc.

- That there was a Quality Board for the early years which included representation from inside the *Cylchoedd Meithrin*, and that there was a team of teachers who supported the quality of the provision and a team of officers from the *Mudiad* who supported more managerial and governing aspects of the provision.
- That a vast majority of the matters raised were matters relating to the *Cylchoedd's* leadership and governance, instead of the quality of the provision.

In response to these observations, the member who raised the matter noted that this was unclear in the report.

By reading paragraph 9 of the Early Years Transformation Work Programme, concern was expressed that it appeared that only 21 of the 83 registered childcare providers in Gwynedd provided a service through the medium of Welsh or bilingually. In response, it was noted that there were 81 registered providers, with 21 of them providing after-care service for 2-year-old children, and that it was a requirement for all providers to provide through the medium of Welsh or bilingually.

It was suggested that the Early Years Play, Learn and Care in Wales document could be a precedent to draw up a strategy for Gwynedd with the local data that we had. All the consulting and commissioning surveys were questioned, instead of moving forward with the strategy. It was also noted that transforming education for the early years involved creating change for the better through the whole of Gwynedd, but no reference to Llŷn was seen in the report. It was noted that very good work was being undertaken in pockets of the county, but it was emphasised that every 5-year-old child should be in the frame for education and play opportunities. It was enquired where the vision was and the Service was urged to develop the Strategy urgently as time was scarce. In response, it was noted:-

- That drawing up the Strategy was a priority for the Service.
- That the Government's grants over the last 10 years had led to more provision in some pockets of the county, and it was not equal for all of Gwynedd's children. This would steer the Strategy, and there would be a need to work with our other partners to draw it up.
- We would also have to look at the work's accountability and appreciation was expressed of the fact that this matter was being scrutinised to ensure this.

Referring to paragraph 10 of the Work Programme, it was enquired how prominent the Welsh language would be in the new childcare and nursery education space, specifically therefore at Our Lady's School, Bangor, which was in the transition category. In response, it was noted:-

- That there was a meeting with the governors of Our Lady's School to explain the vision in terms of having Welsh or bilingual provision, and that they agreed, when the scrutiny process would be undertaken, that we would look for provision that would operate bilingually.
- That there was currently provision on the school's existing site, and the Department would collaborate with that provision over the last period to improve their quality in terms of bilingual provision.

In response to a question, it was confirmed that the governors and the Council officers would have input into the work of evaluating the scrutiny process, looking to having bilingual provision on the site.

It was noted, although the spaces were to be welcomed, that it was sometimes difficult to maintain the spaces that already existed, especially therefore in rural areas where

the number of children could be low from time to time, and there was an enquiry about how much weight was given to maintaining those spaces. In response, it was noted:-

- That several financial sources currently went to the childcare and nursery education locations, and that had substantially increased over the last 4 years.
- Over the recent period, quite fair contributions had been given to small *Cylchoedd* to keep them viable, but there was also more funding to come from the Government as they hoped to further extend 2-year-old childcare. Therefore, all of this had to be considered and to see what exact funding formula needed to go to *Cylchoedd* to retain them.
- That retaining some of the smaller *Cylchoedd Meithrin* was very challenging in a rural county such as Gwynedd, but the increase in the requirement as a result of further extending 2-year-old childcare could make them more viable in the future.
- That education and childcare in the early years was costly as there was a need for a safe staff / child ratio and because the expectations on the locations were substantial, whether it was an Estyn inspection or an inspection of the safeguarding guidelines etc. which was carried out regularly.
- That the number of children in pockets of areas in Gwynedd were not there to justify, or to establish viable provision for the future, and this due to parents' choices or the fact that there were not any children in some areas.
- In terms of funding *Cylchoedd Meithrin*, that the Council had been providing a core allocation to each location, which meant that a *Cylch* with 3-4 children had the same core allocation as a *Cylch* with 30 children.
- That the situation was complex, especially as it was volunteers who mainly established *Cylchoedd Meithrin* and care provisions, and that extreme pressures were on them as individuals to be able to maintain those provisions.
- They wished to ensure the scrutineers that the Service had considered everything in terms of how to ensure quality provision to children before they started at the school, and that sustainability was one of them.

It was noted that some parents in extremely rural areas had chosen not to put their children in the nearest *Cylch Meithrin* as the numbers were already low, and to put them in another *Cylch* where the numbers were higher. This meant that fewer children would be in those rural schools in the future, and that was a concern. It was suggested that there were various ways to try to encourage people to distribute children fairly across *Cylchoedd Meithrin*, especially as some of the parents did not use the *Cylch* that was on their doorstep.

It was asked if there was room to consider whether or not schools could have their own *Ysgol Feithrin*, so that they came under the Council's wing, instead of *Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin*. In response, it was noted:-

- That the question was difficult to answer because the situation in some areas lended itself as more of a model where children would possibly start earlier in the school than they would in other areas.
- That the situation was also complex in terms of the question whether the Council provided the education and the care, and how they could be fair with care providers in the private sector outside of education.
- As Gwynedd only had one admission policy for all the schools, changing the admission age in one school would mean consulting with every school.
- That many of the volunteers in the *Cylchoedd Meithrin* were also school governors.
- That this must be weighed up moving forward, but they wished to emphasise the good work relationship between the Council and *Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin* and the way they tried to think about more sustainable methods to maintain the

provisions. The Council was conducting these types of discussions with the *Mudiad* as it was not believed that the current arrangement of a committee of volunteers and a small number of staff and children was sustainable for the future in Gwynedd.

It was noted that this was the type of thing that members would have preferred to see in the report in order to receive assurance in terms of the collaboration, and disappointment was expressed regarding the lack of vision to move forward and plan in the report.

#### **RESOLVED**

- 1. To accept the report and note the observations.**
- 2. Identify concern about the lack of resources available to move the work forward.**
- 3. That the committee looks forward to seeing wider cooperation with other relevant agencies.**
- 4. Request an update to the Committee in a year's time.**

#### **8. STAFF WELL-BEING STRATEGY**

The Cabinet Member for Corporate Services and the officers were welcomed to the meeting.

Submitted - the report of the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services inviting the committee to scrutinise the staff well-being field to receive assurance that appropriate arrangements were in place and the proposed Strategy would address the challenges in terms of the after-effects of the pandemic period amongst the workforce and staff absence costs due to sickness.

The Cabinet Member set out the context and the Assistant Head of Corporate Services provided a brief summary of the content of the report.

Members were given an opportunity to ask questions and offer observations.

It was noted that:-

- As was always common in a staff survey, there were a lot of views in the report regarding the information and skills of middle managers, and it was noted that the Strategy was welcomed as long as it was implemented and adopted specifically by senior officers, and that the line managers, and specifically the middle managers, received regular training and leadership.
- Although the report had quoted some words from staff to convey the feeling, it would have been beneficial to present more data and information to show the views of staff from different departments within the Council as a result of the Staff Voice Survey.
- That the staff absences were high, and it would have been beneficial to present more information to see whether there were obvious problems in some departments, and the reasons for that.
- The opportunity for the committee to scrutinise this field again was welcomed.

In response to the observations, it was noted that:

- The data was certainly available. In terms of the Staff Voice Survey specifically, there was a clear message in terms of the statistics on well-being, with the well-

being score lower than the jobs / services score. There was also a clear message that front-line staff were unaware of the support packages available.

- In terms of the observations regarding managers, a healthy and satisfied workforce was now one of the 9 work streams in the Ffordd Gwynedd Plan, with another work stream related to staff and manager developments, and the Strategy would tie into that in terms of the programmes available to develop managers.

It was suggested, although middle managers were experts in their field, that they were not always natural managers, and it was asked where should staff refer any concerns they had about managerial-related matters. In response, it was noted:-

- Clearly, staff could escalate such matters within the service or the department, but, as part of the Well-being Plan, it was intended to identify well-being coordinators within each department.
- Staff could also refer the matter to the attention of the Human Resources Service or the Whistle-blowing procedure.

It was noted that it would be interesting to see the statistics on pages 2 and 3 of the Well-being Plan over a period of 5 years to be able to compare the current situation with the situation before and during the Covid period.

The intention to identify well-being coordinators was welcomed, and it was enquired, in terms of the coordinators' own well-being, was there an intention to release them from their normal duties for periods to undertake this role. In response, it was noted that the discussions regarding this continued.

There was an enquiry whether staff could turn to an independent person for advice regarding well-being matters. In response, it was noted that the Council had an agreement with Medra, which had a number of counsellors across Cyngor Gwynedd, and that staff could go to them in complete confidence to discuss any concerns.

There was an enquiry whether it was a corporate priority for all staff to be evaluated, and what were the arrangements for that. In response, it was noted:-

- The continuous evaluation was one of the 9 work streams within the Ffordd Gwynedd Plan.
- The evaluation arrangement had been quite time-consuming over the year, but that work was now underway to draw up a new framework which was more flexible.
- That the new arrangement must work for every service, from teams having one-to-one meetings with their managers on a monthly basis to a workforce that was out on sites, and who did not see their managers often.

Hope was expressed that the Well-being Strategy would increase low morale which still remained amongst staff. In terms of the work environment, disappointment was expressed that there was no reference to the Office Modernisation Plan in the Strategy, as simple provisions such as space for staff to go for a cup of tea and water cooler dispensers etc. would contribute extensively towards well-being. In response, it was noted:-

- That the Office Modernisation Plan did not relate to well-being as such, and the Well-being Strategy was a corporate strategy which included every workplace, including residential homes, schools etc.
- That the work of modernising the Council Headquarters had commenced, with the Property Department leading on the work.

- That there was an intention to create a well-being area for staff in the old reception in the Headquarters. The exact timetable for the work could not be confirmed, but the officers could follow that up after the meeting.

It was enquired whether there was space in the Headquarters for staff to eat their lunch, instead of having to eat by their desks. In response, it was noted that the arrangements varied between corridors, but there was certainly an intention to create corporate space on the lower ground of the Headquarters.

It was enquired whether there were staff members who chose to work from home as they did not feel healthy enough to go to the workplace and mix with other people. It was also enquired whether they saw more depression since people had been working from home. In response, it was noted:-

- That more and more staff members now came into the workplace and that many of them reported that they felt better as they were able to mix with others.
- That the number of well-being referrals was increasing, and although working from home could be a factor in terms of that in some cases, there were no statistics available to prove that.
- That it was now a requirement for office staff to return to the office twice a week, except for exceptional circumstances.

In response to the above observations, it was enquired whether it was possible to see if any research had been undertaken by universities or companies into these types of questions to be able to identify patterns.

It was noted that the work pressure on staff was increasing, and it was enquired whether the Council had a corporate policy or departmental policies which looked at workload assessments. In response, it was noted that the Council had stress risk assessments for individuals and services and should an individual feel that they were under pressure due to work overload, they could discuss that as part of the stress risk assessment.

It was noted that they understood that more people took sickness days since Covid and it was enquired whether data was available regarding that. In response, it was noted:-

- That data was available, but there had been a delay in terms of obtaining data historically.
- That there was an intention for a new absence record system to go live on the staff self-service system. This system would offer some flexibility, for example, if an individual had been working from home 3 days from Monday to Wednesday and did not feel good enough to come into the office on the Thursday, they could also be allowed to work from home on the Thursday, as long as that complied with the requirements of the service.

## **RESOLVED**

- 1. To accept the report and note the observations.**
- 2. That the Committee notes concern about the high levels of staff absences and requests that future updates on the Strategy detail specific data, such as comparison over periods, etc.**

## **9. ENGAGEMENT SESSIONS TO DISCUSS GWYNEDD'S EDUCATION LANGUAGE POLICY**

The Head of Gwynedd's Immersion Education System was welcomed to the meeting.

Submitted - the report inviting the committee to elect 5 members to be present in an engagement session to be held between 1:30 and 3:30 on the afternoon of 4 December to discuss and gather ideas and suggestions regarding Gwynedd's Education Language Policy, and to consider whether there was a need to amend the policy in light of the results of the 2021 Census and a number of policy developments in the language and education field on a national level.

**RESOLVED to elect Councillors Jina Gwyrfai, Elwyn Jones, Beth Lawton, Richard Glyn Roberts and Rhys Tudur to attend the engagement session to discuss Gwynedd's Education Language Policy on 4 December between 1:30 and 3:30 in the afternoon.**

The meeting commenced at 10.30am and concluded at 12.40pm.

Chair