
EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
14/07/26

Attendance:

Councillors: Councillor Rhys Tudur (Chair)

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

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

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

Present for item 4 - Councillor Huw Wyn Jones (Cabinet Member for Finance), Dewi Morgan (Head of Finance) and Sian Pugh (Assistant Head of Finance – Sustainability and Developments).

Present for item 5 - Councillor Dewi Jones (Cabinet Member for Education), Gwern ap Rhisiart (Head of Education) and Llion Williams (Safeguarding and Well-being Quality Leader).

Present for item 6 - Councillor Medwyn Hughes (Cabinet Member for Economy and Community), Llŷr Jones (Assistant Head of Economy and Community) and Hannah Joyce (Wales Slate Regeneration Programme Manager).

Present for item 7 - Bethan Adams (Scrutiny Advisor).

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Elin Walker Jones, Geraint Parry and Dyfrig Siencyn; Colette Owen (Catholic Church) and Gweno Glyn Williams (Dwyfor Parents / Governors' Representative).

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

Sharon Roberts (Arfon Parents/Governors' Representative) declared a personal interest in Item 6 on the agenda. The member was of the opinion that it was a prejudicial interest, and she withdrew from the meeting during the discussion on the item.

3. URGENT ITEMS

None to note.

4. FINANCE PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Cabinet Member for Finance presented the report which provided the Committee with an update on what had been achieved in the field, including an update on the

Council Plan and the Department's day-to-day work up to the end of March 2026. It was explained that the Information Technology Service had been transferred to the management of the Corporate Services Department since 1 April 2026, but as the 2025/26 performance was being considered, the digital services had been included in the report. It was noted that the transition had been smooth, but that the recruitment of an Assistant Head for the Information Technology Service remained a challenge.

It was reported that all matters under the responsibility of the Cabinet Member had been discussed and scrutinised at Performance Challenge and Support meetings, and satisfaction was expressed with the Department's overall performance. It was noted that the Finance Department had taken the lead on two priorities in the Council Plan during 2025/26, namely Managing the Impact of National Budgetary Cuts and the Digital Plan. It was emphasised that the need to achieve financial savings across the Council remained a priority to achieve budgetary balance in the medium term and to seek to keep any increase in Council Tax within reasonable limits. It was noted that the work of the Finance Department in the field was robust and effective, but ensuring that savings were successfully realised in all services remained a challenge.

It was noted that the performance measures showed a robust performance overall, with a few areas still receiving attention. Reference was made to high levels of compliance with mandatory training, along with the robust performance of the Finance and Accountancy, Payroll and Pensions services. It was noted that the level of long-term debt managed by the Income Service remained a matter of concern and that this was the only red category measure in the Department. It was noted that there were signs of improvement and that plans were in place to reduce risk and improve debt recovery. It was reported that the rate of Council Tax collection had improved, although it remained below historical levels. It was noted that there was an intention to introduce additional digital support to support the service.

In terms of Information Technology, it was noted that significant improvements had been made to strengthen the digital provision, including the modernisation of devices, the upgrading of systems, the expansion of digital ways of working and the rationalisation of the infrastructure. It was explained that the work had contributed to achieving financial savings. It was noted that cyber incidents and service outages had highlighted the need to continue to strengthen the resilience and security of the infrastructure, and it was noted that these issues were regularly monitored through the Performance Challenge and Support arrangements.

Attention was drawn to two reports received from external auditors during the year. It was noted that the report by Audit Wales on Strategic Management of Balances and Reserves had been published in September 2025, with the main recommendation relating to strengthening the Council's reserves strategy. It was reported that the ISA260 report had been published in November 2025 and approved by the Governance and Audit Committee. It was noted that an unqualified opinion had been given on the 2024/25 Statement of Accounts and that the report did not contain any recommendations.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:

Attention was drawn to the fact that the percentage of staff who had completed the mandatory training on awareness of the Welsh language was lower than the percentages for the other mandatory training. Concern was expressed about this stressing that as the training was mandatory, the Department should aim to ensure that all members of staff completed it.

Reference was made to the Benefits Service and the pressures arising from high levels of private rents and intermediate rents, noting that high rent costs could make it difficult for people to save towards buying a home.

Attention was drawn to free school meals, noting that the provision of free meals for all primary pupils meant that some families who would have previously been eligible did not see the need to register. Concern was expressed that this led to a loss of important information, as eligibility for free school meals continued to be used as an indicator of deprivation, and it was noted that the problem could increase with the movement of pupils from Year 6 to the secondary sector.

In response to several comments, it was stated:-

- That significant progress had been made with mandatory training since the data collected in March. It was explained that the different courses needed to be prioritised as they required a time commitment from staff, but the expectation was clear that the aim was to reach 100%.
- That the Department had been among the first in the Council to reach 100% in terms of safeguarding training, and that the level for domestic abuse training was almost 100%, with the exception of one member of staff who was absent on a long-term basis. It was noted that Welsh Language awareness training continued to be among the lowest percentages, but it was confirmed that work continued to improve the situation.
- The majority of housing benefit payments had now transferred to Universal Credit, with the Council continuing to deal with specific groups such as pensioners and people in certain types of accommodation. It was explained that the level of rent was based on the nationally determined Local Housing Allowance, and it was recognised that there were cases where the level of benefit was lower than the rent that a claimant had to pay.
- That the Discretionary Housing Payments fund was used in full each year to provide support in this field.
- That the Department was aware of the issue of registering for free school meals as pupils moved from primary to secondary, and that discussions were taking place with the Education Department to address the situation.

Reference was made to the high level of debt owed by the Health Board, and it was questioned how long the money had been outstanding and why it had not been recovered. In response, it was confirmed that Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board's debt was a matter of concern. It was noted that old debts were mainly under consideration and that arrangements in relation to newer debts had improved. It was reported that discussions were ongoing with the Health Board.

It was explained that the six local authorities in North Wales needed to work together on the Health Board's debts. It was noted that historical experience had shown that one authority could be paid if it put significant pressure on the Health Board, leaving the other five authorities to wait for their payments. It was reported that the issue had been identified at the level of finance officers and chief executives, and that collaboration was planned.

Concern was expressed about debt levels in general and the possibility that the cost of living pressures were making it more difficult for residents to pay Council Tax. In response, it was clarified that the overall debt figures under the Income Unit did not include Council Tax debts.

It was further questioned where Council Tax debts were recorded. In response, it was explained that they were reflected in the collection rates. It was noted that residents with the lowest levels of income and capital may be eligible for the Council Tax Reduction Scheme. Concern was expressed, however, about a cohort of people whose income, savings or assets were slightly too high to qualify for the scheme, but who were nonetheless struggling to pay. It was explained that the Council sought to signpost such individuals to services such as Citizens Advice in order to receive support.

The relationship between Council Tax collection rates and the premium on property was highlighted, and it was asked whether a clearer analysis of cases where Council Tax had not been paid could be provided. The view was expressed that a distinction should be made between individuals who refused to pay without mitigating circumstances, cases where an error had occurred, and cases where there was real difficulty in paying. Reference was made to cases where the premium had been charged on a property and where that was considered disproportionate under the circumstances, including a holiday property for which there was no relevant planning condition. A request was made for such information in future reports to provide a better picture of the reasons for the difference in collection rates. Reference was made to the overall reduction in the collection rate since 2019 and the reference to revaluation in 2026, questioning whether an increase in property values could further affect Gwynedd taxpayers and collection rates.

The performance of the Internal Audit Service was questioned, noting that the Service had not met its targets. Reference was made to a recent annual report to the Governance and Audit Committee where a relatively high number of audits had been given 'limited assurance', and it was questioned whether this suggested a problem with the Internal Audit Service. In response, it was noted that:-

- The introduction of the Council Tax Premium had created a significant challenge for the Tax Service, along with the additional pressures that derived from the Covid period. It was stressed that there had been no attempt to hide the magnitude of the challenge.
- Significant progress had been made over the previous year in responding to exceptional cases relating to the premium. It was reported that a panel had been set up to consider applications and cases where there were exceptional circumstances, recognising that some properties could be in circumstances that did not fulfil the original intention of the premium.
- A general exception could not be introduced for a particular type of property, and that each case needed to be considered on its own merits. It was noted that the panel developed information over time and, in identifying cases with similar characteristics, there was a need to ensure consistency in dealing with cases.
- An analysis of the figures could be provided in the next report to provide the additional context requested.
- The revaluation referred to in the report related to Non-Domestic Rates and not Council Tax. It was noted that the revaluation, along with changes to some relief schemes, could create problems for businesses in the county, and it was noted that the Council would do what it could to support them.
- In relation to Internal Audit, it was recognised that the number of reports that had received limited assurance was slightly higher than usual, but that in itself was not considered to be an indication of a problem with the Internal Audit Service. It was explained that the role of the service was to report on what it found, and that an increase in limited assurance reports could be indicative of wider issues

around the Council's internal controls. It was noted that that was a matter to be considered at a corporate level.

It was explained that the concern in relation to Internal Audit was the resources and capacity of the service rather than the quality of the work. It was noted that, in the context of the previous discussion on the premium, a number of Gwynedd residents were in a position where they had assets or capital but relatively low incomes, and it was emphasised that this needed to be taken into account when making decisions regarding Council Tax. In response, it was confirmed that that consideration was borne in mind when considering cases through Panel 13A. In relation to Internal Audit, it was confirmed that the capacity of the service was an issue considered by the Head of Finance, and that a commitment had been given to the Governance and Audit Committee to review the resources available.

It was reported that the number of staff in the Internal Audit team had decreased significantly over the years, from around 12 members of staff to six. It was explained that there was no single specific measure for deciding how much internal audit work should be carried out, and that the level of work depended on the resources available. It was emphasised that the Chief Finance Officer needed to ensure that the capacity of the service did not fall to a level where it would no longer be able to carry out its duties or provide the necessary assurance regarding internal controls. It was noted that any request for additional resources would have to follow the Council's normal bidding process. It was stressed, however, that there was no evidence that the increase in limited assurance reports stemmed directly from the capacity of the service, as they reflected the findings of the work carried out.

Attention was drawn to the long-term debts, which amounted to almost £2 million, and it was asked what exactly the robust plans were to tackle the debt. It was questioned whether there was a risk that some of the debts would have to be written off, and whether court proceedings had been initiated to recover the money. In response, it was noted that:-

- The Cabinet had approved a one-off bid in March, and that a legal and administrative resource had been secured. It was explained that close work was taking place with the Children and Adults Departments in relation to care debts, and that discussions had begun to seek further recovery of the amounts owed.
- Information about specific court cases was not at hand, but that some cases were referred to the Council's Legal Service. It was stressed that in all cases it was not necessary to go to court in order to pursue debt.
- There was an important difference between Council Tax debts and minor debts. It was explained that the Council had stronger statutory powers in relation to tax debts, while recovering minor debts could be more complex.
- A proportion of the debt was owed by another public body, in which the Council hoped to be able to reach an agreement, and that another significant proportion related to people who were being looked after. It was stressed that the circumstances of the debtors needed to be considered before deciding whether court action would be appropriate.
- Debt was defined as long-term debt for the purposes of the report when it was more than six months old. It was explained that some debts were significantly older than that, and that some cases went back several years.
- The Income Service reviewed its practices and structures to see how the debt recovery team could operate faster and more efficiently with the limited resources available.

Reference was made to the tens of millions of pounds worth of savings achieved over recent years and, looking back on the process, it was asked whether there was confidence that the systems used had succeeded in minimising the impact of the cuts on front-line services. It was enquired what lessons had been learnt for the future, given the likelihood that further savings would be needed. In response, it was explained that the Finance Service had learnt through all cycles of savings and had developed a more supportive and challenging role in assessing saving plans. It was noted that there was now a better understanding of how realistic a saving plan was before it was approved, acknowledging that plans had been submitted in the past that were ultimately unachievable.

It was emphasised that it should not be assumed that support services such as the Finance Department were able to accept cuts on an ongoing basis without impact, as that support capacity was needed to enable front-line departments to operate. Nevertheless, the view was expressed that there were further opportunities to improve efficiency, especially through technological advances and doing more with the same level of resources or less. It was acknowledged that it could not be promised that all the necessary future savings would be achieved through efficiency alone, but the view was expressed that opportunities continued to improve ways of working to reduce the need to cut services for the people of Gwynedd.

Attention was drawn to the pressures on the Tax Service during the period of sending Council Tax bills at the start of the financial year. Concern was expressed that residents who were worried about an increase in their bills had to wait for long periods to receive a response over the phone, with some reporting that they had waited up to 45 minutes. It was emphasised that not all individuals wished to use e-mail or wait for a written response, and it was asked whether more staff could be provided to answer calls during busy periods. In response, it was explained that the recruitment and retention of staff in the Tax Service was a significant challenge, particularly as answering calls about tax could be difficult. It was noted that it would be desirable to increase the number of staff at busy times, but that there were not enough applicants available, and it was emphasised that it was not possible to promise an undeliverable arrangement.

The view was expressed that Galw Gwynedd could provide additional support during the busy periods as the increase in calls could be predicted. In response, it was explained that the telephone lines were busy throughout the year and not just during the billing period, and that the service worked regularly with Galw Gwynedd. It was noted that efforts to recruit additional staff were being made on a regular basis, but that a number of posts had to be re-advertised. Reference was made to a particular difficulty in the recruitment of court officers, noting that it was not possible to attract applicants even for some temporary posts.

It was reported that a pilot scheme was underway to introduce on-line forms to improve the service for those wishing to deal with issues digitally. It was explained that Council Tax staff would be able to assist individuals over the phone to complete the forms, with the hope that this would speed up the process and free up more time to answer calls.

It was stressed that not everyone wished to communicate on-line, and the concern was reiterated that some residents due to their situation needed a quick response rather than waiting several working days for a response. It was questioned whether the main obstacle was a lack of applicants, rather than a lack of funding to employ staff. In response, it was confirmed that additional resources had been provided as a result of

the premium to be able to employ more staff, but that the challenge was to attract people to apply for the jobs. It was clarified that the introduction of on-line forms was not intended to replace the telephone service. It was stated that the intention was to enable those who were willing to use an on-line service to do so, freeing up capacity for staff to assist those who needed to use the phone or preferred to do so.

It was emphasised that the Department's services were trying to put the people of Gwynedd first, but that the welfare of staff needed to be addressed. It was noted that staff remaining in the Tax Service were under significant pressure due to the recruitment difficulties, and that putting unacceptable pressure on them had to be avoided. It was acknowledged that the service at the time did not meet the desired best standard for residents, but it was confirmed that different approaches were being considered to improve the situation. It was stressed that failure to attract applicants to vacant posts significantly limited what could be achieved.

Returning to the mandatory training, it was asked how many staff the percentages in the report represented and how many vacancies there were in the Department. In response, it was explained that the training figures included Information Technology Service staff. It was noted that the Finance Department now consisted of approximately 150 staff after the transfer of the service to the Corporate Services Department. It was confirmed that the exact number of vacancies was not to hand, but a commitment was made to provide the information to the members. It was noted that the Tax Service was where recruitment was most difficult, and that turnover levels in other parts of the Department were more normal.

It was questioned whether Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board was the Council's largest single debtor. It was questioned whether the amount related to old debts, given that more recent payment arrangements had improved, and whether there was a risk that the debt would eventually have to be written off. In response, it was confirmed that the Health Board was the Council's largest single debtor. It was confirmed that old debts were mainly under consideration. It was explained that disputes could arise in care cases about what proportion of the cost should be paid by the health service and what proportion should be paid by the Council, and that this often caused delays. It was noted that the Health Board paid relatively promptly once an agreement had been reached.

It was recognised that there was a risk that some debts would eventually have to be written off. It was noted that the Department was continuing to seek to recover older debts, but that there might come a point where it would have to be accepted that a certain amount was not likely to be paid. It was explained that provision for bad debt was included in the budgeting and preparation of accounts, to ensure that the Council planned prudently for that risk.

Returning to the recruitment problems in the Tax Service, it was noted that some members were aware of people who were looking for work, but that there were no Finance posts to be found on the Council's vacancies page at the time. It was questioned how people could know about the opportunities or apply for them if jobs were not advertised. In response, it was explained that some posts within the Tax Service had been advertised in the past without attracting any applicants, and as a result the Department had concluded that the structure of the service needed to be reviewed. It was noted that work on the review was underway and, once the new structure was in place in the following weeks, further posts would be advertised.

It was reported that the Department was looking at the Council's central pool staff to see if there were individuals available who could fill some of the posts, and people looking for work were encouraged to join that pool. It was noted that regular discussions were being held with the service managing the pool to identify any suitable individuals. It was noted that agency staff needed to be used from time to time when posts could not be filled, although this was not the first choice. It was emphasised that the work was not just about answering phone calls, as the information received subsequently needed to be processed. It was reported that the service had succeeded in attracting a trainee and two apprentices to the field, and it was hoped that they would contribute to the future of the service.

RESOLVED

- **To accept the report and note the observations.**
- **To ask to include the following in the next performance report that will be brought before the Committee:**
 - **more detailed data categorised in relation to long-term debts and tax collection;**
 - **number of legal cases relating to long-term debts;**
 - **information about the department's recruitment arrangements.**

5. SAFEGUARDING ARRANGEMENTS IN SCHOOLS SCRUTINY INVESTIGATION REPORT

The Chair of the Scrutiny Investigation presented the report and thanked all those who took part in the investigation. It was explained that this was not a specific case investigation or a statutory investigation, and that its purpose was not to reconsider matters that had already been examined through the Child Practice Review. It was noted that the question posed to the Panel was whether the safeguarding arrangements in the county's schools were appropriate and consistent, with the Panel being responsible for gathering evidence, drawing conclusions and making recommendations to the Cabinet and, in some cases, to the Welsh Government.

It was stressed that the reopening of the Foden case was not within the remit of the investigation, as the Child Practice Review had already considered the case. It was explained that the intention of the investigation was to look ahead and consider what else could be done to strengthen safeguarding arrangements in schools. It was noted that the scrutiny investigation was one of the work streams in the Council's Response Plan following the Child Practice Review, and that the Response Board, the Child Practice Review and the Scrutiny Investigation had different but complementary functions. It was explained that the Child Practice Review had looked back to understand what had gone wrong and the lessons to be learnt, that the Response Board was leading and overseeing the implementation of the corporate response, and that the Scrutiny Investigation had provided an additional layer of independent challenge by focusing on the arrangements in place in schools today and considering how to strengthen them further.

It was reported that a wide range of evidence had been considered over a period of several months. 11 schools were visited and discussions had been held with headteachers, governors, staff and pupils, as well as taking evidence from officers and experts and considering national guidance, policies and Estyn's work. It was noted that the investigation had found a lot of good work taking place in Gwynedd's schools, but it

was emphasised that having good policies on paper was not enough in itself and that it needed to be ensured that they were implemented consistently in all schools, by all members of staff and at all levels.

It was elaborated that the 22 recommendations formed the basis of a work programme rather than a list of individual proposals. It was noted that some of the recommendations related to people, ensuring that staff, governors and those with safeguarding responsibilities received the necessary training, support and clarity; that others related to systems, including strengthening arrangements for recording, monitoring, sharing information and ensuring greater consistency between schools; and that others were culture-focused, ensuring that pupils knew who to turn to for help, that their voice was heard and that everyone understood that safeguarding was the responsibility of each individual. It was noted that the recommendations had been grouped under nine strategic themes, namely training, pupils' understanding, support and well-being, the voice of pupils, review and learning, systems and information sharing, parents, safeguarding visibility, and governance and accountability.

It was stressed that one of the strengths of the report was that it did not rely on one major change, but recognised that effective safeguarding depended on a number of elements working together in a coherent manner. It was recognised that no system could guarantee complete safety, but it was noted that risks could be reduced, systems strengthened and concerns could be identified and responded to earlier, more consistently and more effectively. It was emphasised that the report alone would not make children safer, and that the action taken following the report would make the difference. It was therefore noted that the submission of the report was not the end of a process, but the beginning of the next stage, and that the actual success of the investigation would be measured by the implementation of the recommendations and the difference they would make in practice.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:

It was noted that the investigation had been conducted in a constructive spirit and that members had understood the importance of safeguarding children and the reason for carrying out the work. It was explained that the randomly selected schools worked well together once the purpose of the investigation was explained. It was noted that the 11 schools were located across the county and included a special school, primary schools and secondary schools, giving a broad cross-section of Gwynedd schools. It was reported that the response and information received from the visits had been valuable, and it was recognised that the support of officers in co-ordinating the visits and recording the evidence had enabled the members of the Panel to focus on the scrutiny.

Reference was made to the recent criticism of the report in the press, and the Chair of the Investigation was asked to respond to the comments made. In response, it was acknowledged that criticism had been submitted before the report was considered by the Committee, and it was emphasised that it was important to respond to the criticism as the correct implementation of the recommendations was essential to make a real difference to the safeguarding of children in Gwynedd and beyond. It was noted that the recommendations would be more likely to be implemented effectively if the report and the process that led to it were understood and taken seriously.

It was noted that the criticism had been presented by Ms Yates, who represented some of Foden's victims along with other victims. It was acknowledged that she had represented some of the victims for years and that it was understandable that she was keen to see rapid, robust and meaningful change. It was emphasised that the same

aim was shared, namely to do everything possible to ensure that children in Gwynedd would not experience failures similar to those seen at Ysgol Friars again.

It was reiterated that the Scrutiny Investigation was not a statutory investigation or a public inquiry, but an investigation carried out within the terms of reference approved by the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee. It was reiterated that the reopening of the Foden case or the allocation of individual responsibility was not within the remit of the investigation, as that had already been dealt with by the Child Practice Review. It was explained that the task was to look ahead and consider what else could be done to strengthen safeguarding arrangements in Gwynedd schools in the future, noting that attempting to fulfil both functions at the same time would have created a risk that neither would have achieved effectively.

Reference was made to criticism regarding the use of the word "should" rather than "must" in the recommendations. In response, it was clarified that the use of "should" reflected the nature of a scrutiny investigation, as a scrutiny committee did not have the power to impose statutory duties. It was noted that the Committee's role was to make recommendations and then hold the Cabinet to account for the implementation of the recommendations. It was stressed that this did not make the recommendations any less important, but that it reflected the democratic framework within which scrutiny operated.

Reference was made to sample size and the voice of pupils' work, and it was recognised that a larger sample would always be desirable. However, it was emphasised that the voice of pupils' work was not the only basis for the report, but that it was part of a wide range of evidence which had included visits to 11 schools, discussions with governors, headteachers and staff, evidence from Estyn, officers and experts, as well as the statutory framework. It was noted that the Panel had reached its conclusions on the basis of all the evidence.

It was pointed out that too much emphasis had been placed on the voice of the child. In response, it was explained that including the voice of the child had been a deliberate decision by the Panel from its first meeting, before any evidence had been gathered. It was noted that not including the voice of pupils would have been subject to harsh and appropriate criticism. It was emphasised that the Panel did not see a choice between the voice of the child and adult accountability, as children needed to feel safe and confident enough to raise concerns, but that the adults who served them needed to have the training, knowledge and accountability to respond appropriately. It was noted that neither element could work effectively without the other.

It was explained that the order of the recommendations did not reflect the order of their importance, as they were grouped by theme, and it was emphasised that each of the recommendations was important. Reference was made to the accountability of governors, and it was noted that the Panel had carefully considered the matter. It was explained that this was why the report included recommendations to strengthen the training for governors, clarify responsibilities and call on the Welsh Government to reconsider the national framework. It was therefore expressed that the difference between the criticism and the Panel's position was how far the recommendations should go, rather than the principle itself.

Reference was made to a criticism that the report did not contain anything new. In response, it was reiterated that the purpose of the Scrutiny Investigation was to build on the lessons of the Child Practice Review rather than repeat or replace it. It was noted that the Scrutiny Investigation had asked a different question, namely whether

the safeguarding arrangements of Gwynedd schools at the time were appropriate and were being implemented consistently. It was explained that a number of the recommendations went beyond what was included in the Child Practice Review, including calls for greater national standardisation, strengthening governance arrangements, improving recording and monitoring arrangements and ensuring greater consistency between schools. It was emphasised that the two reports fulfilled different but complementary functions, with the Child Practice Review looking back at the failures and the Scrutiny Investigation looking forward to strengthening the existing systems.

Reference was made to a criticism that action was needed rather than producing another report. There was agreement with that principle, emphasising that the end goal was not the report but the action that would follow. It was noted that the Scrutiny Investigation had seen the report as a single step in a process, and that success would be measured not by the number of recommendations but by the actions taken by the Council and the Welsh Government in response to them.

It was acknowledged that the Panel had not claimed to have all the answers, and that the members had been very aware of the seriousness of the matter and their responsibility. It was emphasised that the intention was to make a constructive contribution to the wider work of strengthening safeguarding arrangements in Gwynedd, and that any constructive comments or criticisms that resulted in the action plan being strengthened or further improving arrangements would be welcomed. It was reiterated that the actions taken jointly, rather than words in a report, would make the difference to the safety of children.

The contents of the report were welcomed and it was noted that new elements had emerged. Reference was made to the recommendation regarding ensuring that the names of the Designated Safeguarding Person and the Designated Safeguarding Governor are displayed on posters in the school. The view was expressed that the information should be visible outside the school building and on the school website, and that relevant contact details should be provided within the Council. It was emphasised that if the concern related to someone within the school, it was important that children and other people knew how to contact someone outside of school.

Reference was made to digital systems for recording concerns, including MyConcern. It was questioned whether it would be possible for an appropriate officer from the Education Department to access the system to be able to see patterns, especially in a situation where the headteacher was overseeing the system. The view was expressed that such access could assist in identifying patterns and ensuring that information followed a child when moving between primary schools or in the transition from the primary to secondary sector. In response, it was noted that:-

- The Committee had previously raised the matter of displaying safeguarding details, and that a team of four officers visited schools annually to check the arrangements and ensure that the relevant requirements were in place. It was explained that the team was relatively new but that it was now ahead of schedule in terms of visiting all the schools.
- The recommendation to display the details of the safeguarding persons, including on lanyards, was considered good practice and that that practice would be added to the criteria used by the safeguarding team. It was noted that some schools in Gwynedd were already doing this.
- The Department could not force a school or governing body to implement an arrangement that was not a statutory requirement. Frustration was expressed

about the limitations of the education authority's powers, noting that recommending, asking and highlighting good practice were the methods that were often available.

- The review being carried out by the Welsh Government needed to clearly consider where the different powers and responsibilities lay, expressing the view that officers of the Education Department did not have sufficient powers to demand that certain arrangements be implemented.
- The Council had invested in a new Bromcom digital system, with more progress being made in the primary sector than in the secondary sector. It was noted that moving between systems was challenging, but that the work was ongoing.
- School autonomy meant that it was difficult to ensure that all schools used the same system. It was noted that seeking agreement across North Wales, Powys and Ceredigion would be even more challenging, and therefore support was expressed for the Welsh Government to mandate a single national system for Wales.
- More than one individual may have access to safeguarding records and that several persons needed to be able to access MyConcern.
- The authority had commissioned one new system for managing information about children across the county, for the primary and secondary sectors.
- The process of moving from the old system to the new system had been very challenging, but it was noted that the aim was to ensure one record for each child that would transfer easily from primary to secondary school. It was noted that, with the school's consent, the authority could have an overview of the safeguarding records on the system.
- Access to MyConcern was possible but more limited and depended on the school's permission.
- There was close and constructive collaboration between the Education Department and Gwynedd schools, and that schools rarely refused to act on new guidelines or requests, particularly in the safeguarding field.
- However, as more additional requirements were introduced, schools in the future may be more reluctant to implement non-statutory arrangements due to the additional workload.

It was questioned what specific safeguards the Education Department would like to have the power to make mandatory, beyond consistency in terms of the recording system. In response, it was explained that schools were already required to record concerns and changes in children's behaviour, but that the nature and level of the concern could be interpreted in different ways. It was noted that Gwynedd's schools tended to be cautious and recorded the vast majority of issues of concern. It was emphasised that one of the most useful changes would be to have a single national system for Wales, as children were able to move between local authorities during their education and there was no consistent system to ensure that a single safeguarding record followed the child throughout their education. It was noted that more than one system was being used even in Gwynedd, as the choice of software remained in the hands of individual schools and headteachers.

It was emphasised that the fact that schools had autonomy did not mean that they did not listen or co-operate with the Education Department. It was noted that there was close collaboration between headteachers and education officers, and that different views were naturally present in a system involving a large number of schools. It was explained that the role of the Cabinet Member for Education and the Head of Education was to listen to those views and, at times, to come to a decision on what was considered most appropriate for the county. The view was expressed that the Welsh Government had a similar role at a national level, and that schools could find it

easier if some decisions, such as the choice of a national system, were made at a Wales level rather than by each individual school.

Reference was made to the accountability of headteachers, noting that school headteachers were accountable to their Governing Bodies and that the Chair of the Governing Body was their line manager, not the Head of Education. It was noted that this was related to the review of school governance. It was reported that the importance of the review had been raised directly with the Minister for Education, stressing the need for it to be a genuine and fundamental review where no option had been ruled out. The view was expressed that the review went to the heart of the arrangements of the education system in Gwynedd.

The report and the emphasis on the voice of child were welcomed, noting the importance of ensuring that children were able to approach an adult they trusted. It was emphasised that safeguarding was a responsibility for the whole community and not just the school. However, the view was expressed that the role of the education authority did not appear to be strong enough in the recommendations. It was acknowledged that officers were visiting schools and recommending practices, but the view was expressed that more robust guidance was needed in some fields. Reference was made to the investment in Bromcom and it was noted that not all schools involved in the investigation had been using the system. The view was expressed that the Department may have more influence over schools than it acknowledged, noting that schools would not be expected to refuse additional support to strengthen child protection.

Particular reference was made to the consideration in the report as to whether the Education Department should take responsibility for providing training to all teachers. The view was expressed that the Education Department could play a stronger role in this field rather than leaving the responsibility to school headteachers, and the wish was expressed to see the education authority act more prominently as a co-ordinator for the arrangements.

In response, it was explained that Bromcom had been commissioned for every school in Gwynedd and that it was intended to be rolled out in all schools. It was noted that the transfer of all primary schools was a significant task over a number of terms, and that the work was intended to be completed by the end of March 2027. It was emphasised, however, that although the system was provided free of charge, schools still had the option not to use it and that the Head of Education did not have the power to force them to do so.

As for supply teachers, it was explained that it was the schools, and not the education authority, that employed them. It was noted that some schools used private supply agencies that provided lists of teachers who had completed DBS checks and safeguarding training. It was reported that Gwynedd maintained a list of supply teachers, although no specific resource was available to maintain it. It was explained that the list was compiled annually and updated where possible, and included teachers who wished to carry out supply work in Gwynedd and who had completed the relevant DBS checks. It was noted that training had been offered to them, but that they were not obliged to attend as they were not employed by the authority.

It was emphasised that it was the responsibility of the school to ensure, when using a supply teacher, that they received the appropriate safeguarding training and knew who to turn to in the school should a concern arise. It was noted that the authority was able to commission systems and provide support, but did not have the power to force a

school to use a particular system or to force supply teachers to attend training with no certainty of work.

Support was expressed for the report and recommendations, and it was suggested that a summary copy of the recommendations should be sent to all school headteachers, including the foreword by the Chair of the Investigation. Reference was made to Recommendation 1, which was to ensure that training of an appropriate level is offered annually to all school staff and governors. It was questioned whether this suggested that the Investigation had found a weakness in the current training. In response, it was clarified that there was no strong evidence of a specific shortcoming in the training, but that the Panel wished to emphasise the principle that safeguarding was everyone's responsibility. It was noted that there was a need to ensure that the training provided was of high standard, consistent, and completed by all.

Reference was made to pupils' understanding of the safeguarding system and the Child Protection Policy 2025. It was noted that the policy should be approved by the Designated Safeguarding Person, the Designated Safeguarding Governor and the Headteacher, but there was no reference to the Chair of the Governing Body or the Chair of the School Council on the pupils' part. It was noted that a promise had been made at a previous meeting that an easy-to-read version of the policy would be available to pupils, and that it should have been published alongside the policy in October 2025. It was questioned why that version had not been provided so far. In response, it was confirmed that an easy-to-read version for children and young people would be published alongside the revised policy in September.

Reference was made to Dr Ceryl Teleri Davies' work on the voice of pupils, noting that she had met with 57 pupils and acknowledged that there had been no opportunity to involve older pupils. It was highlighted that eight areas for improvement or development had been identified in primary schools, while ten strengths had been identified in the secondary schools with no areas of development. It was noted that this seemed inconsistent. Reference was made to the fact that the Investigation involved a number of key stakeholders, including headteachers, safeguarding co-ordinators, staff, governors and pupils, but it was questioned why the voice of parents had not been included. The view was expressed that a questionnaire or survey could have been used to gather parents' views on how clear and consistent safeguarding arrangements were across schools.

In response to the comments regarding training, it was explained that a range of training was provided in accordance with Welsh Government requirements and at different levels according to the relevant responsibilities. It was noted that ensuring that individuals committed to completing the training was a different matter. It was explained that one of the lessons learnt from the investigation was the need to monitor more carefully that Chairs of Governing Bodies, for example, completed the mandatory safeguarding training in a timely manner, and to ensure that the training had an impact.

The Cabinet Member for Education noted that a culture change had already begun, with the Council seeking to be more open to external scrutiny, comments and suggestions on how arrangements could be improved. Reference was made to the establishment of the Response Board following the publication of the Child Practice Review, chaired by Professor Sally Holland, the former Children's Commissioner for Wales. It was noted that members of the Council, officers, along with observers from Estyn, Care Inspectorate Wales, the Welsh Government and the Office of the Children's Commissioner were part of the Board. It was explained that the Board was scrutinising over 57 work streams, not including the associated sub-streams.

It was reported that several quarterly reports had been submitted by the Chair of the Board to the Cabinet and were publicly available, along with the Board's papers. It was noted that the Chair had reported that he was satisfied with the progress being made, that the work was being carried out in a timely manner and that a number of the tasks had already been completed. Reference was made to a joint report by Care Inspectorate Wales and Estyn which had looked specifically at safeguarding arrangements. It was noted that the recommendations of that report were being implemented and that the recommendations of the Scrutiny Investigation would be considered alongside that work.

It was reported that initial work had been undertaken to assess the status of the 22 recommendations, with seven, according to the initial assessment, fully completed, 12 partially completed and three not yet implemented. It was noted that some of the recommendations that had not been implemented depended on the Welsh Government, including the need for a single national recording system across regions and authorities. It was explained that a similar situation existed in relation to the recommendations of the Child Practice Review, as some of them were matters for the Welsh Government to act on.

It was noted that a further update would be presented to the Committee in the autumn on the work of the Response Board, to provide assurances that the work was progressing thoroughly. It was reported that the Assurance Board established with the Welsh Government continued to meet regularly. It was noted that the arrangement would continue following a change of Government, and that a further meeting had already been scheduled.

It was emphasised that significant work was being carried out and that the Council was not ignoring the recommendations or failing to act. It was noted that a clear decision had been made to change policies, procedures and culture to do everything possible to prevent failures similar to those seen at Ysgol Friars from happening again. Reference was made to public criticism that the Council had not acted, and that suggestion was rejected stating that a number of the recommendations of the Child Practice Review and the Scrutiny Investigation had already been implemented.

It was reported that significant progress had been made over the previous 18 months in terms of safeguarding and well-being arrangements in schools. It was noted that a new Education Safeguarding and Well-being Team had been established and expanded, with the intention of visiting each school annually in relation to safeguarding. It was explained that support for governors had been strengthened through a training programme, a new handbook and the appointment of an additional officer to support them, and that safeguarding training had been updated to include awareness of grooming. It was noted that there was a new Headteacher and management team at Ysgol Friars, along with changes to the Governing Body and a new Chair of Governors.

Reference was made to the processes of Part 5, Safeguarding Procedures for Wales, and it was noted that the arrangements had been strengthened to ensure that safeguarding decisions were not made by just one individual, and that records and historical information were checked each time a safeguarding referral was received. It was reported that a retrospective audit of referrals had been carried out over a number of years to ensure that another similar pattern had not been missed. It was noted that work was underway to move all schools to a single electronic system for recording information about children, which would strengthen the ability to share information across the county and improve consistency.

It was stressed that the voice of the child was central to the new arrangements. It was reported that a social worker made a proactive effort to speak to each child who was subject to a safeguarding referral, to ensure that the child's views were part of the decision-making process. It was noted that these developments demonstrated a commitment to strengthening safeguarding arrangements, improving governance arrangements and ensuring the best possible support for children and young people in Gwynedd. It was emphasised that the field was being taken seriously and that there was a commitment not to shy away from any work that needed to be done.

RESOLVED

- **To approve the report.**
- **To ask for an update from the Cabinet Member for Education on the implementation per recommendation in approximately six months.**

6. TOWN CENTRE REGENERATION

The Cabinet Member for Economy and Community presented the report noting that the challenges facing town centres were evident, including changes in shopping habits, the growth of on-line shopping and cost of living pressures. It was explained that the challenge was to re-purpose town centres and make them attractive places to live, work and spend time. It was noted that discussions had begun with the new Welsh Government regarding the field.

It was elaborated that the report buildt on information previously submitted to the Committee and focused on the activities of the Regeneration Programme Service, including town centre regeneration, the development and implementation of regeneration projects and the response to empty properties. Reference was made to the framework for the towns of Gwynedd and the Place Making Schemes developed for Bangor, Caernarfon, Porthmadog, Pwllheli, Bala and Dolgellau. It was noted that these schemes had been prepared since the report was submitted to the Committee in 2023.

The report included information on the development and implementation of regeneration projects and the main grant programmes. It was noted that grants worth £31.8 million had been secured between 2023-26 for the development and implementation of town centre regeneration projects across the county. Reference was made to the projects to be implemented through the Pride in Place Impact Fund and the Local Growth Fund, as well as the work on empty properties in town centres.

It was elaborated that work was being carried out to develop performance measures and collect data to be able to measure the impact of the regeneration work on town centres. Reference was made to the Council's new Economic Strategy and the need to assess the impact of projects as well as monitor the number and condition of vacant properties. It was explained that the final part of the report summarised the main conclusions and lessons learnt, along with further issues to consider over the following months.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:

Clarification was sought regarding the definition of vacant properties. Reference was made to examples in Pwllheli where a shop continued to operate on the ground floor of a building but the top floor was empty, noting that the situation could lead to significant

Council Tax Premium costs and put additional pressure on the viability of the ground floor business.

In response, it was clarified that there was no single simple definition of empty properties across the Council, as a number of services and departments related to empty properties and operated under different legislations and regulations. It was noted that the relevant definitions and periods may therefore vary between services. In relation to town centre regeneration work, it was explained that the Service tended to focus on properties that had been empty for more than a year, prioritising substantial buildings in central locations where their condition was deteriorating and impacting the area.

It was noted that there was a marked difference between the performance of different streets and town centres, with some thriving while others found it very difficult to attract new businesses. It was questioned why there was so much difference between one street or town and another. In response, the view was expressed that retail developments on the outskirts of towns were a significant factor. It was noted that towns without nearby external competition tended to perform better, while town centres with significant development on their outskirts faced more pressure. Reference was made to Bangor as a prominent example, and Caernarfon to a lesser extent.

It was further explained that every town was different and faced specific opportunities and challenges. It was noted that Place Making Schemes had been developed over the previous three years for Caernarfon, Bangor, Porthmadog, Pwllheli, Dolgellau and Bala to identify the main challenges and opportunities in each town and to draw up a specific action plan. It was noted that towns across Wales were facing a period of significant change and that there was no single simple or consistent solution for every place. It was emphasised that towns that had been affected by changes in retail needed to be re-purposed, considering what uses and facilities could attract people and make the experience of visiting a town centre more enjoyable. It was noted that a number of external factors influenced town centres and therefore specific solutions needed to be developed for each town.

It was questioned whether parking costs were having a significant impact on town centres. Reference was made to Porthmadog, where people could use a supermarket car park without paying and then walk to the high street, and it was asked whether such arrangements helped the town centre. Reference was made to concerns raised by members from the Bethesda area, in relation to the impact of introducing a charge for the first hour of parking in the Council's car parks on the viability of high street businesses. Although the Environment Department was responsible for parking, it was noted that there was a desire for the matter to be considered across departments due to its economic impact.

In response, reference was made to the report, which already identified matters such as business rate levels and parking fees as potential barriers to increasing vibrancy in town centres. It was noted that parking charges could be a barrier to the economy, but it was emphasised that the car parks generated a significant income for the Council and that consideration needed to be given to how any reduction in charges would be funded. Reference was made to public transport as an option for some residents, including those eligible for free travel on buses. The view was expressed that the matter needed to be considered differently, but it was noted that the fragile financial situation and the need for the Cabinet to consider further cuts made any change challenging. It was confirmed that the matter would be the subject of further discussion by the Cabinet.

Attention was drawn to the significant investment secured for town centre regeneration of around £31 million, noting that the report recognised the difficulty of proving the impact of that investment. Reference was made to an increase in the number of empty properties between 2025 and 2026, following a previous improvement, and to the fact that several additional empty properties were located in Caernarfon, Bangor, Dolgellau and Pwllheli. It was questioned how the Cabinet assessed the effectiveness of the current strategy and what evidence was available to show that the investment was having a long-term impact rather than a temporary one.

In response, it was recognised that impact measurement was an area that needed to be improved. It was explained that the service relied almost entirely on grants to develop and implement projects, and therefore there was a need to work within the guidelines and priorities of the main funding programmes. It was noted that evaluation reports were being carried out to ensure that projects had been implemented in accordance with grant requirements and had achieved the expected outputs and outcomes. However, it was explained that the challenge was to measure the wider impact on the location itself.

It was explained that the matter had been embedded in the new Economic Strategy, with a framework for monitoring and evaluating the difference that the Council was trying to make. It was noted that the method would take into account the direct outputs, the results at a higher level and, ultimately, the impact. It was noted that the model was not perfect due to the large number of other factors influencing local economies, but the hope was expressed that the new structure would enable the Council to create a clearer link between the projects implemented and the results seen. It was confirmed that this work had not been adequately done in previous years and that it was a field that had been identified for improvement.

It was added that measuring the actual difference, impact and outcomes had been one of the main considerations in the development of the new Economic Strategy. Reference was made to the report which set out the types of measures that were intended to be used. It was noted that measuring impact remained difficult due to the constantly changing economy and wider circumstances, but hope was expressed that the new Welsh Government would be able to provide support in this field.

Reference was made to the challenges that on-line shopping was creating for local stores. Dolgellau's performance was compared to Machynlleth, noting that a number of businesses in Machynlleth benefited from cyclist-related economic activity and major facilities in the surrounding area, including bicycle repair and selling businesses, factories, hotels and other services. The view was expressed that Council officers should visit such successful examples and hold discussions to see what lessons could be learnt and what support could be provided to similar enterprises in Gwynedd.

Concern was expressed that much of the funding listed in the report was concentrated on towns, and it was questioned how much support was being provided to communities and areas outside the main towns. Reference was made to a number of projects in Dolgellau and it was noted that despite the investment, the town continued to face challenges and that local businesses were closing or for sale. The need for officers to visit businesses directly and ask what assistance they needed, including whether parking or other factors were at the root of the problems, was emphasised, rather than relying on desk-top information or investing in projects whose impact was uncertain.

In response, it was confirmed that the Service was seeking to visit examples of good practice across Wales to learn from successful projects and interventions. It was explained that the report in question focused specifically on town centres and therefore the figures in it did not provide a complete picture of all the Department's work. It was noted that the figures, for example, did not include community grants and other programmes administered by different services within the Department, and that many groups in rural areas received support through those streams.

The role of local businesses and groups in the regeneration of town centres was emphasised. It was noted that local partnerships were being developed alongside the Place Making Schemes to co-ordinate the action plans and support local organisations to implement projects. Reference was made to the previous year's pilot scheme for town and community councils, which noted that it had been relatively successful and that a similar scheme had been developed for the current year.

It was noted that the business community was a key partner and that the Service sought to ensure that the voice of local businesses and the private sector was included in local partnerships. It was emphasised that the businesses themselves were best placed to explain the challenges they were facing. It was emphasised that the Regeneration Programmes Service was a relatively small service and that the report did not cover the Department's wider work such as business support and events. The view was expressed that there was a need to move away from focusing solely on grants and to consider how different services and provisions within town centres could be intertwined, including parking and responding to business rates challenges.

The work highlighted in the report was welcomed, with particular reference to the Fund for Town and Community Councils. It was noted that economic development and regeneration were important, but that works such as improving footpaths, bus shelters, playgrounds and other local facilities made a significant difference to the quality of life of residents and were highly valued.

It was noted that measuring the direct impact of economic regeneration work was difficult. The view was expressed that data on the number of visitors or the number of people walking through town centres could be one way of generating more direct evidence, but it was noted that any conclusions about the impact of individual activities remained partly theoretical without such data. The challenge was compared to the work of reviving the Welsh language, noting that both areas were facing major social changes that a local authority did not have the capacity to fully manage at a county level.

It was stressed that there was a role to prevent decisions by other parts of the Council from exacerbating negative trends. Reference was made to the location of supermarkets and commercial developments, noting that the location of large shops in the centre or close to a town centre could support the high street, while developments on the outskirts of towns could take activity away from the centre. Reference was made to Porthmadog and Caernarfon as examples where large facilities were close to the town centre, and this was compared to Pwllheli and Bangor where planning or land allocation decisions had led to increased development on the outskirts of towns. The view was expressed that this should be taken into account when considering land allocations for supermarkets and similar developments in the future.

In response, it was noted that the Pride in Place Fund had been set up by the Council prior to the introduction of the Government's scheme of the same name, and it was emphasised that improving the image and quality of towns benefited the local

community. In terms of measuring the number of visitors, it was reported that work had begun in the previous year to track town centre data. Reference was made to Gwynedd's town centre profile for 2025 and it was noted that the 2025/26 figures would be available shortly. It was explained that the data could show trends and patterns over time, but it would not be able to prove a direct link between a particular activity by the Council and the change observed. It was confirmed that the development of the datasets would continue, with the hope that they would become more valuable as long-term trends emerged.

Reference was made to cross-departmental collaboration and it was noted that a number of existing regeneration projects already involved collaborative work. It was reported that the Service was working closely with the Highways, Engineering and YGC Department on town centre projects, as well as joint schemes with the Housing and Property Department. The hope was expressed that this collaboration could be further expanded to address a wider range of issues.

The work of the Department was welcomed and the significant financial pressures faced over recent years were recognised. However, concern was expressed about the level of collaboration between departments in decision-making that affected local economies. Particular reference was made to the recent increase in parking charges, noting the impression that there had not been enough discussion between the Environment Department and the Economy and Community Department prior to making the changes. It was stressed that such decisions should not be made in isolation, as parking fees could have a significant impact on businesses.

It was noted that Gwynedd was a large and diverse county and that a uniform approach was not suitable for all areas. Reference was made to efforts to rationalise parking charges across the county, but the view was expressed that different local circumstances needed to be taken into account when setting the charges, as the impact of changes on businesses and town centres could vary significantly between areas.

It was further emphasised that the impact of parking charges could vary significantly between different areas and even between individual car parks. Llandanwg was given as an example, noting that one small business relied heavily on locals and visitors who stayed for a short time to walk on the beach and visit the café. It was explained that the previous arrangement had enabled people to pay for an hour, but there was now a need to pay £4 for four hours. It was noted that locals, and often visitors on less favourable days, did not wish to stay for four hours, and that the loss of even a small number of customers could have a significant impact on a business employing a few people in a rural area. The need for better collaboration between departments was emphasised and for the economic impact of decisions to be assessed based on the circumstances of each area and, where appropriate, every individual car park.

Clarification was sought as to the way different towns had been defined in the report. Reference was made to Harlech, which was at the bottom of the list, and to Llanbedr and Talsarnau which had not been included. Concern was expressed that the approach of prioritising investment might put less emphasis on smaller villages and towns, although creating or protecting even a small number of jobs could make a significant difference in a small area. It was emphasised that attention needed to be paid to the smaller communities as well as the major towns.

Reference was made to the fund for town and community councils and it was questioned whether the guidance on what could be applied for had been clear enough.

It was noted that a wide range of projects had received support, with some councils receiving significantly higher amounts than others and many had not received funding. In response, it was explained that the Department had contacted all town and community councils to explain the opportunities available, and had again contacted those who had not responded, which had led to further applications. It was emphasised that no application by a council had been refused and that there was an intention to give local councils the freedom to decide which projects were best suited to the needs of their communities. It was explained that the level of funding was allocated on the basis of population, and therefore that larger areas received more money than smaller areas.

It was questioned whether the opportunity to apply for the fund remained open. In response, it was explained that the latest cycle had just closed at the beginning of July. It was noted that examples of successful projects from the previous year had been shared and that councils had been encouraged to submit applications. It was reported that funding had been earmarked for all town and community councils provided they submitted an application, and it was emphasised that several months' notice had been given of the application period. Reference was made to children's playgrounds and green spaces as examples of the type of projects that could be supported to improve community facilities.

In response to the comments regarding collaboration between departments and parking charges, it was confirmed that the comments had been noted and that the Service would be keen to further develop the cross-departmental work over the following months.

In terms of the definition of different towns, it was explained that the Service had not attempted to create a new definition of town centre, but had used the framework that had already been included in the Local Development Plan. It was noted that the scheme identified Bangor as a sub-regional retail centre, Caernarfon, Porthmadog and Pwllheli as urban retail centres, along with a number of local retail centres. Within the National Park area, it was noted that Dolgellau and Bala were identified as local service centres, with Aberdyfi and Harlech being service settlements. It was emphasised that there was a need to be aware that smaller towns could face greater challenges, and that this was one of the reasons for monitoring the number of vacant units across all towns. It was noted that a high percentage of vacant units in a particular town could provide grounds for further consideration of intervention.

Reference was made to the empty property data, noting that the figure given for Harlech did not seem to match the situation on the ground.

In response, it was explained that an Empty Property Officer visited all town centres in May each year and counted the vacant units on the ground floor. It was noted that the area under consideration was based on the town centre boundary in the planning policies, and therefore it could be a relatively limited area. It was explained that the information was then shared with the Research Unit and adapted where necessary. It was explained that the system was not perfect, but that it had been adopted because there was no other consistent method of identifying vacant properties in local areas. It was emphasised that its main value was to provide a consistent snapshot from year to year to be able to identify trends. It was confirmed that the data for Harlech related to the town centre according to the planning definition.

Reference was made to the wider challenges facing local businesses, including large empty buildings such as former pubs or shops that had left town centres. It was noted

that the rural economic situation, wider economic changes, lack of money in residents' pockets and rising energy costs all affected the viability of local businesses. Reference was made to non-domestic rates support as one way the Council could assist businesses to take up empty properties.

A request was made for an update regarding a vacant building, the Corbett Arms Hotel in Tywyn, noting the ongoing cost to taxpayers and concern about how long the issue had taken to be resolved. In response, it was confirmed that work was underway and that a report would be submitted to the Cabinet in September. It was explained that the work had been affected by wildlife matters, and it was recognised that the building was a significant problem that the Council had inherited.

In relation to empty properties more generally, it was noted that the Service was already working with developers and owners through a range of grant schemes. It was noted that contacting some owners was difficult, particularly in Bangor, as many lived outside the area or even outside Wales. Concern was expressed that some individuals were buying properties at a relatively low price, keeping them as assets and allowing them to decline. As a result, it was noted that enforcement options needed to be considered.

It was explained that a grant scheme was in place in Bangor, but it was acknowledged that there were limitations to what could be achieved through grants alone. It was reported that work was underway to consider more proactive options, including whether the Council could directly purchase, restore and lease buildings, or work with local partners to do so. It was noted that such an approach would have implications, but that it could give more control over problematic properties.

The community fund was welcomed and it was noted that it had worked well for many rural community councils. It was questioned whether not-for-profit community companies, which operated shops, cafés or other enterprises and created local jobs, might be eligible to apply. In response, it was noted that the matter could be considered in future, but it was explained that the main purpose of the specific fund was to improve the image of communities through town and community councils, rather than providing direct economic support to businesses. It was noted that other funds were available that may be more suitable for such enterprises.

Reference was made to an idea that had been raised regarding the use of a multi-storey car park in Bangor as a park-and-ride site for Ysbyty Gwynedd, with the possibility that this could attract more people to the city centre. It was noted that there was no certainty that the idea would be feasible, but the view was expressed that there was a need to be prepared to consider different ideas and new approaches to attract people to town centres.

RESOLVED

- **To accept the report and note the observations.**
- **To ask the Cabinet Member for Economy and Community to discuss car parking fees and the impact of changing enforcement hours in car parks on the local economy with the relevant Cabinet Members and departments.**

7. EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD PROGRAMME 2026/27

The Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee's draft work programme for 2026/27 was submitted for adoption.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:

Reference was made to the length of the discussion on the Finance Performance Report earlier in the meeting, noting that a large number of questions had been raised. The view was expressed that it might be more appropriate, where possible, for performance reports to be placed towards the end of meetings rather than at the beginning. It was noted that members tended to be particularly active in raising questions at the beginning of a meeting, and that changing the order of items could assist in better management of the Committee's time.

In response, it was noted that the order of the performance reports varied between meetings, and that the reports had already been placed towards the end of some meetings. It was confirmed that the order of items could be changed in the future if the Committee wished performance reports to be considered towards the end of the meeting.

It was questioned whether the current arrangements for performance scrutiny had been reviewed since their introduction, noting that the reports created a considerable workload for members and took up a significant proportion of meeting time. It was questioned whether any assessment had been carried out to see whether the scheme was more or less effective than the previous arrangements. In response, it was noted that comments had been submitted through the Scrutiny Forum and that discussions were taking place regarding the format of the reports. It was noted that too much information could sometimes affect the effectiveness of scrutiny, and that members' comments about previous arrangements were taken into account. It was explained that this did not necessarily mean that there would be a significant change, but that the arrangements would be reviewed.

It was questioned whether the number of scrutiny meetings during the year could be increased in order to increase the Committee's capacity to carry out its responsibilities. In response, it was explained that this depended on the resources available, along with the need to conduct scrutiny investigations and task and finish groups. It was noted that the matter was one that could be considered further.

Concern was expressed that the performance reports were reducing the time available to scrutinise other items, as well as creating a very significant amount of reading for members. The view was expressed that consideration should be given to reverting to the previous procedure where scrutiny members attended Performance Challenge meetings, but with a more formal procedure to report back to the Committee. It was noted that there had been benefits to the previous procedure, although some Performance Challenge meetings had been cancelled due to lack of availability of officers. It was noted that the current arrangement was more transparent as the scrutiny took place in a public meeting, but that the time burden was significant.

Objection was expressed to imposing an overly strict time limit on discussions. It was emphasised that while meetings could take a long time, it was important that members had the opportunity to raise their matters rather than feeling frustrated because there was no opportunity for them to contribute.

The opinion was expressed that the current system of scrutiny was not working as effectively as it could. Reference was made to previous discussions about changing the structure of scrutiny and clarification was sought of the other models that had been considered. In response, it was noted that local authorities were implementing different models, and that the arrangements in Gwynedd had been reviewed following the work of Audit Wales. It was explained that the current changes needed time to be implemented and evaluated, and it was noted that an election was due to take place in May which would result in new members joining the Council, and therefore this needed to be borne in mind when considering any changes to the existing arrangements.

It was questioned whether previous documents on the alternative scrutiny models were available to share with members. It was confirmed that reports had been submitted to the Governance and Audit Committee and to the Full Council, and they could be shared.

The view was expressed that submitting questions in advance on performance reports and receiving written responses could be another way of reducing discussion time, subject to the time available to prepare the reports. In response to this, concern was expressed that such an arrangement would limit members' ability to ask follow-up questions arising from officers' responses or other members' contributions. It was emphasised that written questions could be submitted directly to officers or Cabinet Members anyway, and that one of the main benefits of a scrutiny meeting was to be able to develop the discussion live.

The view was expressed that there might be value in scrutiny sub-committees to give more attention to departmental matters.

Reference was made to the Education items that had been programmed for December, and concern was expressed that recent performance reports had included a large number of measures but very little direct information about pupils' attainment, their results, literacy and numeracy standards and their core skills. It was emphasised that members, such as corporate parents and governors, had a responsibility to scrutinise pupils' attainment and ensure that children and young people were enabled to fulfil their potential. The view was expressed that data on attainment, including GCSE results in the core subjects, should be included in the performance report in December.

It was noted that the Committee had already made a recommendation at a previous meeting to consider including information and data on pupils' attainment in future performance reports. It was explained that there were Welsh Government restrictions on what data the Education Department could publish, but that the Department would be reminded of the request and be asked about what information could be provided.

The view was expressed that the Committee should consider scrutinising the assurance arrangements and the process of preparing Cabinet reports in complex legal matters, in light of the matters and costs that arose from the Article 4 Direction. In response, it was noted that the item had been included in the list of potential matters for scrutiny during 2026/27 but the item had not been prioritised. Reference was made to recent scrutiny by the Communities Scrutiny Committee and the committee's recommendations in relation to the need to ensure that appropriate external legal advice was received and that risks were fully considered.

Surprise was expressed that the matter had not been considered a priority, given the costs, financial risk and reputational risk to the Council. It was noted that the Education

and Economy Scrutiny Committee had responsibility for scrutiny of the Legal Service, and the view was expressed that the Scrutiny Forum should give further consideration to the matter.

Consideration was given as to when it would be timely to receive an update on the implementation of the recommendations of the Safeguarding Arrangements in Schools Scrutiny Investigation. It was concluded that the Chair and the Scrutiny Adviser should discuss and agree when the item should be programmed.

RESOLVED to adopt the work programme for 2026/27.

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

Chair