
EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
16/10/25

Attendance:

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

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

Co-opted Members: Colette Owen (Catholic Church), Sharon Roberts (Arfon Parent / Governor Representative) and Gweno Glyn Williams (Dwyfor Parent / Governor Representative).

Officers present: Bethan Adams (Scrutiny Adviser) and Jasmine Jones (Democracy Services Officer).

Present for item 5 - Councillor Medwyn Hughes (Cabinet Member for Economy and Community), Sioned Williams (Head of Economy and Community Department), Dylan Griffiths (Economic Development Service Manager), Nia Bowden (Business Support Programme Manager).

Present for item 6 - Councillor Dewi Jones (Cabinet Member for Education), Gwern ap Rhisiart (Head of Education Department), Debbie Anne Jones (Assistant Head of Education Services), Siwan Llwyd Roberts (Head of the Gwynedd Immersion Education System).

Present for item 7 - Councillor Llio Elenid Owen (Cabinet Member for Corporate and Legal Services and the Welsh Language), Ian Jones (Head of Corporate Services), Arwel Evans (Procurement Manager), Miriam Fflur Hughes (Procurement Consultant).

Present for item 8 - Councillor Llio Elenid Owen (Cabinet Member for Corporate and Legal Services and the Welsh Language), Ian Jones (Head of Corporate Services), Catrin Love (Assistant Head of Corporate Services), Iwan Evans (Head of Legal Services).

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Elwyn Jones and Gwilym Jones (NASUWT).

Councillor Iwan Huws was thanked for his work on the committee.

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

Sharon Roberts declared a personal interest in items 5, 7 and 8. The member considered that it was a prejudicial interest, and she withdrew from the meeting during the discussion on the items.

3. URGENT ITEMS

None to note.

4. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee held on 19 June 2025, as a true record.

5. GWYNEDD ECONOMY STRATEGY

The Cabinet Member for Economy and Community presented the report, noting that the report had been drawn up following extensive consultation with several businesses and organisations. It was noted that the current economic situation was challenging with businesses continuing to face many changes and challenges, including rising costs, the speed of digital transformation and the need to develop appropriate skills sustainably across the county.

It was noted that a recent statement from the Welsh Government referred to the possibility of £550 million of funding to boost the economy in Wales, but there was no clarity as to where that money would be allocated. It was noted that the situation was unclear, stressing that the level of funding received had decreased significantly. It was elaborated that around £20 million was received two years ago with £8.5 million received this year, and that this figure could decrease further next year.

It was stressed, therefore, that a clear strategy was needed to outline the priorities moving forward. It was noted that, following the receipt of input from Committee Members in February on the priorities for increasing the future prosperity of Gwynedd's residents and communities, an initial draft of the long-term strategy would be submitted to the Committee for Members to offer input and feedback before the document was confirmed.

It was emphasised that the long-term strategy in question sets the overall direction, with an action plan behind it to outline the projects that would contribute to the realisation of the strategy, and that said plan would be updated annually. It was noted that this was not just a Council strategy, but a strategy for the whole county, with the intention of continuing to work closely with partners to finalise the final document.

The intention to establish a Gwynedd Economy Forum was explained to co-ordinate the work with partners from all sectors and to build on the positive experiences of implementing the Shared Prosperity Fund. It was noted that the next steps would be to receive additional input, establish the Gwynedd

Economy Forum, confirm the content of the strategy, and submit the final document to Cabinet and then to the Full Council.

The Committee was thanked for its 17 comments at the meeting on 13 February 2025, and it was noted that these had been considered in the formulation of the strategy.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:

It was noted that it was a pleasure to see the work coming to fruition, and more information about the Gwynedd Economy Forum was requested, specifically in terms of membership and how often it would meet. In response, it was noted that the intention was to include representatives from the main sectors that are important to Gwynedd, such as agriculture, tourism, education, universities and colleges, as well as local business owners, entrepreneurs and economic experts. It was emphasised that the representation of the private sector was an essential element of the Forum to secure practical advice and expertise.

Questions were asked about the references to deprived areas of Gwynedd in the strategy, noting that there was no specific reference to fostering economic growth in areas such as Meirionnydd and Dwyfor. It was stressed that more emphasis was needed on these areas within the strategy. In response, it was noted that this was a fair point, and that the geographical element should be underlined more clearly within the document. It was explained that the action plans under the strategy would include consideration of the geographical matters, and it was emphasised that the department strived to ensure fairness across the whole county. Although less funding was available, it was noted that the intention was to maintain a fair distribution of the resources available.

An update on the situation at Llanbedr and Trawsfynydd was requested. In response, it was explained that the development project at Llanbedr continued to be linked to the development of the new road, and that it was hoped that the work would progress by next May. In the case of Trawsfynydd, it was noted that an investment of £70 million had been recently announced for the decommissioning project over the next three years, with the expectation that this would create between 150 and 200 local jobs. It was emphasised that work was underway to strengthen the opportunities in the area, including the development of a science park and elements such as data centres and artificial intelligence.

In relation to Llanbedr, it was emphasised that pressure needed to be put on the Welsh Government to earmark funding before May, noting that it was not fair to expect the North Wales Corporate Joint Committee to provide the funding. The need to continue to press for the continuation of the decommissioning process at the Trawsfynydd site was noted, noting the risk of the process slipping as the financial plans had not increased in line with inflation. In response, it was noted that this point had been raised with the relevant bodies at the Trawsfynydd Oversight Board.

Concern was noted about the lack of Welsh speakers in senior positions and the influence this could have on the proportion of the non-Welsh speaking workforce. The need to monitor the situation and ensure fairness for Welsh speakers within public and private workplaces was emphasised.

The future growth of the economy and the impact of additional costs such as the national insurance tax on small businesses, particularly in the tourism sector, was questioned. It was noted that several businesses were concerned about this matter and, as a result, had reduced their workforce. There was further questioning as to what grants were available to assist these businesses, especially the rural businesses. In response, it was noted:-

- There was a lack of clarity regarding grants as they were constantly changing, with the Welsh Government setting the allocations from year to year.
- The economic vision was based on "growth for purpose" rather than "growth for growth's sake", with a focus on maintaining and maximising what was available and supporting local businesses to save costs, increase income and adapt to a net zero economy.
- The strategy included new opportunities that were suitable and appropriate for Gwynedd as an area, seeking to capitalise on local strengths and geographical elements such as sites like Trawsfynydd.
- The Annual Action Plans would set out the practical actions and local projects that would contribute to these aims, relying substantially on external funding and private sector contribution.
- The current situation needed to be protected while looking to the future.

It was questioned where economic growth was projected in the coming years, stressing the need to create good quality jobs to keep young people in the county. In response, it was noted that access to the electricity grid was crucial, with developments such as data centres, new agricultural developments in Glynllifon and clean energy projects underway. It was noted that while the financial situation was challenging, it was hoped that prosperity and growth would be seen with the new technology. It was stressed that the programme of schemes would be included in the annual action plans. It was noted that it was intended to review them annually to identify the relevant projects as circumstances and private sector interest developed.

In relation to planning applications, awareness was expressed of businesses intending to move to Gwynedd to develop their activity but had not received planning permission. It was questioned how much frustration this created for the development of Gwynedd's economy, and whether representation from the planning area would be part of the Gwynedd Economy Forum. In response, it was noted that planning was a critical area for economic success and was mentioned in the strategy. It was further noted that representation from the planning area would be part of the Gwynedd Economy Forum.

Concern was noted about the soft nature of the strategy in terms of language use, with reference to words such as 'support' and 'promote', as well as the delay in receiving the draft document for 2025-26. In response, it was noted

that strategic documents were directional documents and therefore tended to be soft in tone, and that the action plans included the concrete actions. It was noted that a delay in receiving a funding settlement this year had led to a delay in the preparation of the work, and that action had to be taken within a short financial period.

Concern was expressed about the lack of certainty about the future of grants, referring to the programmes that expired in March 2026. In response, it was noted that several successful programmes had been in place over the past three years, fully funded by grants. It was noted that uncertainty about ongoing funding created uncertainty for Council staff about their working contracts. It was stressed that over half of the department's workforce was on short-term contracts due to reliance on grants, creating a challenge in retaining experienced staff. It was noted that the department was concerned about this and efforts to receive this grant funding for next year would be prioritised.

A request was made for more information about economy schemes relating to the Welsh language and efforts to attract people back to Gwynedd. In response, it was noted that the department had been working on the Arfor programme over the past three years with a budget of £11 million, but this year only received bridging funds. It was emphasised, however, that the lessons learnt, and research carried out over the last three years, such as what mattered to young people and what conditions and circumstances would attract them back, would continue to be used. It was noted that the matter was a priority within the strategy and was therefore being prioritised in grant applications to continue to build on the work that had already been done.

More information was requested regarding collaboration between the Economy and Community Department and the Environment Department to ensure that the strategy was fully considered as the new Local Development Plan was developed. In response, it was noted that there was a clear link between the strategy and the development plan, and that the two strategies would move in the same direction. It was noted that a close working relationship existed for major projects, and that the Department highlighted the importance of the plans to the local economy and offered their views as the planning processes progress.

Further details regarding the evaluation of the Arfor programme were requested. In response, it was noted that the evaluation had been commissioned and shared with the four counties, and that it showed which schemes had succeeded best, helping to identify, moving forward, which type of interventions made the biggest difference. It was noted that the intention was to publish the report by December 2025, having been agreed with the Welsh Government, to ensure that the findings would inform the work into the future.

The lack of discussion between the Environment Department and the Economy and Community Department in relation to various planning applications, was highlighted. The need for better communication between the Departments was noted, particularly in relation to smaller developments and developments in rural areas. In response, it was noted that the working relationship on large

projects was strong, but that the department would discuss with the Environment Department how to extend this to smaller projects.

The importance of supporting the work taking place in Llanbedr in relation to drone developments was emphasised, noting that these developments benefitted agriculture. In response, it was stressed that there was no military work on the site and that the Council would continue to support the development.

It was noted that clean energy generation and hydro schemes were not an industry with potential for growth at present, as the prices offered for this electricity by the Government had dropped significantly.

Opinions were expressed that the delivery plan over-emphasised the Arfon area. It was noted that greater emphasis needed to be placed on the development of basic skills such as carpentry, plumbers and electricians, within the construction industry when formulating training plans.

It was noted that there was a need for more regular reporting on the jobs created or safeguarded through the department's plans, including information at ward level, to demonstrate the impact of the investment on the people of Gwynedd.

RESOLVED

- 1. To accept the strategy and note the observations.**
- 2. Express concern regarding the availability of grants for deprived areas such as Gwynedd, and express hope that there will be equality and fairness within the County in relation to the distribution of resources and support.**
- 3. To note the importance of collaboration between the Economy and Community Department and the Environment Department to ensure that the New Local Development Plan addresses the need to attract jobs and businesses to the County. Similarly, to collaborate with Eryri National Park.**
- 4. Suggest that a clear structure is established to review the progress at the end of the year against the delivery plan.**

6. IMMERSION EDUCATION SYSTEM

The report was presented by the Cabinet Member for Education. It was noted that the Immersion Education System had been the subject of discussion on numerous previous occasions by the Committee, and that continued interest in the field was welcomed as it was a vital one for the county. It was emphasised that Gwynedd had a unique opportunity as a county to ensure that children arriving late to the area had the opportunity to develop a vital skill, namely the Welsh language. It was noted that the Welsh language was important to everyone in Gwynedd and opened doors in terms of employment and cultural opportunities. It was emphasised that this was essential that, in a county where

the majority spoke Welsh, all children were able to take full advantage of everything available to them.

It was noted that two reports had been published since the field was last discussed, namely a report from Bangor University and a report from Estyn. It was emphasised that the previous immersion system had not been inspected by Estyn, but that the system was now registered as an educational entity and therefore received a full Estyn inspection like the schools. The report by Estyn was noted to be very positive, recognising that Gwynedd had an innovative immersion system.

Appreciation was expressed to the staff of the department for their hard work, and in particular to Rhys Meredydd Glyn, the former Head of the Immersion Education System.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:

The level of detail of Estyn's inspection of the Immersion Centres was questioned. It was noted that Bangor University's report contradicted the Estyn report and made specific recommendations, such as reconsidering the current four-day model and returning to a five-day model, noting that the four-day model contained shortcomings such as the contact on the fifth day between the immersion centre and the teachers in the schools. It was questioned whether the Department would be prepared to consider Bangor University's recommendations.

In response, it was noted that the Estyn inspection had included extensive fieldwork compared to Bangor University's inspection, with three inspectors over three days in each of the six immersion centres and in schools, including interviews with pupils and staff. It was noted that Bangor University's report had used different criteria to Estyn, including methods used in assessing adult immersion.

It was stressed that the comments in both reports were valid and that the recommendations had been accepted by both organisations. It was elaborated that work was already underway to respond to several of the recommendations, with centre staff now starting to work alongside pupils in the classroom, rather than taking them out of class as under the old system. It was further noted that additional resources were being offered to respond to the recommendations, and that a website was being developed to provide a snapshot of what was being achieved within the immersion centres.

It was noted that the recommendations regarding the number of days in the immersion centres had been fully weighed up and measured by the Department, with a table appearing in the report comparing the advantages and disadvantages of the four models available. Each model had been considered in detail before deciding to keep the current arrangement for the time being, as headteachers had asked for consistency.

Concern was expressed by a member that not all school headteachers were aware of the situation at grassroots' level.

The difficulties highlighted within the reports were highlighted in terms of the structure of lessons for the children returning from the immersion centres to the schools, and the need to return to the five-day model to address this. It was noted that the Estyn report was superficial, with little detail or evidence to support it. It was further noted that Estyn had inspected several immersion centres in Wales who had just started their journey, and therefore the praise of Gwynedd's centres was understandable.

It was noted that Bangor University's report was a good report, with more detail, evidence and comments from mainstream teachers, immersion teachers and pupils. It was noted that several recommendations and conclusions had emerged from the report, and that one of the main messages was that children needed more hours of immersion. It was noted within the report that comments from immersion teachers indicated that there was no constant contact between the schools and the centres, and that mainstream teachers tended to become more comfortable with using English.

It was noted that a five-day model within the immersion centres offered a clearer structure in terms of education for the children, but that there was insufficient monitoring or follow-up to this within the mainstream, as there were not enough immersion teachers available to ensure this. The need for the Welsh Government to provide more funding to maintain the immersion system was emphasised, as it was not fair for schools to have to contribute to fund the provision.

In response, it was noted that the fifth day within the school was advantageous as it enabled better communication between the centres and the mainstream schools. It was noted that pupils' well-being remained a central consideration for the Department, as well as teaching, and that the fifth day back at school had been identified as something beneficial for the children. It was stressed that the current decision reflected what was best for the children and for the schools, as well as the headteachers' request for consistency, money was not the main factor in reaching the decision. It was recognised that there was room for improvement in communication between the centres and schools, and that plans had been drawn up to rectify this.

It was stressed that both reports were important and stood on their own merits, and that there were lessons to be learned from both. An opinion was expressed that the findings of Bangor University's report stemmed from what happens on the fifth day, which is Friday, when pupils were back at school. It was elaborated that the context of the inspection, particularly the time of year when the work had been carried out, was likely to have influenced to some extent what was seen on Friday. It was noted that Friday was not necessarily a suitable day for children from the immersion centres to return to school.

It was explained that the financial situation was challenging, but that the Council had received a significant grant from the Welsh Government for the

immersion provision and had used all possible means to protect schools from having to fund the provision themselves.

A member made the following comments:-

- That Estyn had already misled this Committee on the matter of children's well-being and safety, and therefore a view was expressed that the Estyn report was unreliable.
- The conclusion of Bangor University's report that mainstream schools were finding it difficult to support pupils to successfully reintegrate on Fridays, and that this had reduced the robust efficiency of the immersion process.
- Bangor University's conclusion had indicated that a return to mainstream school on Fridays had a negative impact on pupils' well-being in terms of consistency.
- Only £1 million was being spent on the immersion system, and that the Welsh Government needed to lobby for more funding.

An opinion was expressed that the report contained bias, disregarding the findings of Bangor University's report.

Concern was expressed about the lack of criticism in the Estyn report, stressing that Bangor University's report offered a more balanced picture and highlighted a lack of strategies, contact and understanding from teachers. It was stressed that changing the model from Friday to Monday at school was not going to be a solution to this problem. It was suggested that pupils' well-being needed to be specifically examined when deciding on the best arrangement, as evidence had shown that pupils felt more confident in the immersive environment than when returning to mainstream school.

The need to consider increasing immersion hours and placing greater emphasis on the process of integrating pupils back into their schools was emphasised, ensuring appropriate strategies and training for staff. It was noted that there was a lack of time for teachers to implement the strategies, and that consideration needed to be given to a return to a five-day-a-week system that had already proven successful.

A view was expressed that the Language Charter had not proven successful, with English being used as an informal language within schools, and that it should be reviewed and scrutinised as a matter of urgency by the Committee.

In response, the following was stated:-

- Work was underway to re-launch the Gwynedd Language Charter with new branding.
- Any additional funding from the Government was welcomed.
- The Department had already used all available resources to maintain the provision and to protect schools from additional costs, but that there were wider financial pressures across education services.

- It was important to continue to celebrate the successes of the immersion centres and to recognise the hard work undertaken daily by teachers and staff across the county.
- Secondary headteachers had raised concerns that communication remained challenging.
- Schools were encouraged to appoint a language mentor to act as a liaison between the immersion centre and the school, to ensure linguistic progression. It was noted that this role was essential to maintain the link between pupils and the immersion staff after their time at the centre.
- An immersion period did not end after 10 weeks, and that relationships were intended to be fostered with mainstream schools to share immersion expertise. It was further noted that the training on the principles of immersion needed to be guided by the universities, so that it could be part of the training of all teachers.

The nature of the consultation held with the headteachers was questioned. Headteachers had been asked whether they had been given an opportunity to consider the evaluation before expressing an opinion on the new models. In response, it was noted that all primary and secondary headteachers had received a copy of the four models and the relevant information before expressing an opinion.

It was noted that cases had been reported where teachers did not arrive at mainstream schools on time on Friday, meaning children had to wait for long periods. Concern was expressed that long periods of online work could lead to loneliness among the pupils. It was therefore stressed that having children back on the fifth day did not fulfil its purpose of keeping them in touch with the school and their fellow pupils.

Concerns were raised about the impact of the fifth day on the social language of the schools, especially in rural areas. It was noted that this could affect the linguistic nature of the whole school and the Welsh culture on the playground and in the classroom. It was suggested that it would be worthwhile to receive the views of schools that had already experienced the arrangement to get a more comprehensive picture of the situation.

A question was asked about cases where parents had not chosen to send their children to the immersion centres. In response, it was noted that reasons such as the need to settle in a new home were common, but that the Department was extending the invitation to future periods and continued to invite and persuade parents to attend through in-person visits to the centres. It was emphasised that cases of refusal of the invitation to attend the immersion centres were very rare.

It was questioned how children with additional learning needs were supported by the immersion centres. In response, it was noted that robust arrangements were in place to support pupils with additional learning needs and emotional needs. It was explained that individual development plans were transferred to the centres and that staff received training on the principles of parenting schools, trauma awareness and ELSA (Emotional Literacy Support Assistants).

The importance of promoting Welsh as a social language in mainstream schools was emphasised, emphasising the need to create a culture where pupils can use the language naturally in the playground and in the community. In response, it was noted that two officers within the Council were working on the reform of the Language Charter and that a funding bid had been submitted to expand these roles. It was further noted that there were jobs available within schools in each catchment area for teachers to take on additional responsibilities to implement the Language Charter and to organise one annual event in their catchment area.

It was noted that another model had been suggested regarding keeping the fifth day within the school but extending the period within the immersion centres from 10 weeks to 12. It was elaborated that it was impossible to determine how practical this model was at present, but that it was something to be considered further in the future.

A member thanked the immersion service staff, congratulating them on their excellent work and praising them for the efficiency of the service. They also thanked all the teachers in the county for their heroic efforts to immerse pupils on a day-to-day basis in the classroom.

It was proposed that the report be rejected because there was a trend in the glorification of the reports received from Bangor University and Estyn; recommend that the Cabinet Member for Education lobbied the Welsh Government for additional funding to fund the provision and thank the staff at the immersion centres for their work.

Councillor Rhys Tudur noted his opposition to accepting the report. He elaborated that insufficient consideration had been given to models of greater duration in the immersion centres; that models needed to be looked at in need of extensive funding e.g. pupils go back to an immersion centre once a week after the 10-week period; and the impact of pupils returning to schools from the centres for one day a week on pupils' language practices in mainstream schools had not been considered.

The proposal was seconded. A vote was taken on the proposal, and it fell on the Chair's casting vote.

A discussion was held in relation to accepting the report.

RESOLVED

- 1. To accept the report and note the observations.**
- 2. To ask the Cabinet Member for Education to:**
 - further lobby the Welsh Government for additional financial resources.**
 - give further consideration to the option of returning to five days and/or consideration of the length of the period in the language centres, taking into account the welfare of the pupils.**

- **consult further with stakeholders and ensure flexibility in terms of the provision in moving forward.**

3. That the Scrutiny Committee extends its gratitude to all those involved in immersion, both in the language centres and within mainstream schools.

7. PROCUREMENT STRATEGY

The report was presented by the Cabinet Member for Corporate and Legal Services and the Welsh Language. It was explained that new legislation in the field of procurement came into force in February this year. It was noted that the report outlined the Council's response to the Act, together with the strategy itself and the consequences of using the social value methodology in the evaluation of contracts.

It was stressed that public sector procurement was subject to a legal framework to ensure fair and open competition, value for money, and to comply with national and international obligations. It was noted that the Social Partnership and Public Procurement Act 2023 was likely to come into force next year, and that preparatory work was underway to respond to these changes.

It was explained that the Council spent around £200 million a year on procurement and therefore needed to deliver the best value in terms of price, quality and social benefits, including a contribution to decarbonisation. It was noted that the strategy sets out the direction for achieving these objectives and includes seven priority areas: local benefits, zero carbon, value for money, social value, technology, governance arrangements and the Welsh language.

It was reminded that the social value evaluation methodology reflected the seven aims of the Well-being of Future Generations and the Welsh Language Act, and that the Council would pilot a new system to ensure positive outcomes for Gwynedd, such as creating employment opportunities for local residents, spending in the local supply chain, and financial contributions to charities and community clubs. It was noted that companies had already offered social benefits of over £4 million since the introduction of the new approach.

It was explained that the next steps were outlined in the report, with a view to submitting the strategy to Cabinet in November. It was emphasised that the Council was a pioneer in the field of social value and that this strategy would underpin procurement over the coming years.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:

A question was asked about the main challenges facing the Council in implementing the Strategy, particularly in terms of achieving the net zero target and keeping the benefits local. In response, it was noted that there were challenges across several sectors, including the environment, Welsh language and the social elements, and that the change in legislation and the need to understand the new arrangements were currently posing the main challenges.

The additional cost of implementing decarbonisation policies, such as the purchase of electric vehicles instead of diesel vehicles, was questioned and what financial impact this had on the Council. In response, it was noted that the main challenge was to calculate the environmental impact when comparing an old contract with a new one, and that this work was continuing at a national level. It was noted that there was currently no sophisticated method to measure carbon in detail, but that the hope remained that energy consumption would decrease over time and that this would lead to a reduction in costs. It was agreed to undertake further research to analyse the additional financial cost of implementing the net zero target.

A member expressed an opinion that the costs of future decarbonisation were likely to be higher than the cost of reaching the net zero goal. The amount of collaboration work that had been undertaken with the Economy and Community Department, and how much support was being given to small companies within the Strategy, was questioned. In response, it was noted that the Economy and Community Department provided support through grants and helped businesses in general. It was also noted that the Procurement Service offered support and provided advance information to businesses about tendering opportunities, with the ability to refer companies to Business Wales who offer independent support. It was emphasised that the Council sought to avoid using national frameworks where possible, to ensure more opportunities for local companies to compete.

The current monitoring arrangements and the steps to develop them further were questioned. In response, it was noted that contract management currently took place primarily within the individual services, and that the intention was to strengthen those arrangements by introducing best practice and ensuring full value for contracts. It was noted that there was a need to improve the monitoring of social value, the collection of carbon information and public reporting on the outcomes of tenders and the performance of large contracts.

It was enquired what was new in this Strategy compared to the previous one. It was asked if the fact that we measured social value was different from other authorities and went beyond the requirements of legislation. In response, it was noted that the element of measuring social value, the emphasis on keeping the benefit local, the impact of net zero procurement, value for money, making the best use of technology, looking at the governance arrangements, and promoting the Welsh language were additional aspects that had not been included in previous strategies. It was elaborated that several of these elements had been a priority in the past but had not been documented within a strategy. It was noted that the emphasis on social value in Gwynedd was higher than in many other authorities. It was emphasised that this strategy reflected the requirements of the Social Partnership and Public Procurement Act and laid the foundations for annual reporting on progress.

It was questioned whether technology and artificial intelligence had led to savings for the Council so far. In response, it was noted that the use of artificial intelligence technology was already taking place, but details of the financial savings were not currently available. It was noted that this area was developing

as part of the Digital Plan, with robust governance arrangements being put in place.

The desire to see the Welsh language treated as a practical and meaningful factor in contracting, rather than just a symbolic promotional element, was emphasised. In response, it was noted that legal advice had been obtained on this matter and shared with the Member, noting the need to act within current law. It was noted that further work was underway to explore new opportunities to strengthen the use of the Welsh language through the detailed action plan.

The timetable for formulating and implementing the action plan was questioned. In response, it was noted that work was already underway in the background, but that the timetable would depend on the capacity and resources of the service. It was noted that this was a long-term strategy, with the actions to be prioritised over several years.

It was questioned what would be updated within the Procurement Policy and when this would happen. In response, it was noted that the Policy would be updated to reflect the requirements of the legislation. It was confirmed that a draft version of the Policy had already been prepared, and that it needed an internal consultation before it could be adopted.

RESOLVED

- 1. To accept the report and note the observations.**
- 2. To ask the Cabinet Member for Corporate and Legal Services and the Welsh Language to ensure that everything possible, within the limitations, is done to keep the benefit local, to promote small companies, create social value and support the Welsh language.**

8. PERFORMANCE REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR CORPORATE AND LEGAL SERVICES AND THE WELSH LANGUAGE

The report was presented by the Cabinet Member for Corporate and Legal Services and the Welsh Language, explaining that the report referred to the progress made against the promises of the Council's Plan and the department's performance measures. It was noted that performance had been discussed at a performance challenge meeting in September.

Members were reminded that the department was leading on six projects within various priority areas: keeping the benefit local, promoting the use of the Welsh language, workforce planning, ensuring fairness for all, women in leadership and a strategic review of health and safety management. The strategic review of health and safety management was highlighted, noting that there had been a slippage in two milestones within the project. The first was to introduce a new information technology system for health and safety across the Council, and the second was to develop a five-year audit plan. It was emphasised that the work was progressing and that the work was expected to be fully carried out.

In terms of day-to-day performance, it was noted that the situation was generally positive, but that several matters needed further attention. Reference was made to language assessments completed by staff, where the percentage had been high but had not yet reached the full target, with eight new members of staff not completing the assessment. Similarly, it was noted that 14 DBS applications were awaiting processing in Liverpool, and a further 44 awaiting implementation by staff or management, with the figures changing daily as new staff reached their renewal period. It was explained that the Safeguarding Operational Group discussed DBS performance on a quarterly basis, with a sub-group scrutinising the data.

It was noted that 52 referrals had been made to Occupational Health in August, with 48 members of staff attending appointments. Of those, 40 were absent from work, but following actions such as a phased return or reasonable adjustments, it was noted that 19 individuals had now returned to work.

In terms of data protection requests, 18 requests had been received during the quarter of which 13 were answered within the timeframe. It was noted that the complexity of many of the applications, particularly in the children's field, had influenced performance, and that if the numbers and complexity increased, the resources would need to be reviewed to cope.

It was noted that the average sick days per head across all Council services, including schools, stood at 4.43 days, compared to 4.23 last year. It was explained that an in-depth analysis for 2024-25 had been submitted to the Corporate Management Team and the Local Joint Consultative Committee, with action to be taken from that. It was noted that the average time to complete job appraisals had decreased from an average of 49.04 days to 35.09 days by the end of August. It was stressed that this performance reflected the work of the team but also depended on the number of applications received and other priorities within the department.

All the officers of the department were thanked for their commitment and continued support to the work of the Council.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:

A question was asked about the lack of reference in the report to progress, or lack of progress, in relation to the Ffordd Gwynedd scheme. In response, it was noted that the department was not leading on the plan but was contributing significantly to the plan leading on several individual streams of work. It was explained that a report on the Ffordd Gwynedd scheme had already been submitted to Cabinet in July.

It was noted that the staff sickness absence figure had not changed much since last year. It was questioned whether there were any patterns or differences between departments regarding staff sickness absences. In response, it was explained:-

- That an in-depth analysis of the situation had been submitted to the Corporate Management Team, showing progress between 2023-24 and 2024-25.
- A new policy on sickness absence had been introduced, and nearly 400 managers had been trained on it.
- A new system to record absences had led to more effective monitoring and possibly increased the figures due to better recording.
- Stress and musculoskeletal conditions remained major factors, with intervention packages available and a focus on the manager's role in supporting staff well-being.

A question was asked about stress, asking whether work pressures and financial cuts contributed to the situation. In response, it was noted that stress was recorded as either personal or work-related, and that it could be a combination of both. It was explained that work was underway to encourage managers to have regular conversations about well-being with staff, through new training and courses such as the i-act training and the ongoing evaluation system.

The department was asked if there were concerns about DBS completion figures, and the reasons why some members of staff had not completed or renewed their DBS. In response, it was noted that the figures were not of concern to the department, as it was aware of the employment status of these individuals, and that the figures were regularly reported to the Safeguarding Strategic Panel and the Safeguarding Operational Group. Individuals without DBS were identified as either new workers, on long-term sickness absence or on maternity leave.

The Women in Leadership project was questioned, asking about the impact of the work and information about the projects specifically to raise awareness among men. In response, it was noted that the response from men had been mixed due to the branding of the project, but that sessions had been held within the Managers' Network to ensure that all managers, whether male or female, received the same message.

The extent to which job-sharing schemes had been considered to encourage and facilitate women to progress to higher positions within the Council, was questioned. In response, it was emphasised that there were several successful examples of women progressing to senior positions, and that more work was being done to expand opportunities through flexibility and suitable contracts. It was recognised that there was room for further improvement.

More information was sought on the health and safety audits that would be carried out through the Corporate Forum and Departmental Forums. In response, it was noted that the work was part of a wider strategic plan. It was noted that carrying out the health and safety audits within the Departmental Forums provided an opportunity for the voice of staff to be heard regarding health, safety and well-being concerns, and that there was cross-departmental representation on the policy approval panel.

The low percentage of 54% of managers who had completed site management training was questioned, and clarification was sought for this. In response, it was noted that not all managers were site managers. It was explained that the course in question was a refresher course, and that most site managers had already completed the original course. It was emphasised that basic health and safety arrangements were in place at all sites, with health and safety officers offering direct support to new teachers or managers.

The performance of 72% of data protection requests completed within the timeframe, was questioned. In response, it was noted that:

- The complexity of the requests affected performance.
- The percentage for Freedom of Information requests had increased to 95%.
- Work continued to improve arrangements and training on responding to requests.
- The use of technology could help, but that the number of systems within the Council meant that such work took a significant amount of time to complete.

Information was requested about the project to develop a new employment system for the Council. In response, it was noted that the project was currently in the procurement phase, with the tendering process underway and an assessment planned within the next month, with the aim of having the system up and running by early December 2026.

Legal Services

A Legal Services report was presented by the Cabinet Member for Corporate and Legal Services and the Welsh Language, stating that the service was made up of four teams, namely legal, propriety, elections and coroner support. It was noted that 91% of responses to the customer satisfaction survey had indicated "very satisfied", with 9% "satisfied", and that the number of responses had increased significantly. It was noted that the service had now progressed from the previous recruitment challenges and had benefited from the Gwynedd Yfory schemes and apprenticeships.

It was noted that the department had now incorporated a new case management system and had looked at the possibility of adopting features of the Lexcel qualification that would benefit the department. It was noted that the department continued to support and advise on the Council's functions in terms of ensuring constitutional, legal and administrative propriety. It was elaborated that this work was ongoing, but in particular a series of "Good Decisions" seminars were planned to be held from October onwards. It was emphasised that the department would work with the Standards Committee, Political Group Leaders and Members, along with relevant officers, to maintain and support high standards of conduct among councillors. Councillors were reminded to ensure they had completed the training on the Code of Conduct.

It was stressed that the main challenge at the moment was the regional work and the provision of legal assistance to the North Wales Corporate Joint Committee (CJC). It was noted that the current period was challenging as several elements of the CJC's work became operational during the current quarter. Reference was also made to the arrangements of the new Senedd elections for 2026, noting the changes to the voting system and the new "Gwynedd Maldwyn" constituency.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:

It was questioned where the department was at in terms of training on the Code of Conduct for town and community councils. In response, it was noted that two or three sessions had been held for clerks and chairs at the beginning of the year, but that staffing priorities had led to a temporary delay in provision. It was emphasised that on-line training was available.

It was questioned whether the department was confident that all the changes related to the upcoming elections could be handled. It was further questioned whether the department had the capacity to fulfil the requirements. In response, it was noted that there was a clear geographical challenge, but that planning work had already commenced in conjunction with Powys, Wrexham, Denbighshire and Conwy councils, with clear working arrangements in place between the authorities to ensure effective organisation.

A question was asked about the department's experience with the automatic registration pilot by the Welsh Government. In response, it was explained that the Council had contributed to the pilot, and that a report from Welsh Government on the system was expected to inform the next steps.

RESOLVED

- 1. To accept the report and note the observations.**
- 2. To welcome the steps taken to address stress, to promote the role of women in leadership, and to ensure that employees have a voice in relation to health and safety arrangements within the Departmental Forums.**

9. EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD PROGRAMME 2025/26

It was noted that all Council members, co-opted members, Cabinet Members, Heads of Department and the public had been given the opportunity to suggest potential items for scrutiny during 2025/26. At the Committee's informal meeting on 17 July 2025, the potential items for scrutiny during 2025/26 were considered.

It was clarified that information about the possible items was provided in advance to committee members. An attempt had been made to prioritise a maximum of three items per meeting to ensure that matters received due

attention and that scrutiny could add value. It was noted that this had not been possible this year with four items programmed for each meeting. It was noted that the members considered that the prioritised items needed to be scrutinised during the year. The expectation for all members to ensure their attendance for the morning and afternoon session was underlined.

'Attendance and pupil behaviour in Gwynedd schools' and 'School Improvement Service' had been identified as items to be programmed in 2026/27. It was noted that the work of the Scrutiny Investigation into Safeguarding Arrangements in Schools was ongoing. It was explained that the final draft report of the investigation was intended to be submitted to the Committee meeting on 11 December 2025.

To ensure that the voice of pupils received due attention as part of the investigation, as emphasised by members of the investigation together with the Crime Response Plan Programme Board, it was noted that it was inevitable that the timetable for submitting a draft final report to the Committee would have to slip. As a result, the relevant departments had been contacted regarding the possibility of reprogramming an item from the February meeting to the December meeting. Confirmation had been received from the Education Department that the 'Education Strategy' item could be moved to the meeting on 11 December 2025.

Members were reminded that the implementation of the Language Charter had been a matter raised during the discussion under the 'Immersion Education System' item as a potential area for scrutiny.

RESOLVED

- 1. To adopt the work programme for 2025/26.**
- 2. To consider prioritising scrutiny of the implementation of the Language Charter when timely.**

The meeting commenced at 10:30am and concluded at 3:10pm

Chair