

GWYNEDD COUNCIL CABINET



Report to a meeting of Gwynedd Council Cabinet

Date of meeting:	11/03/2025
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Paul Rowlinson
Contact Officer:	Carys Fôn Williams, Head of Housing and Property Department
Contact Telephone Number:	3436
Title of Item:	Leasing of the former Abersoch School site to Menter Rabar

1 THE DECISION SOUGHT

To use powers under General Disposal Consent (Wales) 2003 to lease Ysgol Abersoch site directly to Menter Rabar for less than market rent, to realise social, economic and environmental benefits.

2 THE REASON FOR THE NEED FOR A DECISION

To ensure compliance with the requirements of the powers of General Disposal Consent (Wales) 2003.

3 INTRODUCTION

Following reports submitted to Cyngor Gwynedd's Cabinet on 28 September 2021 and 9 November 2021, Ysgol Abersoch was closed on 31 December 2021. Consequently, and in line with the School Buildings Post-use Policy, Menter Rabar was established as a community (not-for-profit) group to create a facility for the benefit of the local community, with the aspiration of securing community use for the site.

Menter Rabar has submitted an application to undertake a long-term lease of Ysgol Abersoch for a nominal sum to establish a multi-purpose Community Hub. The enterprise has been successful in securing grant funding to carry out the first phase of the refurbishment work and is keen to move forward with making the scheme a reality.

4 THE RATIONALE AND JUSTIFICATION FOR RECOMMENDING THE DECISION

At its meeting on 15 September 2009 the Council Board adopted the School Buildings Post-use Policy. The Policy recognised that reorganisation schemes are likely to lead to situations where school premises will be disposed of in accordance with the usual principles, disposal policies and statutory requirements.

However, the Post-use Policy also gives the communities affected when a school closes, a fair opportunity to consider drawing up a business plan to support taking over the premises.

A consultation was undertaken by Menter Rabar to gather the views of the community on what they would like to see at the School. The results of that survey, along with those of respondents from Abersoch to the Cyngor Gwynedd 'Ardal Ni 2035' survey (2022), Cyngor Gwynedd's Childcare Needs survey (July 2023) and discussions with stakeholders, have been considered as Menter Rabar sets about developing a business plan for the site.

A business plan was received from Menter Rabar during 2024, together with a request to take on the lease of the school site for a period of 99 years for a nominal amount in order to develop a Multi-Purpose Community Hub which would incorporate the following:

- Community café.
- Heritage exhibition.
- A multi-use room to host activities and courses.
- Business units to be let.
- Community garden.

The application was subject to Menter Rabar's ability to secure funding sources and planning permission to enable it to realise the scheme.

Planning permission was secured in December 2024, and the total cost of realising the development as a whole is projected to be in the region of £595,000. Menter Rabar has been successful in its bid for £300,000 from the Welsh Government's Community Facilities Programme fund and an additional £100,000 has been raised through various sources. This sum of £400,000 will be sufficient to cover the costs of renovating the building, and to fund the initial running costs of the enterprise. The enterprise is now in the process of bidding for further funding to realise the second phase of the development work, which is the installation of the heritage space and business units.

The Welsh Government's willingness to release the £300,000 grant money is conditional on Menter Rabar receiving a long-term Lease from Cyngor Gwynedd, and the enterprise's Business Plan shows that the project would not be viable if a commercial rent was charged for the building.

The Council is legally entitled in accordance with the powers of General Disposal Consent (April) 2003 to dispose for less than market rent in cases where economic, social or environmental benefits are provided.

It is considered that disposal directly to Menter Rabar for the development of the HUB would facilitate the following benefits:-

Economic Benefits:

- Promote and advance the local economy creating space for businesses that will support entrepreneurs.

- Create new permanent and seasonal jobs in the area.
- Potential to attract visitors and income from outside the area.
- Any remaining profits will be invested in further projects creating a positive economic cycle.

Social Benefits:

- Provide a destination for the community providing opportunities to network and develop new skills through the activities offered.
- Potential to support diverse generations of the community by offering services that will support families, promote inclusion, and support health and well-being.
- Raise awareness of the culture and heritage of the area and promote the Welsh language.

Environmental Benefits:

- Contribute towards a healthier local environment, conserve biodiversity and encourage sustainable food practices by providing a community garden in the centre of the village.
- Reduce Carbon footprint by improving the building's energy efficiency, providing charging points for electric cars, and creating a central location for the community for various activities and services.

Accepting the recommendation and using the powers of General Disposal Consent (April) 2003 to vary from the General Disposal Policy and Section 123 of the Local Government Act 1972, would mean waiving the opportunity to sell the property and generate a capital receipt.

If the property was sold on the open market, we consider the open market value to be around £150,000.

Cabinet members therefore need to carefully weigh up the social, environmental and economic benefits against the potential financial loss.

It should be noted that the intention is to lease the property. Menter Rabar intends to invest significantly in the property, and should the scheme fail for any reason, the property will remain in the Council's ownership. At that time the Council could take a decision to dispose of it on the open market should that be its wish.

5 NEXT STEPS AND TIMETABLE

The Housing and Property Department will direct the Legal Service to issue a lease without delay. This will enable the Government to release the grant funding to Menter Rabar to enable it to adapt the school and realise the scheme with a view to opening the provision during 2026.

6 ANY CONSULTATIONS UNDERTAKEN PRIOR TO RECOMMENDING THE DECISION

The Statutory Officers' observations

Chief Finance Officer:

“Realising that there will be fewer capital receipts, but when weighing against the benefit to the community through the social enterprise, no objection to what is being proposed”.

Monitoring Officer:

“I am satisfied that the decision sought is an appropriate use of the power available under the General Disposal Consent (April) 2003 to dispose of property at less than the market value. The report provides sufficient evidence to support this position”.

Observations of the Local Member – John Brynmor Hughes:

“In my opinion, the Enterprise is great in terms of what we want to do in Abersoch. I think that it will be successful for local people, similar to what Nefyn has done with 'Yr Heliwr'. A strong team has come together to establish it, and they have already done very well up to now to bring the village together through fund-raising activities and by drawing attention to the Enterprise.

I think there is an even wider possibility to what is being discussed here, and the relevant funding and grants are now in place, but not much else can be done without certainty that the building will be transferred”.