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## EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 19/06/25

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### Attendance:

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

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

**Co-opted Members:** Sharon Roberts (Arfon Parent / Governor Representative), Elise Poulter (NEU) and Gweno Glyn Williams (Dwyfor Parent / Governor Representative).

**Officers present:** Bethan Adams (Scrutiny Advisor), Annes Sion (Democracy Team Leader), Dafydd Gibbard (Chief Executive, for items 5 and 6) and Geraint Owen (Corporate Director, for items 7-9).

**Present for item 7** - Councillor Dewi Jones (Cabinet Member for Education), Gwern ap Rhisiart (Head of Education), Debbie Anne Jones (Assistant Head: Corporate Services), Siwan Llwyd Roberts (Head of Gwynedd Immersion Education System), Iwan Gwilym Evans (Head of Legal Service) and Meirion Prys Jones (Consultant).

**Present for item 8** - Councillor Dewi Jones (Cabinet Member for Education), Gwern ap Rhisiart (Head of Education), Debbie Anne Jones (Assistant Head: Corporate Services) and Ffion Edwards Ellis (Assistant Head: Special Education Needs and Inclusion).

**Present for item 9** - Councillor R Medwyn Hughes (Cabinet Member for Economy), Sioned Williams (Head of Economy and Community Department), Roland Wyn Evans (Assistant Head Culture) and Llyr B Jones (Assistant Head of Economy and Community).

**Present for item 10** – Councillor Huw Wyn Jones (Cabinet Member for Finance), Dewi A Morgan (Head of Finance Department), Huw Ynyr (Assistant Head of Finance: Digital) and Sian Pugh (Assistant Head of Finance: Sustainability and Developments).

**Present for item 11** - Councillor Llio Elenid Owen (Cabinet Member for Corporate and Legal Services), Ian Jones (Head of Corporate Services Department), Iwan Gwilym Evans (Head of Legal Service) and Catrin Love (Assistant Head of Corporate Services).

### 1. ELECT CHAIR

Councillor Cai Larsen was elected Chair for 2025/26.

### 2. VICE-CHAIR

Councillor Rhys Tudur was elected vice-chair for 2025/26.

### 3. APOLOGIES

An apology was received from Councillor Dewi Owen and Colette Owen (Co-opted Member – Catholic Church).

#### **4. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST**

Councillor Dawn Lynne Jones declared an interest in item 8 as she worked with children, but as it was a performance report, it was not a prejudicial interest and she did not need to withdraw from the meeting.

The Chief Executive declared an interest in item 8 - as his wife worked in the Education Department, therefore he withdrew from the discussion.

Councillors Beth Lawton, Gareth Tudor Jones, Richard Glyn Roberts and Sian Williams declared an interest in item 9, as they were members of the Byw'n Iach Board, but it was not a prejudicial interest and therefore they did not leave the meeting for the discussion.

Sharon Williams withdrew from the meeting by virtue of her post for item 9.

#### **5. URGENT BUSINESS**

There were no urgent items to note.

#### **6. MINUTES**

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee held on 10 April 2025, as a true record.

#### **7. DRAFT EDUCATION LANGUAGE POLICY TASK AND FINISH GROUP**

Following a discussion on the Draft Education Language Policy at the Committee meeting on 10 April 2025, it was resolved to form a task and finish group to discuss the wording of the draft policy.

Councillor Rhys Tudur, Chair of the Task and Finish Group, presented the changes suggested by the Task and Finish Group. It was noted that many of the recommendations were amendments to refine the policy, but some were more significant.

The main points were as follows:

1. The need to note that it is the school's decision to determine which cross-curricular subjects are taught in English was expressed. It was noted that this would make it clearer.
2. It should be noted in the policy that extra-curricular activities are held through the medium of Welsh if resources were available.
3. It was recommended to use the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Bill 2025's definition of a Welsh School instead of what was noted in the current statutory guidelines, and in doing so, be proactive to comply with the new legislation.
4. It was noted that the policy should express the percentage of Welsh provision for all pupils.
5. The need for schools to provide details on their progress plans was highlighted.
6. It was also asked what the expectation of the policy with Ysgol Uwchradd

Tywyn and Ysgol Friars would be, as they acted as English schools to an extent - it was asked whether there would be a different policy or different treatment as the objectives would be for the whole county.

It was expressed that observations had been received by the Education Department in response to the recommended changes, but they had highlighted challenges and not responses to the recommendations.

Further observations were received from the Task and Finish Group members, expressing their disappointment in the department's responses, specifically with changing the wording in a definition in the Education Bill instead of the guidelines as it would be an Act following receiving Royal Assent, and the need to move forward to comply with the act was expressed.

It was also expressed that the Task and Finish Group believed that the policy had to be robust and with an element of aspiration, especially when looking at the language shift within the county. It was noted that the group had attempted to tighten the draft policy.

The department had an opportunity to respond, and the Monitoring Officer expressed, in terms of the act, that it was in the process of obtaining Royal Assent but it was not currently in force. He added that there would be a timetable from the Government for elements of it to come into power and it would be approximately 4-5 years before this happened. It was explained that there would be a transitional period whilst the statutory procedure of the act was put in place.

The Head of Education added that the department believed that the draft policy showed a commitment to the Welsh language and the need to increase the number of Welsh-speakers. The need to bring people with them when putting policies and procedures in place was expressed. It was highlighted that the department showed a direction for the school but, at the end of the day, it was the Governing Bodies' decision to adopt the Policy. It was noted that there had been consultations when creating the draft policy and that Meirion Prys Jones had been integral in wording the policy. The Task Group was thanked for its work, noting that there were some changes that could be incorporated, whilst others would make the policy difficult to implement across the County. The need to be careful with the bilingual element was noted, as there was a need for balance between a successful policy and children being happy and confident in English also.

Meirion Prys Jones, who helped the Department as an external consultant to create the wording in the draft policy, was given an opportunity to contribute to the discussion. He expressed, when drawing up a policy, there was a need to deal with psychology as there was a need to think about how to manage matters relating to linguistic emotion. It was emphasised that the success of changing people depended on carrying people with you, as it was not possible to legislate a language into existence. It was explained, when discussing language shift, careful planning was required over a long period of time. It was added that the wording of the draft policy was encouraging, it provided guidance and was clear that there was also an element of choice, as there was an element of choice in bringing people with you. It was noted that there was room to tighten some elements, but it was important to remember the tone of the policy and therefore there was a need to use words carefully.

During the discussion, it was decided to discuss the changes recommended by the Task and Finish Group per heading. Observations from the Committee Members were noted as follows:-

It was highlighted that the reference to the English had been removed from the wording in the objectives under the second heading. It was explained that removing the reference

could be problematic as there was a need to ensure that young people were confident and had a good level of Welsh and English. It was emphasised that having confidence to speak English did not mean that young people would not have confidence to speak Welsh. The need to address young people's wish to reach their potential in both languages was emphasised.

Discussing the objectives further, it was noted, when discussing latecomers attending immersion centres, that the recommendation to change the wording suggested an enforcement. It was expressed that there was a need to emphasise encouragement, but there was uncertainty on how to enforce. The Department responded, noting that perhaps there was a need to provide more details when highlighting how the department could encourage families to send their children to immersion centres.

It was noted, although the objectives referred to speaking Welsh, that there was also a need to include writing as this was how the majority of assessments were conducted.

Meirion Prys Jones' observations emphasised that tone was essential, as well as psychology. The need for the education language policy to bring parents with them was noted, highlighting the views of schools and appealing to schools to adopt the policy.

Group members noted that there was a recommendation to remove bilingualism as the department had noted that education was through the medium of Welsh in Gwynedd. It was highlighted that the department had not responded to how they would deal with more bilingual schools, and therefore there was a need to highlight the department's wishes.

In the discussion about the Secondary Schools heading, the Group Members noted that technically it was not possible to force children to attend immersion centres but there was a need for more than encouragement. It was expressed that there was a need to go against the officers' observations and submit a policy that was between encouragement and enforcement.

It was expressed that, possibly, there was a need for an exempt policy for two secondary schools in the county as they worked more as English schools. It was emphasised that the education language policy was for the whole county, and therefore it was inappropriate to refer to schools specifically and only adapt for them.

Looking at the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) heading in the amended policy, it was noted that not including references to the ALN and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 caused concerns. It was expressed that there was a need to consider the ALN act and that it was integral to the policy.

It was added that there may be a need for further research into language with ALN, as experts often encouraged families to speak English with children with learning needs. It was expressed that there was a need to see whether there was evidence to contradict this. The department noted that it was a potential plan to do with the University in the future.

The Group members explained that the act had not been included as there was no detail of what the act entailed, and therefore more details were required. The Monitoring Officer noted that the paragraph acknowledged the duty to comply with the act and was therefore necessary to the policy.

There was a discussion about the wording of the Committee's decision.

## **RESOLVED**

- **To note the output of the work of the Task and Finish Group but there**

**was no consensus on all the recommended modifications;**

- **To ask the Cabinet Member for Education to consider the range of comments submitted by the Scrutiny Members when drawing up the final policy.**

## **8. CABINET MEMBER FOR EDUCATION PERFORMANCE REPORT**

The report was submitted by the Cabinet Member for Education, noting that the data spoke for itself. It was noted that there were successes to celebrate, plans to be developed and that he was looking forward to putting context on some improvement schemes in some fields.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:

In terms of modernising buildings and learning settings, as physical disabilities were prioritised, it was asked how much planning was made for children's sensory needs, not only the rooms but in terms of colours on the walls, the lightbulbs used etc. An answer was given, noting that there were guidelines to follow when constructing new schools, it was explained that there was a need to ensure that Additional Learning Needs (ALN) provision was part of the guidelines. It was explained when constructing schools, the department learned from one project to the other, and adaptations had been made in terms of retaining doors of a natural colour and looking at lights. The need to get more of the department's input when schools were designed was noted to consider these types of needs, and it was explained that the department used part of the ALN capital grant funding to look at this matter further and that they worked with Occupational Therapists.

Attention was drawn to the fact that, in addition to the modernising buildings and learning settings field, there were plans in Arfon and Dwyfor but there was no mention of plans in Meirionnydd. In response, it was noted that modernising education capital funding came in phases and that many schools in Meirionnydd had been developed during the last phase, highlighting plans to restructure schools in Bala, Tywyn and Dolgellau. By now, it was explained that they specifically focused on the Bangor area, and it would move to another area in Gwynedd during the next phase.

It was expressed, when looking at a plan to reduce the cost of sending children to school, the measures were red, and it was asked if children were permanently excluded, whether there was an acknowledgement of the additional cost for parents to move their children to another school - such as school uniform etc. It was noted that families could be supported with this, by diverting funding as there was a need to ensure that children were able to attend school.

It was also asked whether the department was confident that all costs, including the hidden ones, received attention. It was noted that the department was confident that they had given a lot of attention to the main matters and worked to address the problems. It was noted that the department would draw up a charter that would be a suggestion for schools when considering the costs of school trips and school uniform for example.

Many observations were made about attendance as it was a matter of national concern, and it was highlighted that there had been progress as the number of children missing school started to reduce. It was asked what was working and whether there were any strategies in place to improve the situation. In response, it was noted that attendance had been a difficult challenge and that strategies were in place. It was expressed that giving relentless attention to the matter was what made a real difference. It was elaborated that the schools had proven success in increasing attendance with tight and robust processes in place. It was explained that the department prioritised secondary

schools as it was more of a problem in secondary schools. It was explained that the patterns cut during the covid period were now being reconstructed, and the hope was that the figures would reach the pre-covid percentages over the coming years.

In the discussion about attendance, it was noted that some families were legally prosecuted due to non-attendance, it was asked whether there was evidence that this tactic worked, and what were the effects of the experience on families. It was responded, highlighting that there were different types of prosecution and fines. It was noted that the £120 fine when a pupil had an unauthorised absence was not one implemented in Gwynedd. It was noted that another prosecution was implemented by the Education Welfare Team. It was explained that there was a specific process for working with families to encourage attendance. It was highlighted that many children being referred to the Welfare Team were making definitive progress, and that almost half had reasons for the absence which would not lead to prosecution - reasons such as mental health and social problems. It was noted that nobody wanted prosecution but there was a need to use powers to enforce children to attend schools. In terms of long-term impact, it was noted that half returned to school and some de-registered. It was also explained that a fine was not the final step but the court often placed requirements and a direction for how parties worked together to improve the situation and put tasks to achieve within a timeframe.

It was highlighted that the number who chose optional education at home was increasing and it was asked what caused concern, and whether they raised concerns in terms of safeguarding and well-being. The response noted that this field was extremely complex with different cohorts within the 269 being taught at home - such as families choosing to teach their children at home, others feeling that their children were unable to go to school for various reasons and some feeling that their children's needs were not being met. It was expressed that a questionnaire was shared when de-registering from school to know the reason for this to get a better understanding. It was expressed that working with families to keep in contact was underway, and that two teachers were available to facilitate with the curriculum. It was noted that there were no safeguarding and well-being problems as many sacrificed their careers to home-teach, and it was emphasised that many had excellent experiences of home-teaching.

Attention was drawn to the number of measures, asking for their validity as a result of a low number of responses, such as the measure for improving autistic children's communication, as only 2 had responded. In response, it was noted that the department agreed with the observations and it had been highlighted by managers. It was noted that it was difficult to get a fair reflection but there were measures for individual services, and there was a need to refine and ensure that they measured the right things.

When looking at the immersion centre service, it was highlighted that there was no data in terms of how much schools encourage, and how many children refused. It was noted that this data would be useful. The department responded, noting that spaces were very rare in the centres, and the schools encouraged them. It was explained that it was not possible to force children to attend and therefore schools were expected to encourage it. The department expressed that they were happy to provide the number of attendees, it was noted that there was room for improvement, but the department was doing everything in its ability to facilitate the process through support such as transport.

It was asked when the Education Strategy would be presented to the Committee. It was noted that it would be presented during the Autumn Term, it was explained that engagement work had been done but they hoped that it would be presented to the Cabinet before Christmas to be in place during the Spring term.

There was an enquiry about an English as an Additional Language measure, and it was

asked why English was emphasised over Welsh. It was explained that this service was for children from foreign countries and the need to ensure that they had access to education. It was emphasised that it was a small team who had supported many children from Ukraine over the last few years, that were immersed in Welsh before learning English. It was highlighted that the title of the measure was an education term.

Concern was noted about the toileting policy, because asking children to be able to use the toilet before starting at school could be seen as a barrier to some families, especially children with additional learning needs. It was emphasised that guidelines were clear in terms of expectations and this did not include children with health conditions and additional learning needs. It was explained that by creating this policy, there was consistent guidance across the county.

Attention was drawn to exclusions in secondary schools, it was noted that 3 schools had excluded children for 100 days or longer. It was asked whether there was support for the children during these periods. In response, it was noted that the schools where exclusions were higher needed to look at them further and ensure that they made the best use of the inclusion budget available.

It was noted that inclusion funding was received by schools, and it was highlighted that the problems were increasing, it was asked whether this was a concern. It was noted that it was a concern as it was inconsistent across the county and some schools did excellent work to support children. It was acknowledged that needs had changed. It was explained that a new unit would be opened to respond to behaviour challenges. It was noted that the unit was in Arfon as the demand was high in the area, and although there was not a specific location in Meirionnydd currently, the intention was to respond dynamically when the need arose.

## **RESOLVED**

**To accept the report and note the comments and to request further action on some of the comments in relation to the following areas:**

- **Welsh Language and Language Centres**
- **Learning environment for children with specific conditions**
- **Type of buildings in terms of geographical locations plus transport costs**
- **Child absences and inclusion along with children excluded from education and who are homeschooled**
- **Data reliability where the database is small**
- **Costs relating to access to education specifically for low-income families and children excluded from school**
- **Appointment of Headteachers**
- **Timeliness in the delivery of the Education Strategy.**

## **9. CABINET MEMBER FOR ECONOMY PERFORMANCE REPORT**

The report was submitted by the Cabinet Member, noting that it had been a very busy period for the department, with one grant cycle coming to an end whilst another was starting. It was highlighted that the department had 4 priority schemes in the Council Plan, three in the A Prosperous Gwynedd section and one as part of the A Caring Gwynedd programme. It was noted that good progress had been made against the milestones, but the risk common for the four was uncertainty about the future of the

budgets as they were funded by grant funding.

Members were guided through the plans, giving them a taste of the ongoing work, drawing attention to fields such as the significant work made to complete expenditure of the ARFOR programme and the Shared Prosperity Fund projects. It was highlighted that there was 49% less funding available for Gwynedd and the counties of north Wales whilst looking at the Shared Prosperity Fund, but work to identify the 2025/26 priorities had already started.

In terms of the department's day-to-day work, it was highlighted that there was concern that the number of pupils receiving swimming lessons in leisure centres continued to reduce as well as the dredging challenges in Pwllheli Hafan and Harbour. It was noted that the customer satisfaction level was high in many fields in the department, namely the archives service, museums, the arts and the libraries service.

During the discussion, the following observations and questions were presented:-

Attention was drawn to the reduction in the number of pupils receiving swimming lessons, highlighting that this was likely as a result of high transport costs to the centres. It was noted, although this was a problem seen in many rural areas, that the same picture was also seen in urban schools, specifically in deprived areas. It was asked for an analysis of swimming statistics to see the extent of the problem. In the discussion about swimming, it was also asked for an analysis of the users of Byw'n Iach leisure centres to see what the patterns were in terms of which areas used the facilities and in what areas. It was agreed to share the information with the members.

It was asked about the Growth Deal developments in north Wales, as it appeared that there was no progress. The department explained that many things were happening but there had been changes to various projects for many reasons. In terms of Gwynedd projects, it was noted that the Trawsfynydd project submitted by the Eginco company back in 2019 had now been withdrawn as the site was not favoured by the Welsh Government for further nuclear developments. Although the Leader attempted to divert the funding to an alternative project, it was resolved that it would not be possible to do this with any withdrawn project and a principle was set that a new application would have to be submitted. Consequently, it was noted that a new application to develop a Science Park on the site was in the process of being submitted.

Another application seen in Gwynedd as part of the Growth Deal was the Glynllifon application to develop a Rural Innovation Hub. As it was such a large project, there was a need to submit a planning application for a new entrance. As a result of opposition to the application by statutory organisations, it was noted that Coleg Llandrillo Menai was also looking at submitting another project.

Although the two projects above were not progressing, it was emphasised that two projects were progressing at Parc Glan Cegin, Bangor, as well as a Bangor University Project. It was expressed that projects were developing and the department was confident that Gwynedd would benefit from being part of the project. It was

acknowledged that the projects were moving slower than anticipated when the agreement was signed.

Disappointment was noted that projects were progressing so slowly, and it was expressed that there was a desire for the Committee to look at the matter in more detail, looking specifically at costs and the benefit for Gwynedd.

One member expressed that they were unaware of the plans in Trawsfynydd and the department agreed to send the original project to them, noting they were now dated and it was emphasised that Gwynedd was not part of the original project.

One member highlighted that Growth Deal projects were not seen in the south of the county where there was a true need for jobs and developments.

Attention was drawn to the good work being done by the Creating the Best Possible Circumstances in Gwynedd for Community Enterprises and Business to Thrive Scheme, and Support the People of Gwynedd into Work, with 184 supported to return to work this year and 232 received help to increase their ability to earn a good salary. It was asked whether there were figures for the previous years to see the figures in their context. The department explained that the team was doing excellent work, but it was entirely dependent on grant and the financial situation was fragile. It was expressed that figures were available and they would be shared with the committee.

The Committee asked about collaboration between departments, and how much discussion there was with departments such as Education in terms of swimming lessons, funding with the impact of the letting threshold of 184 days on small businesses and holiday accommodation, as well as the environment department with minor improvements to Gwynedd infrastructure in terms of making it attractive, e.g., car parks and pavements. The department explained that there was collaboration, highlighting the work associated with the Shared Prosperity Fund. It was detailed that there was very close collaboration with the Highways and Environment department to identify plans to improve city centres, and that workshops had been held with representation from Council departments to prioritise plans.

It was noted that there was a sense that there had not been much collaboration between the Planning department and the department in terms of developing tourism plans, highlighting the Glynllifon Growth Deal project for example. It was highlighted that there was close collaboration with the planning officers being members of project boards, such as the Slate Plan, but a planning application on the Glynllifon site had been refused following objections by statutory organisations beyond the Council, therefore it was not lack of collaboration that was the problem in this case.

Attention was drawn to the Caernarfon Food Festival committee's announcement that they would be taking a break for a year, partly due to the pressures on the small committee, and the department was asked for their support to help in the future. Support was expressed to hold discussions and to see whether the department could do more.

It was highlighted that Libraries were now more than a place to borrow books and they were community hubs. It was asked, with Neuadd Dwyfor thriving, what had caused such a positive change. The department responded, noting that libraries such as Tywyn was an example of what libraries could offer, and the department was developing a new strategy for the future which would incorporate the agenda of supporting people. In terms of Neuadd Dwyfor, it was noted that the substantial investment programme, as well as being accountable to the needs of the area and a good team had led to a positive change. It was highlighted, although the building was used much more, that it had not led to an increase in income as a result of increase in costs. It was noted that there were many lessons to be learned but it highlighted that co-locating services was vital.

## **RESOLVED**

- **To accept the report, noting the observations;**
- **That consideration needs to be given to scrutiny of the benefit of the Growth Deal for Gwynedd including the alternative project in Trawsfynydd**
- **To ask the Economy and Community Department to provide three-year rolling data on numbers who have received return to work support**
- **To ask the Department to make a request to Byw'n Iach Company for user data;**
- **To request that the department seeks funding and wider support for the Caernarfon Food Festival and to demonstrate more clearly in the report that there was funding for social enterprises.**

## **10. CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE PERFORMANCE REPORT**

The report was submitted by the Cabinet Member, noting that the purpose of the report was to provide an update on the field. It was expressed that the department was leading on 2 priorities in the Council Plan - Managing the Impact of National Budgetary Cuts and the Digital Plan. It was reported that progress was seen on both plans.

It was noted, in terms of measuring the whole department's performance, that 12% reported amber, which had received further attention as part of the measuring performance discussions, and 12% reported red, which was a cause for concern being updated regularly, reviewing whether there was a need to present a new measure.

Attention was drawn to those measuring as red. In terms of the Income Service, it was highlighted that the balance of the value of various debts over 6 months was almost £2m. It was expressed that a comprehensive review of the situation of old debts, as well as the implementation processes continued.

In the Taxation Service where the other two measures reported red, it was noted that the Ffordd Gwynedd review was being held to strengthen recovery arrangements, as the collection rates for Council Tax and Non-domestic Rates were lower than what they had been historically. It was explained that the reduction in the collection rates was also

partly due to the high number of self-catering holiday units that did not reach the criteria of 182 days for Business Rates transferred back to Council Tax during the second half of the year and they had been backdated and therefore a high percentage remained unpaid by the end of March 2025.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:

Many observations were received about the reduction in Council tax collection as a result of many houses changing to become holiday units paying non-domestic taxes and the impact of not reaching the threshold of the number of days to let a holiday accommodation under the new rules. The Head of Department noted that this was as a result of decisions by the District Valuer's Office which had been backdated and presented late in the financial year. It was noted that there had been a lack of communication which meant huge bills for individuals as a result of the premium and the department was aware of the mental anguish that this had created.

Committee Members noted the need for an Exempt Policy as this had an impact on many residents and enterprises within the county which highlighted an unfair situation. It was expressed that it had to be created to refine the exemption to provide a level of fairness and to have a level of flexibility in the tax bills sent out. The department responded, noting that it was a very complex situation, but the department was working to submit a policy and guidance in the autumn, but tax collection was essential to fund services. It was explained that the department needed to be careful as individuals could use it as a way to avoid paying taxes. It was noted that the arrangement was rigid without an exemption policy. It was asked for any policy to be presented to the Committee for discussion.

When discussing the same field, it was noted that there was a need for better discussions between the departments as the planning department would give planning permission to all types of camping sites, the finance department sent bills out to individuals and the economy department was trying to develop sustainable tourism. The need for the departments to discuss with each other further was noted.

It was asked for further information about how many individuals were in the lowest tax bands who had problems paying, and how many were being taken to court for not being able to pay. In response, it was noted that the information would be shared with the Committee. It was noted that specific arrangements were in place and support was available, but individuals had to ask for this support.

It was asked, in terms of the Digital Plan, how confident was the department that the Council's new payroll system would be in place when the old system came to an end at the end of 2026. The department responded, noting that there was no choice, and it had to be in place and that steps had been made to ensure that the plan was progressing, such as starting the procurement element, as well as receiving the Cabinet's approval to get one-off funds to be funded.

**RESOLVED**

- **To accept the report and to note the observations.**
- **To accept that a Council Tax Premium Exemption Policy needs to be drawn up**
- **That consideration needs to be given to whether there is a role for the Scrutiny Committee in the creation of the policy**
- **To ask the Finance Department to share data in relation to Council Tax prosecutions with members.**

# **11. CORPORATE AND LEGAL SERVICES AND THE WELSH LANGUAGE CABINET MEMBER PERFORMANCE REPORT**

The report was submitted by the Cabinet Member, noting that she was going to start with the Corporate Services. It was expressed that it was good to report that there had been significant progress in the Council's strategic priorities, and that many successes were seen in the quantitative performances. It was noted that some challenges continued in fields such as occupational health, staff sickness and contracting promptly.

It was highlighted that there had been an increase in the procurement field, with an increase of 1% in the Council's use of local companies bringing the percentage to 59%. It was noted that work had been done in the employment field, but it was highlighted that the jobs matrix was now to be completed in 2025/26, but it was highlighted that a general staff training framework was now underway.

In the equality field, it was noted that a staff equality forum had been established, and work was being done to the Council's website to ensure that it was accessible. It was further highlighted that autism and neurodiversity training was available to staff.

Progress in the Women in Leadership plan was highlighted, with 45% of the individuals now having moved to senior positions, and it was noted that the development programmes and teatime chats for staff were continuing, as well as launching a new brand for the project.

The Legal Service was then discussed, highlighting that there were 4 teams - Legal, propriety of elections and registration and support for the coroner's service. It was highlighted that the officers receiving the service were satisfied or very satisfied with the service and an annual report from the heads of department reported positive results. It was explained that the department's staffing situation was now healthy, and locums were no longer used.

Attention was drawn to the fact that the propriety team had held training on the code of conduct for members, and that many members had still not completed it which was a

matter that arose often in the Standards Committee.

Staff from both departments were thanked for their work.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:

It was highlighted that many projects had slipped from this year to the following year, and it was asked whether this was as a result of a shortage of staff to complete the work. It was noted that the shortage of staff was not the problem but workloads could be heavy and, as a result, it was difficult to complete them without the impact on day-to-day work. The key job matrix was highlighted as an example, noting that many complications had come up, but work on the plan had restarted with a higher staff capacity in place to finish the work.

It was expressed that many measures had been highlighted red, it was asked whether this caused concern. In response, it was noted that many were red as a result of the high challenge that the department gave in terms of measures. However, it was noted that there were some concerns, such as the occupational health service where an increase in the number of referrals, as well as a shortage of nurses meant that the measure was red.

Attention was drawn to the 'An Efficient Gwynedd' priority field which incorporated a lot of Ffordd Gwynedd, and a lot of frustration was noted with Ffordd Gwynedd. It was highlighted that there were many examples of departments continuing to fail to respond to enquiries from members of the public which was very frustrating. It was asked whether Ffordd Gwynedd was working, as a lot of funding was provided for it, and if some Heads of Department did not operate in accordance with 'Ffordd Gwynedd', how were staff expected to do so. It was noted that the Ffordd Gwynedd contribution was completely dependent on the departments' collaboration. It was noted, in terms of the lack of response to correspondence, that the New Customer Care plan had been developed which would set standards to respond to enquiries. An understanding of the frustration and the need to track further was expressed.

Reference was made to the 'A Welsh Gwynedd' priority field and the promoting the use of the Welsh language project. It was noted that a two-year work programme was in place. It was asked what was being done and whether there were any measures. It was noted that a specific report on the matter would be presented to the Language Committee the following week, and it was explained, with a very small team, that demands were heavy, but they were trying to work in different ways.

Attention was drawn to the freedom of information requests, highlighting that the performance was slightly lower and it was asked whether there were specific fields or a pattern. The Head of Department explained that the Council received approximately 1000 requests per year, varying in their nature. It was highlighted that this field had been the subject of an investigation by external regulators and a report would be presented to the Governance and Audit Committee which would highlight the 10 recommendations to address and the work programme in response. It was noted that there was progress, but

staff needed training to better deal with them, as well as publishing more information so the information was available to the public.

It was highlighted that very good work was being done in the Democracy Team with documents being sent in a timely manner.

It was noted, in terms of questionnaires by the departments in the Legal Service, that only one in three of the heads of departments had responded. It was asked about the other parties such as individuals waiting for 106 contracts deriving from planning permission conditions. It was noted that departments' satisfaction showed the support that they received to fulfil their work, and therefore that it highlighted an important resource. In terms of the one in three responses, the need to ask heads of departments to respond to the annual questionnaire was noted. It was noted, in terms of the other parties, that it was difficult to get their views and how appropriate it would be.

It was asked how much work was being outsourced and how much was kept local. It was noted that the department tried not to outsource, but it was dependent on the nature and risk of the work. It was highlighted that they used a barrister, as well as solicitors in expert fields, but they tried to keep the benefit local.

Attention was drawn to prosecutions, specifically about non-attendance of children at school, it was asked whether there was more information, an increase in the number and whether costs were transferred to parents. It was explained that the Education department would be better-placed to respond and there was a need to look at the data and work with the department to give a full picture of the process. In terms of transferring costs - it was a matter for the Court to determine costs, this was not in the hands of the Council.

More information about the pilot to automatically register electors which was currently being conducted was requested. It was noted that the plan was for the whole of Gwynedd, and the Council was one of 5 counties part of the pilot. It was expressed that Gwynedd looked specifically at groups that were difficult to reach and worked with enterprises such as GISDA to support the Council to move the plan forward.

## **RESOLVED**

- **To accept the report and to note the observations.**
- **To welcome that a detailed work programme is being drawn up to address the recommendations of the Information Commissioner's Office following an audit of the Council's arrangements in relation to freedom of information requests**
- **That the Committee receive an update on the Customer Care Plan as it develops**
- **That Heads of Department need to be encouraged to respond to the annual questionnaire from the Legal Service**
- **To request that the Scrutiny Committee receive information about**

**prosecutions relating to pupil absences.**

The meeting commenced at 10.30 am and concluded at 4.50 pm

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**CHAIRMAN**