
EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
18/06/26

Attendance:

Councillors: Councillor Geraint Wyn Parry (Vice-chair)

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

Co-opted Members: Sharon Roberts (Arfon Parents/Governors' Representative), Colette Owen (Catholic Church), Gwilym Jones (NASUWT) and Elise Poulter (NEU).

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

Present for item 7 – Councillor Llio Elenid Owen (Cabinet Member for Corporate and Legal Services and the Welsh Language) and Iwan Evans (Monitoring Officer).

Present for item 8 – Councillor Dewi Jones (Cabinet Member for Education), Gwern ap Rhisiart (Head of Education) and Robert John Jones (Education Transport Manager).

Present for item 9 – Councillor Dewi Jones (Cabinet Member for Education), Gwern ap Rhisiart (Head of Education), Robert John Jones (Education Transport Manager), Alison Halliday (Assistant Head of School Support) and Ffion Edwards Ellis (Assistant Head of Additional Learning Needs and Inclusion).

Present for item 10 – Councillor Medwyn Hughes (Cabinet Member for Economy and Community), Sioned Williams (Head of Economy and Community); Roland Evans (Assistant Head of Culture) and Llŷr Jones (Assistant Head of Economy and Community).

Present for item 11 – Councillor Llio Elenid Owen (Cabinet Member for Corporate and Legal Services and the Welsh Language), Ian Jones (Head of Corporate Services) and Iwan Evans (Head of Legal Service).

1. ELECTION OF CHAIR

Councillor Rhys Tudur was elected as Chair for 2026/27.

2. ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIR

Councillor Geraint Parry was elected as Vice-chair for 2026/27.

3. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Sian Williams, Elin Walker Jones, Dewi Owen, Rhys Tudur and Gweno Glyn Williams (Dwyfor Parents/Governors' Representative).

4. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

Councillor Gwynfor Owen declared a personal interest in Item 8 on the agenda as he was a Governor at Ysgol Hafod Lon . The member did not consider it to be a prejudicial interest and did not leave the meeting during the discussion.

Sharon Roberts (Arfon Parents/Governors' Representative) declared a personal interest in Item 10 on the agenda because of her position with the Welsh Government. The member was of the opinion that it was a prejudicial interest, and she withdrew from the meeting during the discussion on the item.

5. URGENT ITEMS

None to note.

6. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meetings of this committee held on 19 January 2026 and 12 February 2026, as a true record.

7. MEMBERS' WHISTLEBLOWING POLICY

The Cabinet Member for Corporate and Legal Services and the Welsh Language submitted the report, reminding Members that the Cabinet had adopted an amended Whistleblowing Policy for staff in January. It was noted that adopting the policy had been a high priority and an important step forward in strengthening the Council's procedures and arrangements in response to the Our Bravery Brought Justice report. It was explained that there had been a call at the same time for a policy that would provide a way for elected members and co-opted members to raise concerns about any misconduct.

It was noted that there was a need to prepare a policy that was appropriate for Cyngor Gwynedd elected members, as the staff whistleblowing procedure was based on employment legislation and legal protection under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998. It was explained that the policy offered guidance to members on how to raise concerns in a safe and clear space, and that the procedure co-existed with other arrangements such as the Code of Conduct and the Safeguarding Policy. It was emphasised that this strengthened the Council's arrangements to respond to any impropriety for the benefit of the county's residents.

It was reported that discussions had been held with the Member Enquiries Task Group when preparing the policy, and that engagement had also taken place with all the members. It was noted that they had consulted with Protect, a charity with expertise in the field of whistleblowing, and that the Standards Committee had considered the policy earlier in the month and had expressed support for it. It was considered that the next step, after receiving the Committee's observations, would be to submit the policy to the Full Council in July with the intention of adding it to the Council's Constitution.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:-

The policy was welcomed, noting that it was a positive step forward. It was suggested that including a general definition of what whistleblowing meant made the policy easier to read and gave a clearer context. In response, it was explained that whistleblowing was an employment concept which derived from employment law, and that it was

essentially a framework for raising concerns about serious matters. It was noted that the policy offered two things to elected members, namely a place to raise matters that they considered to be serious and an element of confidentiality in doing so. It was emphasised that the intention was to create a space that was as safe as possible to raise serious concerns.

It was acknowledged that the policy was an important step forward because this type of specific protection had not been available to councillors previously. The fact that the policy acknowledged concerns about significant misconduct or criminal or illegal behaviour, that it offered confidentiality when raising those concerns and that it stated that any type of poor treatment a member may face as a result of making a disclosure should be reported, was welcomed. However, many changes that would strengthen the policy were suggested.

Concern was expressed that the policy largely relied on internal processes. It was suggested that a member raising concerns about senior officers, organisational culture or governance failures might feel that there was not a truly independent route available. It was suggested that an alternative route should be available under such circumstances, which would allow a councillor to directly contact external bodies such as the Police, Audit Wales or any other relevant regulator. It was acknowledged that such a route would not likely be used in the majority of cases, but it was emphasised that it should be available.

Attention was drawn to paragraph 3.3 of the policy, which stated that concerns about the safety or well-being of children or adults should be addressed in accordance with the national safeguarding policy. It was acknowledged that this was appropriate in relation to individual cases, but it was suggested that the wording could give the impression that the policy was irrelevant should a member want to raise concern about a systemic failure in safeguarding arrangements. It was emphasised that individual safeguarding cases should not be addressed under the policy, but it was suggested that the wording should be changed to make it clear that concerns about systemic failures in safeguarding procedures could be raised through this route. It was suggested that clear deadlines should be set for dealing with matters. In response to the suggestions, the following was noted:-

- A member, in relation to any concern, had a right to contact an external agency. It was explained that the Code of Conduct provided an open route to refer matters to the Council, the Police or other relevant bodies.
- It was confirmed that a sentence could be added to clearly highlight that this procedure was not the only one available.
- Paragraph 3.3 referred to referrals regarding an individual child or adult, which should be addressed under the appropriate safeguarding procedure. It was noted that it would be inappropriate for individual safeguarding cases to be submitted to the Monitoring Officer under the whistleblowing policy. It was noted, however, that the policy could be an appropriate way to raise serious concerns about systemic failures in safeguarding arrangements. It was confirmed that wording could be added to highlight this difference between individual cases and systemic failures.
- The protection given to staff who were whistleblowing was statutory. It was explained that the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 adapted the employment legislation and provided protection such as the ability to claim compensation, an employment tribunal should an individual be persecuted, as well as protection from unfair dismissal.

- The relationship between elected or co-opted members and the Council was different to an employment relationship. Should a member be treated inappropriately by a member of staff as a result of a whistleblowing matter, this could be a disciplinary matter, and it would be treated as one. It was noted that the policy already referred to that.
- Should the inappropriate behaviour come from another member rather than a member of staff, that would more than likely be a matter under the Code of Conduct. It was emphasised that the policy should not offer a level of protection that could not actually be provided.
- The consequences of inappropriate behaviour from another member could be political in their nature, and the ability of the authority, as a corporation, to deal with such situations could be limited. However, it was noted that the policy at least highlighted a system to raise the matter.
- That setting deadlines for investigations was complex, because the subsequent actions would depend on the nature of the concern. Should the matter be criminal or involve the Police or the Health and Safety Executive, the investigation schedule would be beyond the Council's control. The Council could set a timetable to acknowledge the concern and provide an initial response, as well as commit to keep in touch with the member. However, it was noted that the timetable for the subsequent steps varied according to the nature of the matter.

The view was expressed that increasing the number of documents and policies did not make things clearer. It was noted that paragraph 6.2 referred to referring matters to the Police or an external authority when that would be appropriate, and the decision to do so was in the hands of the Monitoring Officer after receiving a request from a member under the policy. It was questioned whether there was a fundamental paradox in the Monitoring Officer's role. It was noted, on one hand, that the Monitoring Officer was responsible for monitoring the propriety of members, staff and the authority itself and, on the other hand, acted as the main legal officer responsible for the Council's legal protection. It was suggested that it might be more appropriate for the Monitoring Officer to come from another authority, whilst the main legal officer stayed within their own authority.

In response, it was explained that this matter had been the subject of an ongoing discussion amongst officers who had fulfilled the same role, as the two functions were combined in many authorities. It was noted, based on experience, that problems rarely came up, because propriety was relevant to the two roles. It was acknowledged that a theoretical paradox could arise should the Monitoring Officer's role be more operational in legal matters, but it was noted that this had not been a problem in practice. It was acknowledged that the question had come up by others over the years, but it was explained that this was the procedure used in the majority of councils in Wales and other public bodies with Monitoring Officers.

It was noted that paragraph 6.2 placed significant paradoxical pressure on the Monitoring Officer. Attention was drawn to paragraph 6.3, that referred to reporting back when appropriate or suitable. This wording was questioned in the context of transparency in local government and public authorities in general. It was noted that there was a feeling amongst the public that authorities reported on everything and claimed transparency, except for the matters that the public wished to know about. Concern was expressed that increasing the number of documents could give the impression that something was being done, but it could also cause more uncertainty and give the impression of a desire to be transparent, instead of ensuring true transparency.

In response, it was emphasised that the policy had been presented sincerely to create a procedure for raising concerns. It was noted that a logical system had been included, which offered a way to raise concerns and noted how they should be dealt with in a range of circumstances. It was confirmed that the policy would be expected to be implemented sincerely and appropriately. However, it was acknowledged that there were wider questions regarding how the Council dealt with matters beyond the scope of this type of policy. It was emphasised that the aim of the policy was to create a clear path for members to raise concerns that they considered to be serious, and to specify how those concerns should be dealt with. It was noted that the policy filled a gap in terms of how such concerns were raised and treated. It was explained that the policy also made it clear that other paths were available, and that was the most that such a policy could achieve.

It was added that the policy already stated, should there be a conflict of interest or any suspicion about the propriety of the Monitoring Officer, the Chief Executive would act as the alternative route.

It was noted that it was sad that such a policy was required, but it was acknowledged that it was needed under the current circumstances. The policy was described as logical and a matter of common sense. It was noted that the policy would not necessarily change the way that members behaved or were treated, but many of the positive elements in it were welcomed. It was suggested that the only people who could oppose such a policy were the ones who engaged in misconduct as they would not want other people to raise concerns about them.

It was emphasised that confidentiality was an extremely important element of the policy. It was noted that this could be a weakness within the Code of Conduct arrangements, because the same level of confidentiality did not apply when submitting a complaint to the Ombudsman, where it would be a requirement for the complainant to provide their name. The opinion was expressed that the policy gave better protection to members than the Code of Conduct in some circumstances. The policy in its entirety was welcomed.

It was noted that the policy was necessary and it would open the door for members to follow different ways to raise concerns. It was acknowledged that many comments had been made during the discussion, and minor amendments could be made to the policy in response to them.

RESOLVED that the Committee declares support for the policy, asking the Monitoring Officer to make changes in accordance with his response to members' comments.

8. EDUCATION TRANSPORT POLICY

The Cabinet Member for Education submitted a draft of the new Education Transport Policy, and the Committee was asked to submit observations on it. It was noted that the main changes had been clearly highlighted in the report, including the Empty Seats Scheme, faith schools transport, dual residency arrangements and the offer to post-16 learners.

It was explained, although this was a Cyngor Gwynedd policy, that it must operate within the Education Transport Measure and the associated statutory guidance set by the Welsh Government. It was noted that the Council did not have freedom to act as they wished in every case, because there were statutory requirements that they had to

comply with. The opinion was expressed that the Welsh Government should review the Measure and the associated guidance because some elements of them did not make sense.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:-

The matter of the Empty Seats Scheme was raised, explaining that the scheme allowed children who were not eligible for free school transport to use empty seats on school transport vehicles for a fairly low cost. It was noted that the scheme had been paused since October 2025 and there was no provision for it in the draft policy. It was asked whether this meant that the scheme would permanently end and would not be re-established. In response, it was confirmed that there was no provision for an Empty Seats Scheme in the draft policy and such a policy would not be implemented from September onwards.

Significant concern was expressed regarding the decision, referring to a previous confirmation that there was no legislation preventing an authority from implementing an Empty Seats Scheme, and the fact that other authorities continued to implement such schemes. It was noted that the main reason for revoking the scheme was to reduce the financial and operational risk to the Council. It was acknowledged that the risk must be managed in a responsible way, but it was questioned whether the risk had been balanced appropriately against other considerations.

Reference was made to the Ffordd Gwynedd principles and the expectation to find practical ways of meeting the needs of Gwynedd residents. It was noted that revoking the scheme could lead to more cars travelling to schools, and it was questioned whether the environmental impact had been considered in the context of the climate emergency declared by the Council. It was questioned whether the decision had been considered in the context of the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015, fairness for children in rural areas and the impact on children who faced an economic disadvantage. It was suggested that the Council's financial and operational risk had received more emphasis than all these other considerations, and it was asked whether the department's priorities were correct. It was asked whether an assessment had been conducted of the likely impacts of revoking the scheme. In response, it was noted:-

- It was acknowledged that the offer could appear unreasonable at first glance, because providing an empty seat for a specific period was not a problem in itself. It was explained that the problem arose due to the statutory duty of the department to provide transport to eligible pupils.
- It was explained that a seat could be empty at the start of a term and offered to a child who was not eligible for free transport. Should a new family move to the area later and need the seat for an eligible child, it would not be possible to take the seat from the discretionary user immediately.
- It was explained that the discretionary user would have to be consulted during the autumn before revoking the seat the following September. Consequently, the Council could be required to provide additional separate transport for the eligible pupil, although an ineligible child was still using the seat on the current vehicle.
- It was emphasised that there was a need to protect the Council's benefits, the department and all Gwynedd residents. It was explained that it was no longer possible to rely on an arrangement where the user of an empty seat accepted that they would have to give up the seat should an eligible pupil move to the area, because this previous arrangement had been challenged and there were already

cases in Gwynedd where the Council provided transport that it would not have had to provide historically as a result of this.

- Over 50 children currently used empty seats, and the plan had been frozen to avoid creating a further reliance on the provision until the department had consulted on the policy.

Reference was made to other authorities that continued to implement schemes where users signed to confirm that they only had a right to use a seat whilst it was available. It was suggested that such an arrangement gave some protection to the authority and that the Council operated in a manner that was too risk-averse. In response, this suggestion was rejected, noting that there had been local examples where the individuals had threatened to take legal steps against the Council regarding the implementation of the discretionary provision. It was explained that many rural authorities had revoked similar schemes many years ago because the implications and the risks were higher in rural areas than urban areas. It was acknowledged that the level of the offer varied across Wales, but it was noted that the department's recent experience was that implementing the discretionary offer left the authority open to a challenge. It was confirmed that legal advice had been received that the provision should not continue to be offered because the long-term risk to the authority was significant.

It was proposed to ask the Cabinet to reconsider the matter as it considered the draft policy. In response, it was explained that the decision was based on the Government's guidance and was not an interpretation created by the department. It was acknowledged that the Empty Seats Scheme made sense and this was why the scheme had originally been introduced, but it was noted that the scheme had been implemented in good faith within a legislative framework and weak guidelines from the Welsh Government that put the Council on uneven ground.

The Cabinet Member for Education reported that a letter had been sent to the Minister for Education asking her to review the Measure and the guidance. It was explained that the requirement for an 11-month notice before changing a transport arrangement did not provide enough flexibility to authorities in relation to a discretionary provision. It was confirmed that the department had listened to the observations submitted and the matter would be fully considered, as well as the potential implications of any change to the existing policy.

Reference was made to the need for an effective working relationship between the Education Department and the Environment Department to implement the policy and commission the transport provision. In response, it was confirmed that the department had worked with the Environment Department to implement the policy and commission the transport.

It was asked whether the relationship between the two departments had worked effectively. In response, it was confirmed that the relationship had been strengthened, with the Transport Manager coordinating the work within the Education Department and managers within the Integrated Transport Service commissioned the transport and managed the day-to-day provision. It was noted that the collaboration and communication between the services strengthened as they went on.

It was asked whether the arrangement had improved since the school bus service between Abererch and Ysgol Glan y Môr was stopped at the beginning of the school term the previous year. In response, it was noted that lessons had been learned regarding the need to communicate and share messages in good time, instead of

during school holidays. It was hoped that there would not be a similar situation again in September.

Reference was made to the relationship between school transport, safeguarding and child protection. The opinion was expressed that there was a tendency to place more emphasis on the legal and organisational safety of the system, the authority and schools instead of child protection. In response, it was explained that the challenge was to draw a balance between basic statutory requirements and the public's expectations around safeguarding.

It was noted that some matters reached the well-being and attendance level rather than reaching the safeguarding threshold, such as children purchasing junk food on the way to school. Reference was made to children using public transport to reach the school and having to stand due to a lack of seats, as well as behaviour problems and the impact on people travelling to work. It was expressed that those considerations had not received enough attention.

Clarity was sought regarding the arrangements for faith schools, asking whether there was significant demand for transport to the faith schools for children outside their catchment area. In response, it was explained that there was generally no significant demand, but there was a specific demand in relation to the Catholic schools in Bangor and Caernarfon. It was noted that a reference to faith schools had been included as it had not appeared in the previous policy, and that a 5-mile transport catchment area had been designated.

Reference was made to the difference between rural and urban areas and the fact that safe footpaths to the school were not available in every area. An example was given of children who lived in villages near the A470, where it was unsafe for them to walk from one village to the other because the road was so busy. The opinion was expressed that there was inconsistency between rural and urban areas due to a lack of funding for safe footpaths. In response, the suggestion that the policy did not give fair consideration to rural areas was rejected. It was explained that footpaths were assessed to determine whether they were safe and suitable for children, and that the process applied in rural and urban areas. It was emphasised, should there not be a safe footpath to the school, transport would be provided. It was emphasised that there was an attempt to be consistent and fair within the policy across the county.

Support was expressed to providing support to families to ensure attendance at school, but it was acknowledged that continuing with the existing Empty Seats Scheme could create an additional significant cost due to the requirement to provide a 1-year notice before revoking a seat. It was suggested that a legal challenge about a shorter notice period had led to a weaker policy for parents in the end and had forced authorities such as Gwynedd to change their arrangements. The policy was accepted as it was in relation to the Empty Seats Scheme, and it was appreciated that the Cabinet Member had written to the Government asking to reconsider the guidelines.

The information about the pilot at Ysgol Hafod Lon was welcomed, but concern was expressed regarding the tendering process for transport for children with additional learning needs. It was noted that the report placed great emphasis on costs without sufficiently explaining the detrimental impact that changing providers, drivers or transport arrangements had on children with additional learning needs.

Concern was expressed regarding the requirement for parents of children with additional learning needs to fill a form to make a request for transport. It was asked

how many forms parents were expected to fill across the Council's services, suggesting, should an Individual Development Plan already state a need for transport, that the same information should not have to be re-submitted. It was asked for a reduction in the number of forms that parents of children with additional learning needs were expected to fill. In response, it was noted:-

- There was a need to ensure that transport providers understood the needs of children and young people with additional learning needs, and the journey to school was an important part of their school day.
- There was a need for drivers, chaperones and providers to be aware of children's needs and do everything possible to reduce any stress caused by the journey.
- Work had already been done with providers and more work was underway. Reference was made to the pilot scheme at Ysgol Hafod Lon, where electric buses and drivers employed by the Council were used by the Council to ensure more consistency and control over the standard of the service.
- Problems could arise when contracts were re-tendered, because a different company could win the contract and lead to changing drivers. It was noted that a close relationship often developed between families, children and drivers, and that such a change could be difficult for the child.
- Lessons had been learned from previous experiences and steps had been considered to mitigate the impact of changes when re-tendering contracts.
- Some children had very profound needs and specifically adapted vehicles, and that parents may choose to transport their child themselves. Therefore, it was noted that the form could be necessary to ensure the most suitable provision.
- Any unnecessary questions on forms would be reviewed and removed. It was confirmed that there was no intention to force parents to repeat the same information, and an effort would be made to reduce the load of paperwork.

Reference was made to the Ysgol Hafod Lon pilot, and it was noted that the priority was to provide a high-quality service to the children. However, it was emphasised that education transport was a significant expenditure field which was overspending, and any opportunity to make savings without reducing the quality of the provision should be taken advantage of. It was reported that the pilot had been successful during its first year and had led to a £55,000 saving. It was noted that a second minibus would be introduced next year, with the expectation that this would ensure a further saving of £130,000.

It was emphasised that the aim was to maintain or improve the quality of the service so that children and families would not see a deterioration in the provision. It was noted that there was a possibility to expand the service, but the department continued to rely on contracts with the private sector, and it would not be possible to change the arrangements overnight. Reference was made to the reduction in the number of taxi drivers and taxi companies, and they needed to gradually develop the service.

It was reported that the transport cost solely for Ysgol Hafod Lon was approximately £1 million per year, and there was an additional cost of approximately £500,000 for Ysgol Pendalar. It was noted that these figures showed the significant amount of spending. It was explained that a letter had been sent to the previous Minister raising a question regarding whether the Council received sufficient funding to pay the actual cost of transporting children to school. It was suggested that the real costs were not fully reflected in the funding received through the general block grant from the Welsh Government. It was suggested that a specific grant could be required for education transport, which would be directly allocated to the department, and it could be appropriate to raise the matter once again with the new Government.

Assurance was requested that the Welsh language would be duly addressed in the tendering process, although it was acknowledged that this would not always be easy. In response to a question regarding specific travel plans, it was explained that two different schemes were implemented alongside each other, namely the £1 travel scheme for young people up to 16 years old and a scheme for young people aged 16-21 called 'My Travel Card'. It was noted that the second scheme had started as a pilot, but the hope was that the Welsh Government would make it permanent to facilitate travel between educational sites.

Concern was raised regarding the 5-mile limit for transport to faith schools. It was noted that this would have a significant impact on pupils from some areas who had received transport historically. Reference was made to the fact that the faith schools were admission authorities themselves, and they did not have formal catchment areas, but it was argued that parish boundaries had been used historically for transport purposes. The Bethesda area was given as an example, noting that it had been within the parish boundary and had been included in maps shared with the local authority in the past. Concern was expressed that children from Bethesda would lose transport to Ysgol Ein Harglwyddes in Bangor. The department was asked to reconsider the limit and adapt it for faith schools.

In response, officers confirmed they would be willing to discuss the matter and look at the details. It was explained that the 5-mile figure had been set based on the template used for primary and secondary transport, but that did not prevent the department from reconsidering it. It was confirmed that the matter would be discussed before submitting the policy to the Cabinet.

Full support was expressed for the review of the policy, and the provisions for post-16 learners were welcomed, noting that they gave students more choice to attend settings that offered suitable courses. It was emphasised that the policy should give appropriate consideration to the safety of the child and school attendance. Reference was made to the significant overspend in the field and it was asked whether there was an estimate of the savings that the new policy would secure. In response, it was noted that the policy's implementation was not expected to create savings. It was explained that the policy had been drawn up to ensure consistency and fairness across the system, not to reduce expenditure. It was noted that the budget was being managed as tightly as possible, but costs would likely increase when re-tendering contracts due to fuel prices and operational costs.

Attention was drawn to the need to review school catchment areas. It was noted that closing schools and pupil movements could change which school was most suitable to a specific community. It was asked when the catchment areas would be reviewed, who would be part of the process and whether the history of the areas and local connections would be considered. In response, it was noted:-

- The future of some schools had already been discussed and the whole catchment area had been considered as part of any such discussion.
- Should a school close, there would be a need to decide where the catchment area should move, which boundaries would change and what schools would the children attend.
- The department did not have the capacity to conduct a comprehensive review of every catchment area.
- Catchment areas would be reviewed as changes arose, especially when the future of a particular school was being considered.

- A wider review could be conducted per cluster of schools, using a secondary school catchment area as a foundation, should the capacity be available.

It was asked whether new housing developments were considered when looking at school catchment areas. In response, it was confirmed that the department worked with the Planning Service when a new housing development was proposed. It was noted that the Planning Service asked for information regarding local school capacity to receive additional children, but there were enough spaces in the majority of schools.

It was asked whether it was possible to change a catchment area when a new estate was constructed to facilitate a smaller school or prevent a school from closing. In response, it was confirmed that the department would not change the catchment area boundary to direct children from a new estate to a smaller school instead of the nearest school. It was explained that the boundary of the existing catchment area would be respected. It was added that legislation made it a requirement to respect the right of parents to choose a school for their children, and it was not possible for the Council to encourage parents to choose one school instead of another in order to support the numbers of specific schools.

It was explained that housing developments did not currently create a significant problem because capacity was available in most schools. It was noted that not all pupils of every school necessarily lived within its catchment area. Should a school reach its capacity, the admission procedure would prioritise children from the catchment area. Reference was made to the low number of appeals regarding school admissions in Gwynedd, noting that there were usually enough spaces to approve the application according to the parents' choice.

Concern was expressed that not all parents who used the Council's website to search for catchment area schools were aware that they had a wider choice. In response, it was noted that wider discussions were taking place regarding the sustainability of communities and what the Council could do to support it. Reference was made to a new stream, 'Nôl i Wynedd', in the Council Plan, and it was noted that they might need to think more creatively about how communities could be supported and to challenge existing trends.

It was emphasised that making savings was not the main reason for introducing the policy and the discussion had not been steered by an intention to remove bus services to reduce costs. It was explained, should opportunities arise to provide services in a different, better and more efficient way, those opportunities would be considered.

It was asked where the policy left post-16 students from Dwyfor who, due to curricular reasons and the range of subjects available, chose to study in sixth form in a secondary school in Arfon. In response, it was explained that the amended policy assured free transport to the nearest educational site that provided the relevant course. It was noted that the nearest provision to learners from Dwyfor who intended to study A Level would normally be Coleg Meirion-Dwyfor.

It was asked what would happen should a learner study a subject that was unavailable at the nearest setting. In response, it was confirmed, should the relevant subject or course not be available at the nearest setting, transport would be provided to another setting where the provision was available.

It was acknowledged that the Education Transport Policy was complex and there were many barriers and statutory requirements associated with it. It was noted that there

was a need for flexibility to implement it, and the importance of pupil safety and ensuring fairness was emphasised.

RESOLVED

- 1. To accept the report and note the observations.**
- 2. To ask the Cabinet to pay particular attention to the Empty Seats Scheme when making a decision.**
- 3. To recommend to the Cabinet Member for Education:-**
 - **That consideration should be given to modifying the Draft Education Transport Policy to designate parishes rather than distance in terms of transportation to faith schools.**
 - **To look at reducing the number of forms that parents of pupils with Additional Learning Needs must complete.**

9. EDUCATION DEPARTMENT PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Cabinet Member for Education presented the report, stating that the arrangement was relatively new but it was a useful way for the Members to see and understand the Education Department's range of work. It was noted that the report gave the Committee an opportunity to scrutinise the department's performance.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:-

General concern was expressed regarding the size of the reports pack submitted to the Committee, which included approximately 350 pages. It was noted that it was unrealistic to expect members to read all the material in detail, which could mean that some relevant questions would not be raised. In response, an apology was given about the length of the report, and it was explained that changes to the Education Department's performance challenge arrangements were underway. It was noted that the department was large and contained many different services, and identifying the most important matters amongst all the information had been a challenge. It was confirmed that every manager would continue to report on performance, but moving forward, the Assistant Heads of Department would provide summaries of approximately three or four pages, highlighting the successes and the fields that required attention.

Attention was drawn to the significant reduction in the number of applications for headteacher posts and to the increasing challenge of attracting individuals to leadership posts in schools. The development of the Future Leaders programme was welcomed, which provided practical support to individuals who wished to move to leadership posts. It was noted that 17 individuals from the primary sector and seven from the secondary sector followed the programme. It was asked how many had followed the programme in the previous year and whether the feedback had been positive.

Reference was made to the support programme for new headteachers and acting headteachers, with 26 individuals following the programme. It was noted that the response to the programme had been positive, and that new headteachers had provided good feedback regarding the support received from the Council. Attention was drawn to the fact that 13% of schools did not have a permanent headteacher, and

members asked for the equivalent figures for the previous years to put the situation in context. In response, it was noted:-

- That recruiting headteachers was a significant challenge and the problem was not unique to Gwynedd, as schools across Wales and beyond faced the same difficulty.
- There had been a significant turnover amongst headteachers in Gwynedd over the last two or three years due to the age profile of the workforce. It was estimated that between 30% and 33% of schools had changed headteachers during that period.
- Some headteachers had reached retirement age, whilst others had decided to leave the profession because they did not wish to remain in the role.
- Primary headteacher posts had attracted three or four applicants in the past and secondary headteacher posts had attracted two or three, but posts were now being advertised without receiving any applications in some cases.
- The situation had been included on the department's risk register, as it was a significant risk that could have an impact on the quality and standards of schools.
- A team of school support officers was in place, and they intended to strengthen the support for governing bodies in the coming year to ensure that headteachers and schools received support from several directions.
- There was a need for national changes, including increasing the number of spaces on the National Professional Qualification for Headship. It was emphasised that teachers who showed a desire to lead a school should be supported to gain the relevant qualification.

It was reported that 15 individuals had followed the Future Leaders programme during the previous year, and the majority had moved on to acting headteacher posts or permanent posts. It was explained that the programme had worked towards developing talent within Gwynedd schools and ensuring that a pool of individuals was available to respond to urgent situations in the primary and secondary sectors. It was confirmed that the programme had been successful and had contributed to an annual increase in the number of successful applicants for the headship qualification.

It was reported that a new programme had been established this January for headteachers who had been in their posts for less than three years, as well as acting headteachers. It was noted that 22 headteachers were following the programme, which was being led by two support officers who had previously been headteachers. It was explained that the programme gave headteachers an opportunity to network, receive mentor support and identify familiar faces and departments within the authority. It was noted that the programme provided support with matters such as funding, improvement plans and human resources. It was acknowledged that the role of a new headteacher could be lonely and this support could be of significant benefit.

It was asked whether one main reason stood out in the decisions of headteachers and teachers to leave the profession. In response, it was explained it was not one specific reason, but a number of factors had contributed to the situation since the period of the pandemic. It was noted that some children arrived at school without being able to complete basic tasks such as using the toilet, eating independently or wearing a coat. It was explained that secondary schools had seen a deterioration in the reading skills of some pupils as they started in Year 7 compared with the pre-covid period.

Reference was made to the challenging behaviour of children, parents' behaviour and the burden of dealing with an increasing number of complaints. It was noted that complaints had become more complicated, especially as artificial intelligence was used

to create them, and that responding to them could be difficult for headteachers. Reference was made to changes in the curriculum, with some headteachers deciding to retire instead of implementing more changes over the coming years. It was noted that there were more children with additional learning needs in schools, and that frustration regarding a lack of sufficient provision to fulfil their needs had contributed to the pressure on headteachers.

It was emphasised that no headteacher could cope with all these changes on their own. It was noted that there was a need to change the way the authority, schools, governors and the scrutiny committees worked together, and reduce the sense of "us and them" within the system. It was explained that success would be assured by working for the benefit of all Gwynedd children, instead of only focusing on one classroom.

It was suggested that these challenges should be raised at a national level with the Welsh Government. It was noted that the new Minister for Education had previously led headteacher unions and would therefore be aware of the pressures facing the profession.

A member noted, in terms of education unions, that the three main concerns consistently being raised by teachers were workload, behaviour and salary. It was noted that workload and behaviour often swapped places as the primary concern, with salaries normally in third place. It was suggested that these factors made teachers think carefully before applying for leadership posts. Reference was made to data from the Education Workforce Council regarding the cohort of newly qualified teachers in 2015, stating that 40% of that cohort had left education by 2025.

Reference was made to a number of capital projects that had slipped in terms of time or cost, or both in some cases. It was asked whether more delay was expected in relation to the projects that were underway, or whether there was confidence that they would be completed within the timeframe and the budget. In response, it was acknowledged that it could not be assured that there would not be further delay as capital projects were complicated and unexpected problems could arise.

Reference was made to the Ysgol Ein Harglwyddes project, where it had been planned for children to move to the new building, but the work had not been completed to a sufficient standard. It was noted that a difficult decision had been made to postpone the opening until 1 September 2026. It was emphasised that it was better to postpone than move children to a building where the work had not been completed properly, noting that there had been a tendency in the past to move children in and then resolve the problem.

It was explained that the Ysgol Tryfan project had been underway for several years and had faced capital challenges. It was noted that it was difficult to anticipate the cost of construction work, especially when work was taking place on the site whilst the school continued to operate on the site. The hope was expressed that it would be possible to keep to the timeframe and the budget, but it was acknowledged that there would be a need to continuously fight to achieve this. It was noted that no large capital projects had been completely free from problems, and further problems could arise although specific ones had not been identified.

Reference was made to a plan to reduce the cost of attending school, and the fact that a specific plan was in place was welcomed. It was asked how the success of the plan would be measured. In response, it was explained that the success would be based on

the commitment of schools to implement the plan's principles. It was noted that no headteacher wished to make attending school more difficult or more costly, but schools were required to consider the financial implications of their decisions. Reference was made to the second-hand school uniform shop schemes and the need to consider whether a specific logo on sports uniforms was necessary. In response, it was noted that members who served on governing bodies could raise these matters directly and the response of governing bodies would be important in developing the work.

Reference was made to the immersion system, and it was noted that the department wished to make many improvements, but they were not affordable at this time. A member asked for more information regarding those improvements. In response, it was noted that a review of the immersion system had been conducted, a positive Estyn inspection had been received and a report from Bangor University had been considered. It was noted that there were significant implications in terms of resources, and that more centres and more staff would enable more children to have access to immersion provision.

It was explained that the existing budget was insufficient to fully fund the current immersion centres, and more resources would enable the department to provide more spaces. However, it was acknowledged that this would raise questions regarding the length of time that learners would spend in the centres and the associated transport costs. It was noted that the system performed well with the resources available, and the best possible use was made of local and national resources to increase the use of Welsh in schools.

It was acknowledged that there was increasing pressure on the immersion system and that pressure would continue over the coming years as schools implemented the Language Policy. It was emphasised that the cost of the system was higher than the level of grants received. They expressed their appreciation of the Welsh Government's contribution, but it was noted that the contribution should reflect the real cost of the provision. It was suggested that schools would have to spend more on Welsh-medium education in the future.

Concern was expressed regarding the increase in the number of pupils who had de-registered from schools. It was asked what Gwynedd's strategy was to respond to the increase and reduce it. It was noted that the report referred to a national pattern, but it was asked to include figures for the whole of Wales to put Gwynedd's position into context. In response, it was noted:-

- The number of children being educated at home had increased nationally, and it was agreed to share the national figures with the Committee.
- There was significant concern about the increase in Gwynedd. It was noted that the number had increased to over 300 school-aged children, compared with approximately 250 at the same time the previous year.
- The figure had changed during the year as Year 11 pupils left the system, and therefore it could appear that the number had reduced in September even though the basic trend had not changed.
- There was a particular trend for older pupils to be de-registered.
- There was a difference between parents choosing to educate their children at home from the start, parents who had decided to give up working to provide high-quality home education, and parents who took their child from school because the school could not fulfil the child's needs or due to attendance or behaviour problems.

- Many parents provided excellent home education. However, particular concern was expressed about children who were taken from school due to difficulties, as they could reach post-16 age without qualifications and then have to follow foundation courses before moving on to their choice of studies.
- The Gwynedd and Anglesey Additional Learning Needs and Inclusion Service was in the process of being split, and they planned to have two staff members to support families who chose to educate their children at home.
- Home visits were already being conducted to assess what support was required and whether the parents could provide an appropriate education.
- There was a need to prevent families from feeling under pressure to pull their children out of school. It was noted that this required joint working between the inclusion teams, additional learning needs and schools.
- Plans were in the pipeline to respond to the matter, and it was suggested that a more comprehensive report be submitted to the Committee in the future, including more information about the impact of the interventions.

It was emphasised by the Cabinet Member that it was a matter of priority for him. It was noted that additional learning needs, social issues, poverty and changes in society contributed to the increase. It was acknowledged that family situations had intensified in some cases over recent years, but it was emphasised that identifying the causes of the problem was not sufficient in itself. It was explained that the Council needed to adapt and develop its way of working to meet the needs of those children and families.

Reference was made to the work that had been undertaken over the previous 18 months to review services. It was noted that the Additional Learning Needs and Inclusion Service with Anglesey would come to an end by September and a separate service would be established for Gwynedd only. It was explained that the demand had significantly increased, that the service was growing and was difficult to manage, and the geographical areas were very broad. It was hoped that a service solely for Gwynedd would give better control and respond more effectively to local needs, continuing to work with Anglesey when appropriate.

Reference was made to other changes, including establishing a new inclusion service and a new Camu i'r Copa centre in Llanwnda, as well as the changes deriving from the conclusion of GwE (School Effectiveness Service). It was noted that the new arrangements had an important role in terms of supporting schools, children and families. Reference was made to the culture of schools and the priorities that steered their work, including whether more emphasis should be placed on the standard provision instead of more expensive activities. It was acknowledged that there were no quick answers, but it was repeated that the area was a priority and the service was moving in the right direction.

It was added that a legislative change was underway regarding home education, which would change the power of local authorities in terms of access to children and making decisions about children and families who chose this path. It was noted that the department would try to work in partnership with families, in the spirit of the new legislation. It was noted that the Youth Service provided support to reduce the number of young people who were not in education, employment or training, and the service intervened earlier in schools to prevent this from happening.

The commitment to present more information to the Committee was welcomed. It was asked for the data to include the age of pupils who were being de-registered and their geographic location, to identify any patterns.

Concern was expressed that some teachers and acting headteachers who wished to follow the qualification for headship continued to be refused. It was acknowledged that the course was run by the Welsh Government, not Cyngor Gwynedd, but it was noted that the situation caused concern given the shortage of headteachers. In response, it was agreed that individuals who had shown an interest in becoming headteachers should have the opportunity to follow the qualification. It was explained that the Welsh Government had set a cap on the number of spaces, and that this was not the local authority's decision.

It was noted that acting headteachers and other individuals who wished to apply were being encouraged to contact the department, and that the local leadership programmes helped to identify gaps in their experience and strengthen their applications. It was reported that one individual had been successful in 2024, had gained the qualification and received a permanent headteacher post, contributing to reducing the number of acting headteachers. It was noted that three individuals had received the qualification since September, and that four others had been accepted for September 2026.

It was confirmed that the concerns had been raised with the Welsh Government. It was reported that the number of spaces had increased from 46 to 96 for September 2026, suggesting that the Government had listened to the concerns. It was noted that the department worked closely with Learning, which was responsible for leading the qualification and developing a career path for middle and higher leadership.

It was asked whether satellite sites were being developed in Meirionnydd as discussed when the pupil referral provision was established, and whether feedback had been received regarding the proposal. Reference was made to a recent television programme regarding Brynffynnon, and it was noted that there was some similarity between that provision and Camu i'r Copa, although the age groups were different. It was emphasised that high priority must be placed on safeguarding, because vulnerable pupils were at greater risk of being abused. In response, it was noted:-

- A decision had been made from the start to establish an appropriate and high-quality provision.
- A significant capital investment had been made at the old school to create a safe and inclusive facility.
- All the necessary resources had been provided to ensure that the children were fully involved and felt safe.
- Working in a behaviour support unit was challenging because children's behaviour was becoming increasingly challenging.
- The team had some outreach capacity to schools, although there were mixed opinions regarding the effectiveness of that method. It was explained that the success of behaviour work often depended on building a relationship with the child, and this was difficult when an officer only visited for a short period.
- There was a wish to develop more provision and more centres, but it was emphasised that they should be full and suitable provisions.
- Discussions had been held with headteachers in Meirionnydd who were eager to see a provision in the area, particularly for the secondary sector.

Concern was expressed regarding safeguarding children who were being educated at home, noting that child abuse often happened by parents, brothers, sisters or close family members. It was asked how problems could be identified should the child be educated at home and there was no regular contact with a school. In response, it was noted that safeguarding every child was important. It was emphasised that it should

not be assumed that safeguarding problems were associated with every family who chose to home educate, because many parents were doing excellent work for the right reasons. It was acknowledged that there had been national cases where safeguarding issues were raised, and it was suggested that this was one of the factors that influenced the Government's decisions when creating the new legislation.

Concern was expressed regarding the decision to separate the Anglesey and Gwynedd Additional Learning Needs services, noting that the Welsh Government often encouraged collaboration between local authorities. It was asked for a separate discussion to explain the reasons for the decision. In response, it was explained that this was a practical decision. It was noted that the service included approximately 130 to 140 staff members, that it was a growing area and faced intensifying needs, and that it was difficult to manage as one service across such a vast area. It was acknowledged that many of the aspects from the partnership with Anglesey had worked well, but it was noted that a more dynamic service was required which could respond more effectively to the needs of the people of Gwynedd.

Concern was expressed that children with additional learning needs who would have been provided a space in a special school five years ago were now being refused, leaving mainstream schools to respond to their needs with limited resources. Reference was made to a significant increase in the number of pupils in special schools, stating that Ysgol Hafod Lon had been built for 100 children, but it would have 135 registered pupils in September 2026. It was noted therefore that the school had to use satellite sites because of the lack of space.

In response, it was noted that the increase in the number of children with additional learning needs who might require a space in a special school caused significant concern. However, it was emphasised that there was a need to consider the basic question regarding inclusion and the way schools and communities were organised. It was explained that it was not desirable to create a system where children with additional learning needs were being educated completely separate to other children. Reference was made to an example of full inclusion between two nearby schools during break times, and a desire was expressed to see children with additional learning needs and other children being educated together where possible.

It was noted that the Council had invested more in integration during the year, but it was acknowledged that more funding was required. It was confirmed, should additional resources be available, that they would be given to schools to employ more staff and increase their ability to be inclusive. It was acknowledged that inclusion made the work of mainstream schools more challenging. It was noted that any increase in the capacity of special schools or constructing a new school would lead to transport implications and additional costs, and there was a need to consider these matters collectively. It was emphasised that it would be better to invest in education and children's experiences instead of spending more on transporting them to provisions that were further away.

Clarity was requested regarding the reference in the report to changes to the plan at Ysgol Bontnewydd. In response, it was explained that the project was challenging because the plan was to build a net zero school. It was noted that this created specific challenges that had not emerged in normal school projects, including insurance matters. It was confirmed that a more comprehensive response would be provided in due course.

It was asked whether schools lost funding when a child was de-registered, because funding was allocated per pupil. Concern was expressed that losing this funding could contribute to redundancies and a reduction in the number of staff. In response, it was explained that it was not possible to provide a simple answer because the impact depended on the time of year that the child was de-registered. It was noted that some schools were able to benefit temporarily should the child leave after the funding had been allocated based on the pupil census. However, should the child be out of school for a whole year, the loss would appear in the subsequent funding.

It was asked how many children benefited from the Camu i'r Copa provision, and whether those children differed from the ten pupils who had been permanently excluded from secondary schools. It was asked, on average, how long a child who had been permanently excluded remained without education before receiving an alternative provision, and who was responsible for safeguarding the child if they were not open to the well-being team. In response, it was reported that approximately 25 children had benefited from the Camu i'r Copa provision during the first year. It was noted that their paths before reaching the provision varied, with some facing exclusions and others not. It was explained that the long-term aim was to ensure that children were able to access the centre before reaching the point of exclusion.

It was asked about the impact of the 230 applications to transfer schools this year, noting that this could place significant pressure on nearby schools, particularly should many children move at the same time. It was asked whether the funding moved with the child when a transfer happened during the academic year. In response, it was explained that not every transfer came from behaviour or inclusion issues, as some could be due to moving house or families moving into or out of the area. However, it was acknowledged that schools were concerned regarding accepting children with challenging behaviour or inclusion needs without additional funding.

It was noted that an agreement existed in the past for the funding to follow the child, but there was not an existing agreement between the headteachers. It was confirmed that the arrangement could be reconsidered, but it was a matter for the schools to agree upon. It was noted that a discussion would take place at every governing body in September, with a decision being made about the way forward.

The Camu i'r Copa staff were thanked for their work, noting that they worked under significant pressure and showed a huge commitment to the children at the centre.

Concern was expressed that the report was fairly superficial in some places and that insufficient figures had been included. Reference was made to statements that the Youth Service work had a positive impact on the well-being, personal development and confidence of young people, but it was noted that there was no specific data to support these statements. In response, it was confirmed that there was more information regarding the Youth Service in other reports and the Youth Service's annual report. It was proposed to share the annual report with the Committee. It was acknowledged that the brief observations in the performance report did not do justice to the amount of work happening.

Reference was made to a recent change from the SIMS information system to a Bromcom system in secondary schools. Concern was expressed that the transfer process placed significant pressure on the well-being of school office staff, and that staff had worked additional hours to address the change. It was asked whether the authority provided sufficient resources and support to schools when introducing the new system. In response, it was noted:-

- The authority had paid for a SIMS system for many years, but schools had been part of the process of choosing Bromcom as the new provider.
- Moving from a system that had been in place for almost a quarter of a century to a new system had been difficult.
- The relevant headteacher had discussed the problems with the department officers and the support team.
- The school should not have been left alone, and the authority should not allow that.
- Many of the problems derived from matters that were beyond the authority's control, including the difference between what was promised by Bromcom and what the company could provide.
- There was disappointment regarding the fact that the change had impacted office staff, as the intention was to improve the school's business processes.
- The authority had committed to the new system and there would be a need to resolve the problems.
- The school in question had been the first to adopt the system and therefore faced the challenges before other schools.
- There was a recommendation in the Child Practice Review to have one consistent system across the county to record safeguarding matters. It was noted that Bromcom was able to provide that function, and that had been one of the main reasons for the change.
- There was a need to ensure that education systems, data and information about children reached the best possible standard, because the previous situation was unacceptable.

The open nature of the discussion between Committee members, the Cabinet Member and officers was welcomed. It was noted that the report reflected the increasingly difficult social circumstances in which schools operated, including children's readiness for school and their ability to carry out basic tasks.

It was suggested that it would be beneficial to include more information about traditional educational results in the report, such as attainment in literacy, numeracy and GCSEs across Gwynedd. It was explained that comparative data could show Gwynedd's situation compared with Wales and the United Kingdom, without the need to scrutinise individual schools in a public session. In response, the suggestion was welcomed and it was noted that work was underway to bring the information together. Reference was made to previous national decisions not to use or publish performance data in public forums, but it was noted that secondary headteachers now showed a desire to be more open when using data to plan improvements.

The Cabinet Member for Education noted that the door had not shut on further developments in the provision of special schools. It was confirmed, should more spaces be required, they would have to respond to that need. It was suggested that satellite sites in mainstream secondary schools could provide support to some pupils with specific needs.

It was reported that more funding had been given to special schools and mainstream schools during the year, and the intention was to try to provide more in the following year. It was noted that an audit of school funding arrangements was underway, which could create opportunities to re-distribute the budget in a different way.

Reference was made to the Youth Service's annual report, and it was noted that it included more information about the number of children who had benefited from well-being support. It was explained that the questionnaires within the report submitted

measured the experience of children whom the service already worked with, and that it was not easy to collect consistent data about children who did not receive support.

Concern was expressed regarding restructuring the Youth Service which had happened some years before. It was noted that five new community provisions had been established since the previous year, and the possibility that the service was gradually moving back towards the previous provision was welcomed. It was reported that the Youth Service was developing a five-year plan and had conducted a consultation. Members were encouraged to take part in the consultation and submit their views.

In terms of the schools' performance data, it was suggested that they should go further than only submitting the Gwynedd average, because one school could increase the average and another could reduce it. It was proposed that data should be submitted per school, without naming the school. It was emphasised that the purpose of this would be to identify schools that performed well and those that required support, to steer improvements instead of placing blame. It was noted that headteachers' agreement was required and a consideration of the Welsh Government's perspective before implementing the arrangement. It was confirmed that the matter would be raised with headteachers before September, with the aim to submit information to the Committee in the autumn.

RESOLVED

- 1. To accept the report and note the observations.**
- 2. To ask the Head of Education to share national comparative data on de-registration with members of the Committee together with the Youth Service Annual Report.**
- 3. There is a need to look at including information and data in relation to pupils' attainment in the future performance report.**
- 4. That the Committee scrutinises the situation in relation to de-registration and Elective Home Education as part of its work programme when timely.**

10. ECONOMY AND COMMUNITY PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Cabinet Member for Economy and Community presented the report noting that it looked back on the department's performance over the previous year, with specific attention to the progress made against the Council's priority projects. It was acknowledged that many of the department's services had faced financial uncertainty because of changes to the Government's funding programmes, but pride was expressed in the performance of the department's teams and the progress made in achieving the Council's commitments.

It was noted that 69 organisations across the county had received support through the Government grant in the last year. It was reported that 55 community councils across Gwynedd had been supported and that £8.9 million had been invested to improve town centre infrastructure. It was noted that a request had been made for the department to further research the additional actions the Council could take by using local authority

powers, including options that did not necessarily align with existing guidelines. It was confirmed that work had already started on this.

It was reported that 118 Gwynedd businesses had received support over the previous year, with a £1.3 million investment. It was noted that 255 Gwynedd residents who faced barriers to employment had received support, as well as 130 additional individuals who had received support to ensure a better or full salary.

Satisfaction was expressed with the progress made with the Trawsfynydd science park. It was noted that members had received an invitation to visit the site and receive a presentation on the latest information regarding the plan, and it was confirmed that a further update would be presented to the Committee in due course.

It was noted that work had commenced over the previous year to develop a more sustainable model to support communities. It was explained that pilot arrangements were being considered in Tywyn, Abermaw and Blaenau Ffestiniog. It was reported that grants to the value of £217,000 had been allocated to community groups and food banks across Gwynedd to strengthen the local support available to residents.

It was noted that the number of visits to Byw'n Iach leisure centres during the previous year had been lower than the previous year. It was explained that the reduction stemmed mainly from a change in the method of gathering data, although there was also a small reduction in the number of primary children who received swimming lessons at the centres. It was noted that the number of visitors remained slightly lower than pre-covid levels, and it was emphasised that there was a need to agree on new systems, improve the performance and encourage more people to use the swimming pools.

It was reported that the previous year had been challenging for maritime services, with winter storms causing damage and a large number of visitors arriving on weekends when the weather was fine, creating traffic problems and additional pressure. It was noted that waste and safety were matters that needed to be considered, as well as several other matters. It was acknowledged that the services' ability to respond to the quick increase in the population on busy days was limited, which caused frustration for local communities and visitors. It was confirmed that these matters would be part of the Destination Management Plan in the future.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:-

Reference was made to the archives service and the fact that the opening hours had been reduced to the lowest level since 2016. It was noted that over a thousand individuals had responded to a questionnaire, and insufficient opening hours had become prominent as the main concern. It was acknowledged that more material was available online, but it was emphasised that not everyone wished to access services from their homes. It was asked whether there was any intention to extend the opening hours as a result of the Government's investment in public places and the public's responses.

In response, it was explained that opening hours had been a cause for concern to users for many years, and the reduction derived from the need to reduce the service's operating costs. It was noted that the opening hours between Dolgellau and Caernarfon had reached the lowest level possible. It was reported that there had been significant investment in windows, sustainability measures within the premises and the

reading rooms, but it was confirmed that there was no additional funding available to extend the opening hours.

Reference was made to the work to encourage businesses to increase their use of the Welsh language, and it was asked how compliance was being monitored. In response, it was explained that promoting the Welsh language was included as a condition when allocating grants, and that evidence was gathered to show that the condition had been fulfilled. It was noted that businesses were expected to do more than just translate sheets, promoting the Welsh language as part of their activities. It was explained that the method of implementation varied between businesses, but checks were being undertaken. However, it was acknowledged that there was a weakness in the monitoring arrangements because staff who managed the grants were often funded through the grant itself. It was noted that the resource would not necessarily continue after the scheme came to an end. It was explained that the three-year plan would be evaluated and that information and evidence were being gathered, but it would not be possible to monitor the businesses after the scheme ended.

Reference was made to areas where broadband was not always available for businesses and homes. It was emphasised that a reliable connection was essential, particularly as analogue services ended, and it was asked what support the Council could provide to areas without coverage. In response, it was noted:-

- The Digital Gwynedd plan had been part of the Council's previous plan, but the work was now being done in partnership with Ambition North Wales through a regional team.
- A plan was underway to target areas where there were gaps in the provision, but the UK Government had published a similar plan, creating two initiatives with the same aim.
- The regional programme had been postponed to see what the UK Government scheme could provide. It was noted that this scheme would provide subsidies and support for providers to encourage them to serve areas where there were specific gaps.
- The UK Government change had created uncertainty in terms of the status of the scheme, and there was a need to confirm how far it had developed.
- Members were encouraged to submit practical examples and the postcodes of areas where problems continued. It was confirmed that the information would be shared with the regional digital team and raised with the relevant officers.

Reference was made to the £1.3 million distributed between 118 local businesses, and it was asked whether there was evidence that the investment had created new jobs. In response, it was confirmed that such data was being gathered. It was explained that the purpose of the grants was not solely to create new jobs, as they were used to protect existing businesses and posts and increase long-term sustainability. It was noted that information about the number of jobs created had been included in an appendix, and they committed to share the actual figure with the members.

Reference was made to cultural regeneration projects and their reliance on external funding. It was asked whether it was possible to ensure that some projects could continue should the external funding come to an end. In response, it was acknowledged that the department relied heavily on external grants as there was no internal capital budget available. It was explained that Government funding was attracted to support business in Gwynedd, but grant conditions could limit the type of activities that could be achieved.

It was noted that there had been a request for the department to consider what needed to be achieved instead of only focusing on what was eligible under grant conditions. It was explained that there had been a significant change in the funding over previous years, with the Shared Prosperity Fund having been fairly flexible, whilst the new Local Growth Fund placed more emphasis on growth and capital expenditure and was less flexible. It was reported that an effort was made to ensure a fair geographical allocation of the funding across the county. Reference was made to regeneration plans for 13 catchment areas in Gwynedd, with the hope that those plans would reflect most local priorities.

Reference was made to the workstream for town centres. It was noted that Welsh Government funding and the Shared Prosperity Fund tended to focus on improving town centre facilities, but this did not always address the use patterns of town centres, empty properties, parking or softer matters that influenced people's perceptions. It was acknowledged that there was a need to extend the scope of the work, and it was confirmed that a specific report on town centre work would be submitted to the Scrutiny Committee in July.

It was asked whether there was evidence that the World Heritage Site designation and the associated investment brought economic benefit to Gwynedd communities. In response, it was explained that the designation had been in place for four years and that many schemes and projects had been developed in the communities of the slate areas. It was acknowledged that all the results of the work had not become clear yet.

It was noted that close work was happening with communities on economic projects, tourism, regeneration, pride in place and heritage interpretation. Reference was made to a project to the value of approximately £36 million which included redeveloping the Wales Slate Museum in Llanberis. Neuadd Ogwen in Bethesda was given as an example of investment that had made a practical difference. It was reported that basic infrastructure had been improved, including lighting, sound and insulation, and the improvements had enabled the hall to hold events and late night gigs without adversely affecting the local area.

Reference was made to completing work on buildings in Church Street in Blaenau Ffestiniog, in partnership with Antur Stiniog, to regenerate shops on the high street for housing and commercial use. It was reported that work had happened in Parc Padarn, Llanberis, and that local companies were being supported through the regeneration and construction work.

Reference was made to previous observations that funding for the bypass in Llanbedr would have to come through the North Wales Corporate Joint Committee. There was doubt that the body would allocate a significant proportion of its funding to one plan. It was noted that invites had been sent for Welsh Government members to visit the area and discuss the plan with the community. It was emphasised that the bypass was important to the economy, public safety and to create work opportunities, and it was asked whether the department would continue to press on the Welsh Government to fund the plan. In response, it was confirmed that a plan was ready to be implemented before the previous Government reconsidered the matter. It was noted that costs had increased since then, but a plan still existed and funding was the main barrier. It was confirmed that meetings would be arranged with the relevant Ministers, and the importance of the plan to the economy and the local community would be emphasised.

Reference was made to overnight sites for motor homes, and it was noted that approximately 2,000 vehicles had stayed on the sites in Cricieth, Caernarfon and

Pwllheli for a two-year period. A member asked about the percentage use of the sites. Reference was made to an increasing problem with motor homes in other areas, noting that a significant number had been seen in one location whilst the Caernarfon official site was almost empty. It was asked for clarity regarding 96 enforcement cases in unofficial locations, including the nature of breaches and the reason for taking action. It was noted that motor homes caused problems in some areas. Reference was made to the fact that they would come under the visitor levy scope, but it was suggested that collecting the levy from motor home users would be difficult.

In response, it was confirmed that information could be provided about the percentage use of the sites. It was explained that the Environment Department was responsible for enforcement work, and they committed to ask for background information about the cases. It was acknowledged that the capacity of the enforcement team was limited and that it was difficult to prove in some cases that a vehicle had stayed overnight.

It was asked whether the Welsh Government had considered establishing a new development department, which could offer better grants, attract employers and create jobs in rural areas. In response, it was noted that a meeting would be held with the Minister for the Economy in the Welsh Government, and the question regarding a development department would be raised.

Reference was made to parking problems in communities, including vehicles parking on yellow lines, obstructing roads and creating danger and inconvenience for residents. It was asked whether it would be possible to invest in land to create new parking spaces. It was suggested that purchasing the land or sites of chapels that were closing could be considered, and to charge for parking to recover some of the cost. In response, it was acknowledged that the matter was cross-departmental. It was confirmed that there were opportunities to create more parking spaces for residents and visitors, which could also create an income for the Council. It was explained that the matter could be discussed with the Environment Department. It was noted that community parking was one of the priorities that could be introduced through the Area Regeneration Framework, because different communities had different priorities.

Communities were encouraged to present ideas through the Area Regeneration Framework. It was noted, should an appropriate grant be available, that funding could be sought to purchase land. Should funding not be available immediately, it was suggested that the plan should be developed to a sufficient level of maturity to take advantage of any future funding opportunity. It was added that there would be a need to collaborate between services such as environment, highways, housing and economy. It was noted that the most successful companies were often led by active local groups, but it was acknowledged that management and maintenance costs would rise should the Council purchase and provide a car park. It was confirmed that there was an opportunity to work with community support officers to assess the options and develop a specific plan for a specific site.

Concern was raised regarding recent changes to car park arrangements. It was acknowledged that the Environment Department was responsible for parking, but it was emphasised that the decisions had a significant impact on the local economy. Dissatisfaction was expressed with the consultation period held in November, noting that participants had to read many documents before finding the relevant information about the changes. It was suggested that this did not constitute a fair and accessible consultation.

The rationale for extending the charging hours so that payments began earlier in the morning and finished later at night was acknowledged. However, concern was expressed that some parking spaces had been re-designated from short-stay to long-stay. Llandanwg was given as an example, where it was noted that a visitor or a local individual who wished to spend half an hour on the beach could need to pay £4.50 for parking. Reference was made to a local business that had suffered significantly because of the change. It was suggested that the changes had led to more vehicles parking on the side of the road before the car park, creating additional traffic problems.

The Economy Department was asked to raise the matter with the Environment Department and ensure that the economic impact of changes to car parks were fully considered when conducting consultations in the future. In response, it was confirmed that the observations would be submitted to the Environment Department.

RESOLVED

- 1. To accept the report and note the observations.**
- 2. To ask the Economy and Community Department to share data on numbers using Arosfan (motorhome) sites and information relating to enforcement issues with Committee members.**

11. CORPORATE AND LEGAL SERVICES PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Cabinet Member for Corporate and Legal Services and the Welsh Language submitted the performance report of the Corporate Services first. It was explained that the report referred to the progress made against the promises of the Council Plan 2023-28 and included the department's performance measures. It was noted that the Corporate Services led on six main projects, namely Keeping the Benefit Local, promoting the use made by Gwynedd residents of the Welsh language, workforce planning, ensuring fairness for all, women in leadership and a strategic review of health and safety management. It was reported that these projects had been scrutinised by the Cabinet Member during a performance challenging and support meeting in April.

It was noted that progress had been made during the year. Reference was made to developing and approving a new procurement strategy that placed an emphasis on local and social benefits. It was reported that training sessions had been developed for officers in the field of procurement to raise their awareness and their understanding of how to buy locally, gain social value and reduce carbon.

It was reported that significant work had been carried out to promote the Welsh language, including programmes with local schools and businesses, as well as research with Bangor University to analyse the public use of the Welsh language in Gwynedd. It was noted that work had been done with the Welsh Language Commissioner to expand on this.

It was reported that the Women in Leadership project had performed well, with many examples of women moving to leadership posts. Reference was made to a video created and a questionnaire sent to women who worked for the Council to gather their views on the project and the next steps. It was noted that prominent progress had been made in the field of health and safety by introducing the first phase of the new information technology system and providing training to managers. It was explained

that this had improved the process of reporting accidents across the Council, and that positive feedback had been received.

It was acknowledged that there had been a delay with the workforce planning project, but it was noted that a draft plan had been created and a full consultation would be conducted in due course. It was explained that this delay had impacted the milestones for the Ensuring Fairness for All project. It was further noted that the milestone for the strategic review on health and safety management had slipped due to work on introducing a new system for human resources and payroll.

In terms of the department's day-to-day work, reference was made to a high percentage of staff who had completed mandatory training. It was reported that the department, during 2025-26, had dealt with every freedom of information request within the appropriate deadline. It was noted that the situation regarding sickness figures continued to be monitored to understand the pressure and take appropriate steps to manage it.

It was reported that there was strong performance in terms of the level of the service, with high levels of customer satisfaction and the number of calls to the contact centre had reduced in recent years. It was noted that the processes for dealing with freedom of information requests were timely and had improved over the previous year. It was reported that developing and training staff was a robust field, with more e-modules available online and positive feedback had been received. Reference was made to an improvement in the field of procurement and Keeping the Benefit Local, noting that this supported the local economy. It was acknowledged that some fields still needed more attention, including data protection and occupational matters.

The officers were thanked for their work and their contribution to support the Council's work throughout the year.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:-

The progress made through the Women in Leadership project was welcomed, but concern was expressed that men should also receive the same opportunities and support to develop. It was noted that there was no objection to the project, but it was emphasised that men should not be left behind when trying to increase the number of women in leadership posts. Reference was made to the Ensuring Fairness for All project, and it was emphasised that there was a need to give attention to other groups, including disabled people, people from ethnically diverse backgrounds and from different sexual orientations.

Concern was expressed that many posts included a driving licence as an essential requirement, even when there were other methods of travelling to meetings or completing the work. It was noted that online meetings and improvements to public transport also reduced the need for officers to use a car in every case. In response, it was noted that a procedure had been adopted in the past to include a clause regarding a driving licence in job descriptions, but it was acknowledged that the point raised was fair. It was noted that staff were expected to attend training and meetings, but this did not mean that they could not use other methods of travel. It was acknowledged that there was a need to look carefully at the wording in job descriptions to ensure that it did not create an unnecessary barrier for disabled people or other groups.

In terms of Women in Leadership, it was noted that the project had turned a corner in terms of its original aim, as the number of women in higher leadership posts had

significantly increased. It was explained that a lack of confidence had emerged as an important factor during the training, but it was acknowledged that this was also relevant to men. It was noted that the same training and development opportunities were available to everyone, but the project had given more cohorts of women an opportunity to come together to discuss their experiences. It was acknowledged that there could be room to consider a similar offer for men.

It was emphasised that ensuring fairness for all was an important priority. It was noted that regular meetings were being held with the Equality Team to consider what was happening across the Council. Reference was made to the Core Equality Group, which met four times a year, and to the Staff Equality Forum, which provided information and raised matters to discuss. It was reported that 30% of those in leadership posts were women when the project had started, and that figure had increased to 46%. It was noted that this was the original intention of the project, but the department was now in a situation to discuss the next steps and how the work should be developed.

Reference was made to the priority of promoting Gwynedd residents' use of the Welsh language and it was asked who the members of the Welsh Language Project Board were. The idea of having a strategic overview of the work and the priorities was welcomed, but it was asked who was responsible for allocating and realising the work.

In response, it was explained that the Welsh Language Project Board had just been established with the aim of providing guidance, monitoring progress and receiving reports on the work. It was confirmed that a list of the officers and members on the board would be provided. It was noted that officers had already been leading on specific projects, but there was an advantage in having a programme board to ensure that the Council's Language Strategy was being achieved.

It was explained that many projects had been completed and that lessons learned reports would be submitted to the board. It was noted that one of the board's important roles in the future would be to commission new projects, agree on a list of priorities, set success measures and ensure that the necessary details were in place.

It was added that the Project Board had held one meeting to date and that there was representation from every department on it. It was noted that this was a cross-departmental matter, and contributions from all departments were needed to get a comprehensive picture of the work. It was explained that the first meeting had focused on establishing the board's terms of reference, and subsequent meetings would look in detail on the projects and progress. It was confirmed that elected members were also part of the board.

Reference was made to place names and street signs, noting that many streets in Trefor did not have name signs. It was explained that work had been done locally through a pilot to create a list of suitable Welsh names. It was noted that the signs had been welcomed by residents. Disappointment was expressed that the pilot scheme had ended, and the report suggested that it was not practical to change every sign. It was suggested that the work should be reconsidered as it was a practical way of ensuring that the Welsh language was more visible.

They proceeded to submit the performance report of the Legal Services.

It was explained that the service's performance was being monitored through feedback from the departments that received the advice of the Legal Service. It was noted that a questionnaire was issued at the end of every case. It was reported that 30% of the

questionnaires sent during the year had been returned. It was acknowledged that the response rate may appear low, but it was noted that it was a significant increase on the previous year and reflected the department's work to promote the questionnaires.

It was reported that 95% of the responders had given a score of 5/5 or noted that they were satisfied with the service, compared with 93% in 2024-25. It was acknowledged that there was room to improve, and it was noted that actions were already underway to respond to the observations received. It was reported that annual questionnaires had also been sent to heads of departments and managers, with a response rate of 33%. It was noted that the responders had described the service as good or very good. Reference was made to observations regarding the department's capacity, and it was confirmed that the situation would be monitored regularly.

In terms of propriety, it was reported that a course on good decision-making had been provided to officers and that work was continuing to promote high standards amongst members. It was noted that some members had not completed the Code of Conduct training. It was confirmed that the course was core training and available online, and that work continued to encourage everyone to complete it.

It was reported that increasing emphasis would be placed on preparing a national programme for the 2027 elections. It was noted that the Monitoring Officer's period of providing legal advice to the Corporate Joint Committee had come to an end, releasing the Head of Legal Services to return to work full time for Cyngor Gwynedd.

It was reported that work to keep the Council's Constitution under review had been completed, and a contribution had been made to review the whistleblowing procedure, as well as review officer delegation schemes.

It was reported that the recent period had been very busy for the Elections Service, including several by-elections, with the Llanrug by-election also underway. Reference was made to the Senedd election in May, which had presented additional challenges due to the size of the geographical area, the number of constituents and the new boundaries for Gwynedd Maldwyn. It was noted that the annual register had been published. Reference was made to a problem that arose in relation to the Coroner's salary and it was confirmed that this matter had now been resolved.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:-

The increase in the satisfaction level with the Legal Service to 95% was welcomed, but attention was drawn to the response rate of 30% for the questionnaires. It was asked whether any proactive actions had been taken to seek the opinion of the 70% who had not responded. In response, it was explained that no specific action had been taken to target the individuals who had not responded, and it was acknowledged that questionnaire fatigue could be a factor. It was noted that obtaining responses to the questionnaires had been a challenge for many years, but the 30% rate provided a relatively useful picture of the service's performance. It was explained that the biggest change was the work of directly consulting with the departments and their management teams, because that method was able to provide more detailed feedback and an opportunity to conduct a more comprehensive discussion about the service's performance. It was emphasised that individuals could not be forced to respond to questionnaires and therefore there was a need to ensure a balance between the different methods of gathering feedback.

Reference was made to the arrangements of the recent Senedd election, noting that it had been very different to previous elections due to the size of the constituency and the voting arrangements. It was asked whether there was an intention to review the way the election had been conducted and to identify any lessons to be learned for future elections. In response, it was explained that there was a need to be careful regarding the role of the Council as it was the Returning Officer's responsibility to conduct the election and the Council did not have a specific role in terms of scrutinising that function. However, it was noted that it was a normal part of planning every election to conduct an operational review of all the arrangements since then, considering what worked well and what needed to be improved. It was explained that these lessons would be used when preparing for the next election, and the whole process was being reviewed against the Electoral Commission's standards. It was confirmed that an operational review of the processes took place regularly. It was noted that more work relating to the Senedd boundaries was expected in future, as the recent arrangements were temporary. It was explained that the size of the area to be administered had led the service to start planning much earlier than usual, and the view was expressed that this had been beneficial.

It was expressed, based on the experience of visiting many polling stations, that the arrangements in Gwynedd had been very thorough. It was noted that Gwynedd was not always amongst the quickest areas to complete the count process, but it was acknowledged that ensuring that the count was thorough and correct was more important than the speed of the process.

Attention was drawn to a reference in the report to legal advice that emerged from the Ysgol Friars situation, and a member asked for more information regarding the nature of the work, the resources assigned to it and the impact or lessons that had arisen from it. In response, it was explained that such a situation created a wide range of legal work and led to a demand for advice across several fields, including Education, Human Resources and governance. It was noted that it was not only one individual from the Legal Service who was associated with the work, as different officers had contributed according to the nature of the matters and the expertise required. Reference was made to work that had come about from the situation, including contributing to the whistleblowing arrangements, as well as elements of the wider response plan that required legal input. It was emphasised that a lot of legal support had been provided throughout the period, from the initial steps to the current situation.

It was asked further whether the work had placed significant pressure on the service's resources. In response, it was acknowledged that the usual day-to-day work had not reduced as a result of the situation, and therefore the additional requirements had created additional pressure. It was reported that external experts had been commissioned when specific expertise was required, and it was noted that the end of the arrangement of providing legal advice to the Corporate Joint Committee had released additional capacity. It was acknowledged that the situation had added to the pressures on the service, but it was confirmed that the team had managed to cope with the work.

The committee expressed its huge appreciation of the legal support received, noting that the service provided invaluable support to members and that the staff responded willingly and in a helpful manner. It was acknowledged that the Council was fortunate to have a professional team in Gwynedd.

Reference was made to a complaint that had been received following the election regarding changing the location of a polling station. It was explained that the polling

station in a ward had moved from a previously used building, but the sign on the old building still stated that it was a polling station, even though the door was locked. It was noted that constituents who had voted in the building for years had gone there and had not been able to vote due to the confusion about the new location. Concern was expressed that there had not been enough warning about the change, and specifically regarding the presence of the sign on the old building.

In response, it was explained that the Elections Service monitored and reviewed voting arrangements and that changes to boundaries, new housing developments and other local circumstances could mean having to change the location of polling stations. It was noted that such changes were advertised and information was sent to constituents, but it was acknowledged that it was natural for individuals to go to the venue that they were used to voting in for years. It was confirmed that the matter had been brought to the service's attention and would be considered as part of the current review to ensure that enough information was provided when similar changes occurred.

RESOLVED to accept the reports and to note the observations.

The meeting commenced at 10:30am and concluded at 3:47pm

Chair