Appendix 3 - The Scrutiny Committee's Questions

1) Is it realistic to fulfil the Strategy's vision?

The Gwynedd Schools Strategy 2026-2036 is ambitious, but it is based on robust policies. Its objective is to create a fair, inclusive and sustainable education system, which helps every learner to succeed. The vision is realistic as it builds on national policies such as the Curriculum for Wales, Cymraeg 2050 and the ALN Act.

The Strategy notes clear priorities, including:

- Ensuring welfare, safety and an inclusive and eco-friendly learning environment.
- Investing in the buildings and infrastructure of schools;
- Strengthening leadership and responding to recruitment challenges;
- Developing a skilled, bilingual workforce;
- Supporting small rural schools and promoting financial fairness;

Although the plan is robust, there are key challenges:

- Fewer pupils, especially in the primary sector, which in turn leads to fewer pupils in the secondary sector also.
- Ongoing financial pressure;
- Difficulties with staff recruitment and retention, particularly in rural areas and in Welsh medium areas;
- National policy changes which can increase the burden on schools and the Authority.

The Strategy acknowledges these barriers and offers steps to mitigate them. Therefore, the vision is realistic for 2026-2036, provided there is commitment, digital resources and close collaboration between the Authority, schools and communities.

2) Are the priorities of the Education Department as noted in the Strategy both suitable and timely?

The priorities of the Education Department in the Schools Strategy 2026-2036 clearly reflect the county's existing needs and challenges. They correspond with key national policies such as the Curriculum for Wales, Cymraeg 2050, ALN Act and Well-being Act, ensuring robust strategic direction.

The Strategy's main priorities are:

1. **Raising standards and improving learning experiences** - in line with the Curriculum for Wales, with an emphasis on creativity and equal access.
2. **Promoting Welfare** - essential as a result of the pandemic and the increase in mental health concerns.
3. **Strengthening the ALN provision** - timely when implementing the ALN Act in full.
4. **Developing the workforce and leadership** - important due to the lack of teachers and headteachers.
5. **Investing in modern and sustainable buildings** - which supports digital learning and responds to carbon targets.
6. **Strengthening the Welsh language** - central to the Council's vision and key to reach the aims of Cymraeg 2050.
7. **Reviewing the schools' network** - necessary due to the reduction in pupil numbers and financial pressures.

The priorities reflect the reality of the education sector in the county and focus on fields which make the biggest difference to the quality of the provision and learner welfare. They are suitable and timely, provided that the Department receives the resources and support required for their successful implementation.

3) To what extent do the priorities of the Strategy align with the direction and other corporate priorities of the Council, as well as national priorities?

The Gwynedd Schools Strategy 2026-2036 has been drawn up to align closely with the Council's corporate direction. It reiterates the main policy documents, such as the Council Plan 2023-2028, WESP, the Climate Plan and the Medium-Term Financial Plan.

Main strategic alignment fields:

1. **Corporate priority on welfare and opportunities for children and young people**
   The Strategy shares the aim of ensuring fairness, inclusion and support for all learners to reach their potential.

2. **Supporting the Welsh Language**
   There is a clear commitment to expand Welsh-medium education and reinforce Cymraeg 2050, in line with the WESP.

3. **Contributing to the Council's climate targets**
   By means of eco-friendly buildings, energy efficiency and active travel policies, the Strategy supports the aim of "Net zero carbon status by 2030".

4. **Reconciling with the Medium-Term Financial Plan**
   The Strategy considers the financial pressures and promotes a sustainable method of resource management, including supporting small schools by means of fair funding methods.

5. **Supporting the aims of the Well-being Act**
   The Strategy reflects the seven well-being goals, including strong communities, lively culture and environmental sustainability.

6. **Working jointly across departments**
   The emphasis on partnership with social services, health, children's services and the community, reflects the Council's integrated approach.

In brief, the Schools Strategy is fully in line with the corporate priorities of Cyngor Gwynedd. It provides a practical framework to implement the Council's goals in terms of fairness, sustainability, strengthening communities and promoting the Welsh language over the coming decade.

4) Are additional resources required to realise the aspirations of the Strategy?

Although the Schools Strategy is based on efficient use of existing resources, it is obvious that additional investment will be required to realise this ambition in full. Some of the steps described go beyond the core statutory work of the Education Department, therefore, success will depend on ongoing financial and operational support from the Council and the Welsh Government.

Fundamentally, although the Strategy is an effort to make more efficient use of existing resources, additional investment is needed in the form of capital funding, **people** and **time** to realise the vision. This is especially true in the fields of school buildings, workforce development, extending the Welsh and digital provision, and ensuring equal access in rural areas.

As a result, we will be developing **a clear financial plan** alongside the Strategy, to ensure that resources are in line with the priorities and that Members understand the medium-term implications.

5) What input have key stakeholders had into the Strategy's vision and priorities?

The Strategy has been developed through a process of engaging with the main education stakeholders. This has enabled us to ensure that the vision and priorities correctly reflect the actual needs and expectations of learners, families, professionals and members of the community.

1. Input from schools

Meetings were held with school headteachers across the county to gather views on the future of the schools network, the recruitment challenges and the need for leadership support. Additional sessions to engage with the Headteachers on the draft version of the Strategy have been arranged for December 2025.

2. Contribution from pupils

Discussions were held with young people at a youth forum to note their aspirations and priorities in terms of welfare, skills and learning experiences. An additional session to discuss the draft Strategy has been arranged with the Young People County Forum in December 2025.

3. Ongoing method of engagement

The Strategy is described as a live document, with the intention of carrying out regular reviews and ongoing feedback mechanisms to ensure that the voices of stakeholders continue to steer the implementation process.

It can be confirmed that the input of key stakeholders has been central to the drawing up of the Strategy and its priorities. Consequently, the Strategy is based on a firm understanding of the actual needs of Gwynedd learners, and reflects the partnership and collaboration principles, which are a key feature of the Council's corporate policy.

6) How is it intended to respond to the demographic challenges?

The Strategy acknowledges that demographic changes are a big challenge to schools' sustainability over the coming decade. The number of primary children is reducing substantially, with empty places increasing and a direct impact on funding, the workforce and on the quality of the provision.

Based on the evidence:

- The number of primary learners has reduced by around 14% since 2016.
- Around 24% of school places are empty in the county, which creates huge financial and planning pressures.

In response, the Strategy notes clear steps:

1. Plan a sustainable schools network

- Review and, if needed, restructure or merge schools where numbers are low.
- Develop collaboration models to maintain efficient local provisions.

2. Use data to draw-up the provision

- Integrate population projections and housing developments to plan school capacity.
- Monitor the choices of parents to understand pupil movement patterns.

3. Support rural schools

- Continue with the Protection Scheme for small schools.
- Share resources and expertise between schools, including digital methods.
- Ensure that decisions safeguard the Welsh language and the local community.

4. Invest in modern and flexible schools

- Focus on eco-friendly and flexible buildings through the Sustainable Learning Communities Programme.
- Design schools that adapt to population changes.

5. Consider transport and accessibility

- Review transport policies to ensure fair access.
- Support more efficient and eco-friendly transport methods.

6. Workforce planning

- Manage staffing changes sensitively, with opportunities to re-train where needed.
- Develop a leadership system which reflects the schools network in the future.

In brief, the Strategy offers a proactive approach, which uses data and works closely with communities to create a more sustainable and high-quality schools system. Success will depend on careful planning, strong partnerships, and ongoing financial support from the Council and the Welsh Government.

7) What factors are considered when making decisions to go into a period of consultation on a school closure?

The 2026-2036 Strategy emphasises that closing a school is a serious decision, and the last resort after all other options have been considered. The process is evidence-based, and the welfare of the learners and the sustainability of the education system are central.

When determining whether a consultation on a school closure should be commenced, several factors are considered:

1. Demography

- Pupil numbers and trends in the catchment area.
- The school's capacity and level of empty places.

2. Quality of education

- Estyn Reports, performance and learner progress.
- The ability to offer a broad curriculum and teacher expertise.
- Strength of the leadership and options to improve.

3. Welfare of learners

- Impact on travel, activities and leisure time.
- Social and emotional impact on pupils.
- That alternative arrangements offer an experience of an equivalent or better quality.

4. Financial sustainability

- Cost per pupil.
- The school's ability to maintain safe staffing within the budget.
- Impact on other budgets, including the Protection Scheme.

5. Condition of the building

- Suitability for the Curriculum for Wales and modern teaching methods.
- Maintenance and energy costs and sustainability requirements.
- Impact if the school is a community centre.

6. Impact on the Welsh language

- The impact on Welsh-speaking communities and on the use of Welsh.
- Ensure that new arrangements sustain or strengthen Welsh-medium education.
- Compliance with WESP and the aims of Cymraeg 2050.

7. Transport and accessibility

- Travelling distance and time to other schools.
- Safety of paths and active travel.
- Environmental impact and transport costs.

8. Engaging with the community

- The views of parents, governors and the local community.
- Consider collaboration solutions before moving to close.
- Comply with the requirements of the Schools Organisation Code (Wales).

In brief, consultations on a school closure will only be commenced after full evidence has been analysed and consideration has been given to the impact on education, communities, finance and the Welsh language. The aim of the process is to ensure fair, transparent and sustainable decisions to support all learners in Gwynedd.

8) What is the role of the Schools Support Service in realising the Strategy?

The Gwynedd Schools Support Service plays a central and extended role when implementing and reiterating the Strategy, following the transfer of GwE duties to the Local Authority. This new arrangement ensures a united, local and consistent approach to supporting schools, placing full responsibility for educational improvement within the local education structure.

However, the Support Officers will not lead on the modernisation work, this will be under the care of the Head of Education Department and the Modernisation Team.

1. Ensure education standards and improve ongoing improvement

The Schools Support Officers make direct engagement with schools to monitor teaching standards, learner progress and quality of leadership.

Through regular visits, analysing data and self-evaluation methods, they work alongside headteachers to create practical improvement plans and measure the impact per school.

This local arrangement enables a swifter and more contextual response to the individual needs of schools, strengthening accountability and a constructive professional relationship.

2. Develop professional leadership and practice

The Service leads on ongoing professional development for headteachers and teachers, including mentoring programmes, developing middle leadership and succession.

This is in accordance with the Strategy's priorities to foster resilient, confident and ambitious leaders who can lead schools through periods of change.

Through a local approach, the support is more tailored to the needs of every cluster and individual school.

3. Support the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales

The Schools Support Officers provide practical direction, models and guidance for schools when developing their local curriculum, assessing learners and planning innovative learning experiences.

The Service facilitates collaboration between schools to share good practice and ensure that standards of teaching are consistent across the county.

This ensures that the national education vision is realised locally, reflecting the identity and culture of Gwynedd.

4. Promote the Welsh language and bilingualism

The Officers support schools to improve the workforce's linguistic skills and foster a lively Welsh ethos which corresponds with the ambition of Cymraeg 2050.

By monitoring the linguistic progress of pupils and provide guidance on Welsh education models, the Service ensures consistency and progress across the county.

5. Support the welfare of learners and staff

The Service works closely with the Social Services, the Learner Welfare Service, and Health to ensure an integrated approach to supporting physical and emotional welfare.

The Schools Support Officers provide training, guidance and practical support to schools on safeguarding, positive behaviour and mental health.

This emphasis on welfare complements one of the cross-sectional themes of the Schools Strategy.

6. Strategic planning and local accountability

The Schools Support Service is an integral part of the process of collecting, analysing and reporting on performance data, supporting the Education Department to make evidence-based strategic decisions.

This work includes contributing to reviews of the schools network, workforce planning and local improvement plans.

The new local model ensures clear accountability between schools, officers and the Authority, with shorter lines of communication and more personal support.

With GwE duties now fully integrated to the Council's structure, the Schools Support Service operates as the main mechanism to implement the Schools Strategy. Its role is to transform the strategic vision into a practical impact, ensuring;

- that every school is suitably supported;
- that the standards of education and welfare rise continuously; and
- that the Gwynedd education system is sustainable, bilingual and of a high standard for the future.

9) How will progress be monitored?

The progress with the implementation of the Gwynedd Schools Strategy 2026 - 2036 will be systematically monitored through a combination of formal and partnership processes:

- Annual Action Plans - every strategic priority will be converted into annual targets with clear performance measures, annually reviewed by the Education Department.
- Formal Monitoring Reports - regular progress reports are submitted to the Education Scrutiny Committee, the Cabinet and relevant Elected Members.
- Self-evaluation and Impact Assessment - schools and Schools Support Officers will gather evidence of the impact on standards, welfare and the use of Welsh, steering ongoing improvements.
- Use of Data and Estyn Reports - monitor key indicators such as attainment, attendance and linguistic progress, as well as the findings of Estyn inspections.
- Mid-term Review (2028-2030) - a formal review of the Strategy will be carried out to measure progress against the mid-term targets and to re-emphasise priorities, if required.

The monitoring process will ensure accountability, transparency, and ongoing improvement, giving Members the confidence that the Strategy will be implemented effectively and achieve definitive outcomes for Gwynedd learners.

10) How will the Strategy address matters such as attendance, behaviour and PISA test results?

The Strategy focuses on the welfare of learners, standards and effective leadership. Although it does not specifically refer to PISA, the steps proposed support the same goal of improving attainment.

1. Attendance

- Emphasis on ensuring that every child participates in full in the learning.
- Collaboration between schools, welfare services and families to improve attendance.
- Create attractive learning environments to increase motivation.

2. Behaviour and welfare

- Welfare at the heart of the educational provision.
- Inclusive and restorative method of managing behaviour, which understands the needs of learners.
- Training and sharing good practice to foster positive behaviour.

3. Standards and attainment (including PISA more broadly)

- Raising standards across the county, focusing on progress.
- Emphasis on the quality of teaching, leadership and collaboration between schools.
- Develop a Curriculum for Wales of a high-quality to improve literacy, numeracy and critical thinking.

By placing welfare, attendance, positive behaviour and teaching standards at the root of the work, the Strategy sets firm foundations to improve learner outcomes. Although it does not refer to PISA, it is completely consistent with the principles which form the basis to improving international standards.

11) Does the Strategy address the Language Charter and Secondary Sector Language Strategy and their role as a part of the Strategy?

Yes. The Strategy gives clear and robust attention to the role of the Language Charter and the Secondary Sector Language Strategy as key elements in the work of realising their linguistic and cultural vision.

The Strategy emphasises that promoting and strengthening the Welsh language is at the root of all aspects of education in the county, acknowledging that the education system is the main mechanism to realise the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP 2022-2032) and ambition of Cymraeg 2050.

Specifically:

- The Language Charter (primary sector) is identified as a practical framework to foster positive attitudes towards the Welsh language amongst children, families and school communities, promoting natural use of the language beyond the classroom.

- The Secondary Sector Language Strategy operates alongside the Schools Strategy to continue with the linguistic momentum to the secondary period, supporting schools to plan social and academic opportunities to use Welsh in real-life contexts.

The Strategy gives specific, firm and practical attention to the Language Charter and the Secondary Sector Language Strategy as an integral part of its commitment to foster confident bilingual learners and strengthen the Welsh language as the main living language of education and community in Gwynedd.

12) What consideration is given to alternative uses for closed schools?

The Strategy acknowledges that every school building is a valuable community asset, and it emphasises the need to ensure the best possible use of the educational assets to support sustainable provision for the future.

When a school closes, the Strategy notes clearly that the Authority considers options to reuse the building or site, reflecting educational, community and environmental local needs. This is a part of the commitment to plan a sustainable schools network and manage resources effectively.

In line with the Strategy:

- Every case of changing or closing a school is considered in line with a detailed assessment process, including considering the impact on the community, on the Welsh language, and on the local education provision.

- The Strategy emphasises that the Authority will investigate opportunities to use school buildings for other educational or community purposes, before making any final decision.

- The aim is to ensure that any resource that already exists continues to be beneficial for learners and communities, instead of losing them completely from the educational system or community.

- Reference is also made to the need for long-term planning for school infrastructure, in order to avoid an excess of unnecessary capacity and ensure effective use of buildings and sites.

The Strategy does not note specific details on creating alternative education hubs, but it provides a clear principle: when a school closes, the Authority considers alternative educational or community use as part of the commitment to ensure a sustainable, efficient schools system, which is beneficial to the local community.

13) What support is available for governors in the Strategy?

The Strategy acknowledges that school governors play a key part when realising the vision for high-quality and sustainable education. The document emphasises the need to ensure ongoing support and professional development for governors as part of the educational leadership system.

In line with the Strategy:

- The work of strengthening school leadership, including developing and engaging with governors as operational partners in the process of raising standards.

- The Strategy outlines the proposal to provide training and ongoing support to governors, ensuring that they are confident when carrying out their strategic duties and financial accountability.

- There is a reference to the importance of open communication between governors, headteachers and the Authority, as part of the work of strengthening leadership and plan for school improvement.

- The Strategy emphasises that support for governors is a part of the broader method of fostering strong leadership at all levels, including headteachers, senior teams and governing bodies.

14) What will be the impact of financial cuts on schools in the future, particularly in the secondary sector, with the reduction in pupil numbers?

The Strategy clearly acknowledges that there is substantial financial pressure on the education system, and that this is likely to continue over the years to come. This financial challenge is acknowledged as one of the main risks to the sustainability of the schools network, particularly as the pupil numbers reduce.

According to the Strategy:

- Pupil numbers are expected to reduce by around 14% by 2026, reducing school income as a result of a funding formula that is based on pupil numbers.

- The secondary sector is facing the greatest impact in terms of maintaining a broad curriculum and offering a full range of subjects as numbers reduce.

- The Strategy notes that the schools network will need to be reviewed to ensure that every school continues to be financially viable and is able to provide a quality education.

- There is commitment to ensure financial fairness, by reviewing the Protection Scheme for small schools and ensure that resources are being used efficiently across the county.

- The Strategy emphasises the need to invest wisely in infrastructure and human resources, focusing on long-term sustainability rather than short-term measures.

The Strategy acknowledges that there will be financial cuts, and the demographic reduction will have a substantial impact on schools. The Strategy's response is to plan pro-actively, ensure efficient use of resources, and maintain a sustainable education provision that is able to offer a quality curriculum for every learner, despite the financial pressure.

15) What is the provision that will be offered to children that are unable to attend school for various reasons?

The Schools Strategy emphasises the commitment to ensure that every child and young person obtains a suitable education, regardless of their circumstances. This includes specific provision for learners who are unable to attend mainstream schools for medical, emotional, social or other reasons.

According to the Strategy:

- The Authority commits to providing a suitable provision for learners who are unable to attend school, in order to ensure that they continue to gain access to a quality education and make progress.

- There is an alternative education provision and individual support for children who require a different method of learning, according to their specific needs.

- This includes support through the Learner Welfare, Emotional Health and ALN Services, ensuring a multi-agency and inclusive method.

- The Strategy also acknowledges the importance of careful transition back to school where possible, with individual support plans to facilitate the return of pupils to mainstream education.

- In accordance with the principle of an inclusive and fair education, the Authority ensures that every learner has equal opportunities to reach their potential, regardless of their situation.

The Strategy provides for a flexible, individual and inclusive provision for children who are unable to attend school. The focus is placed on ensuring that every learner continues to receive a quality education and multi-agency support, reflecting the Council's commitment to welfare and educational equality for all.