

MEETING	Gwynedd Council Cabinet
DATE	28 September 2021
CABINET MEMBER	Councillor Cemlyn Rees Williams
OFFICER	Gwern ap Rhisiart
TITLE OF ITEM	Ysgol Abersoch

1. THE DECISION SOUGHT

The Cabinet is requested to consider the objections received during the statutory objection period and the response to those objections, and determine whether to:

- i. Finally confirm the proposal issued through a statutory notice to close Ysgol Abersoch on 31 December 2021, and provide a place for the pupils at Ysgol Sarn Bach from 1 January 2022 in accordance with Section 53 of the School Standards and Organisation Act (Wales) 2013 and the requirements of the School Organisation Code 011/2018.

2. THE REASON FOR THE NEED FOR A DECISION

- 2.1 The purpose of this report is to report to the Cabinet following conducting an objection period on the proposal issued through a statutory notice to close Ysgol Abersoch on 31 December 2021, and provide a place for the pupils at Ysgol Sarn Bach from 1 January 2022, and ask them to confirm the proposal. The Statutory Notice was published on 25 June 2021, commencing a 28-day objection period. The objection period ended on 23 July 2021 and 211 objections and 2 petitions were received.

3. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 3.1 At its meeting on 17 September 2019, the Cabinet supported a recommendation to commence formal discussions with the governing body of Ysgol Abersoch in order to consider options for the future education provision in the catchment area. The decision came about as a result of concerns regarding a reduction in pupil numbers at the school. Pupil numbers at the school have fallen consistently since 2016 and has been fragile for some time.
- 3.2 Following these meetings, a report was presented to the Cabinet on 15 September 2020, where the recommendation to undertake a statutory consultation process, in accordance with the requirements of section 48 of the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013, on the proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch on 31 August 2021 and to provide a place for the pupils at Ysgol Sarn Bach from 1 September 2021, was approved. The decision was confirmed by the Cabinet at its meeting on 3 November 2020, after the original decision was called in and referred back to the Cabinet by the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 8 October 2020.
- 3.3 The report submitted to the Cabinet on 15 September 2020 outlined the challenges facing the school, in particular:

- i. school numbers are a cause for concern. In September 2020, there were 8 full-time pupils and 2 nursery pupils.
- ii. the class sizes are small - with 10 pupils being taught in one mixed-age class.
- iii. projections show 10 pupils in 2021, 12 pupils in 2022, and 12 pupils in 2023.
- iv. September 2020 data shows that 26 pupils live in the Ysgol Abersoch catchment area with 21 of them attending other schools. It also shows that 5 pupils from outside the Abersoch catchment area attend Ysgol Abersoch.
- v. Ysgol Abersoch receives an additional amount to the usual allocation via the minimum staffing protection policy (which ensures at least a headteacher and teacher at each school, and a headteacher and an assistant in schools with fewer than 15 pupils). The total additional funding for the 2020/21 financial year (based on the numbers in September 2019) was £52,582.
- vi. The per pupil cost for Ysgol Abersoch during the 2020/21 financial year was £17,404, compared with the county-wide average per pupil cost of £4,198 for the same period.
- vii. Number of surplus spaces - 76% surplus places at the school (32 in total).

4. THE STATUTORY CONSULTATION

- 4.1 In accordance with the requirements of the School Organisation Code 011/2018 and the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013, a period of statutory consultation on the proposal was held with relevant consultees between 12 January 2021 and 23 February 2021.
- 4.2 A statutory consultation document was produced in accordance with the requirements and guidance of the School Organisation Code 011/2018 and an electronic copy was distributed to all relevant consultees. In addition, hard copies of all documents were sent out at the request of consultees. The consultation document together with all background documents can be seen on the Council's website www.gwynedd.llyw.cymru/modernisingeducation.
- 4.3 During the consultation period, Gwynedd Council officers held virtual "drop-in" sessions via Microsoft Teams software, where invitations had been sent out to governors, teaching and ancillary staff, parents/guardians of Ysgol Abersoch pupils and any stakeholders from the community of Llanengan who wished to ask questions about the proposal. During the sessions, officers from relevant departments were available to explain and respond to enquiries, in order to enable the individuals to contribute to the consultation. 7 people attended the virtual drop-in sessions.
- 4.4 Also, a consultation document was created for primary school children with accompanying questionnaires. Arrangements were made for an independent facilitator to hold virtual sessions with the 2 schools that were subject to the consultation in order to ascertain the views of pupils on the proposal.
- 4.5 154 responses were received to the statutory consultation, elaborating on the following issues:
 - Objections to the proposal
 - Comments on the statutory process
 - Alternative options
 - Educational matters
 - Financial matters
 - Assessment against the Well-being Act
 - Post-use of the school site
 - Nearby schools
 - Transport and travel
 - The community
 - The Welsh language
 - Abersoch Cylch Meithrin and Cylch Ti a Fi
 - Other

4.6 Also, during the consultation period, a response was received from Estyn which noted that the proposal was "likely to at least maintain the existing standards of primary education in the area".

4.7 Other alternative options suggested during the statutory consultation

4.7.1 The School Organisation Code 011/2018, notes that consultees are able to suggest other alternative options as well as observations on the proposal in question during the consultation.

4.7.2 5 other alternative options were suggested during the consultation. (A number of the responses suggested that further consideration should also be given to the option to extend the school's age range to 3-9) However, after appraising these options against the factors of the 'Excellent Primary Education for Children in Gwynedd' strategy (whilst considering the School Organisation Code 011/2018 and other relevant considerations), it was concluded that the proposal of closing Ysgol Abersoch and providing a place for all the children of the Ysgol Abersoch catchment area at Ysgol Sarn Bach remained the most appropriate option to respond to the challenges faced by the school (for the reasons noted in section 4.1 and 4.7 of the report on the consultation www.gwynedd.llyw.cymru/modernisingeducation).

4.8 Changing the date of implementation

4.8.1 Despite the consultation being held on the proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch on 31 August 2021 and provide a place for pupils in Ysgol Sarn Bach from 1 September 2021, following consideration of the observations received from the consultation expressing concern about the outline timetable, it was recommended that the implementation date be adapted. It was considered that deferring implementation until 31 December 2021 would allow more time for the Education Department to put arrangements in place in order to ensure a smooth transition for pupils from Ysgol Abersoch to Ysgol Sarn Bach.

4.8.2 Following the consultation, it was reported back to Cabinet on 15 June 2021, and the Cabinet considered the consultation report, the observations and alternative options received during the statutory consultation period, and resolved to:

- i. Approve the issuing of a statutory proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch on 31 December 2021, and provide a place for the pupils at Ysgol Sarn Bach from 1 January 2022.
- ii. Approve the issuing of statutory notices on the proposal in (i) above in accordance with the requirements of Section 48 of the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013.

5. STATUTORY OBJECTION PERIOD

5.1 In accordance with the Cabinet's decision of 15 June 2021 a statutory notice was issued, in accordance with the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013 and School Organisation Code 011/2018, commencing a 28-day statutory objection period between 25 June and 23 July 2021.

5.2 The statutory notice was issued on 25 June and placed on the gates of Ysgol Abersoch and Ysgol Sarn Bach and on the Council's website www.gwynedd.llyw.cymru/modernisingeducation . Electronic copies of the notice were distributed in accordance with the requirements of the School Organisation Code 011/2018, and the relevant stakeholders received an e-mail with a link to the website to inform them of the objection period and procedure. It was clearly stated in the notice that it was possible for anybody to object and how it was possible to do so.

5.3 The objection period ended on 23 July 2021, and 211 objections had been received and 2 petitions. Following the objection period, the Cabinet is required to consider a formal report of the objections and the response to them prior to reaching a final decision to implement the proposal or not. **Appendix A** includes an analysis of the objections received and the Council's response to those objections.

6. OBJECTIONS RECEIVED DURING THE OBJECTION PERIOD

The purpose of this part of the report is to present a summary of the objections received during the objection period, together with the Council's response. All the objections and comments and the Council's response to them are noted in **Appendix A** of this report.

6.1 The Objections

Correspondence (letter or e-mail)	Petition	Total
211	2 (1 online + 1 Friends of Ysgol Abersoch)	213

6.1.1 A total of 211 objections were received via e-mail or letter. It is worth noting that many of the comments received were submitted during the statutory consultation period and re-submitted as part of the objection period.

6.1.2 As well as the individual objections, two petitions were received:

- An online petition with 1,884 signatures stating *"The Ysgol Abersoch opened in 1924. Unfortunately, the school is under pressure to close. The staff of the school are incredibly passionate to keep the school open and to celebrate 100 years in 2024! The school is at the very heart of the village of Abersoch, North Wales, and also in the hearts of all students, former, current or future, parents and all the locals. Please, sign this petition to show support for this school and stop the closure. Sign to support the local community, please!"*
- A petition by the Friends of Ysgol Abersoch with 1,115 signatures stating *"Gwynedd Council is consulting on the proposal to close the school from 31 August 2021. Please sign this petition in support of Ysgol Abersoch, which provides an excellent education and is crucial in the safeguarding of the Welsh language and culture in the heart of our community."*

6.1.3 After the objection period closing date, the objection comments were analysed and the Council response to these was provided under the following headings:

- Objections to the proposal without comment
- The community
- Educational matters
- The Welsh language
- Abersoch Cylch Meithrin / Cylch Ti a Fi
- Comments on the statutory process
- Transport and travel
- Impact on learners
- Staff
- Nearby schools
- Financial matters
- Alternative options
- Well-being Act
- Post-use of the school site
- Implementation date of the proposal
- Other

6.1.4 The analysis can be seen in full in **Appendix A** but a summary of the main objection comments received, together with the Council's response to these, is provided below.

6.2 Objections to the proposal without comment

6.2.1 63 expressed opposition to the proposal only without including any comment or reason why, e.g. "I object to the closure of Ysgol Abersoch.", "I'm against this school closing!!" and "I do not agree that this school should be closed and I reject any attempt to close it."

6.3 The community

6.3.1 The main comments raised during the objection period was to the impact of the proposal on the community and related to the following issues:

- **The school is the heart of the village**
- **The school supports village life and is a key part of the village**
- **Closing the school would have a negative impact on the village and the Welsh language**
- **Lack of relationship with the community of Ysgol Sarn Bach**

6.3.2 The Council notes the comments in relation to the importance of the school to the life of the village and community of Abersoch.

6.3.3 When developing any proposals relating to education modernisation, full consideration must be given to the potential impact on the community.

6.3.4 As part of the consultation process, an assessment of the community impact of the options under consideration was carried out in order to gauge the probable impact the options would have on the communities in question. In accordance with the requirements of the School Organisation Code 011/2018, following the consultation period, a further assessment of the proposal and each of the alternative options considered was completed. A copy of the full assessment can be found on the Council's website www.gwynedd.llyw.cymru/modernisingeducation

6.3.5 The assessment noted that the closure of Ysgol Abersoch would affect some elements of community events and that there would be some negative impact from closing the school. However, it was noted that 9 (35%) of Nursery - Year 3 pupils who live in the Ysgol Abersoch catchment area already attended Ysgol Sarn Bach. Consequently, it is concluded that a link already exists between the alternative school and the broader area.

6.3.6 To mitigate any potential negative impact on the community should the proposal be implemented, the assessment notes the importance of ensuring that the community of Abersoch is included in the activities of the alternative school, and to encourage community collaboration between the alternative school and the Abersoch community, where appropriate.

6.3.7 Consequently, , should the proposal be implemented, it will be required as part of the process to encourage discussions between the alternative school and the parents of Ysgol Abersoch pupils so that parents and pupils take advantage of their facilities and after-school activities, and to encourage the alternative school to also take advantage of the facilities of the community of Abersoch.

6.4 Educational matters

The main comments raised during the objection period related to the following issues:

6.4.1 Numbers - comments were received stating that there is a possibility that Ysgol Abersoch pupil numbers could increase in the future.

6.4.2 The Authority has prioritised Ysgol Abersoch for a review of the educational provision as it faces a number of challenges. Pupil numbers at the school have fallen consistently since 2016 and the figure has been fragile for some time.

6.4.3 As a result of the current low numbers, and projections that numbers will remain low at Ysgol Abersoch for the next five years, the school is in a vulnerable position and under increasing budgetary pressures.

6.4.4 The Council notes the comments; however, bearing in mind the size of the projected increase in pupil numbers, it is likely that the challenges facing Ysgol Abersoch will continue.

- 6.4.5 Although 2 nursery pupils and 3 reception pupils started in September 2020, unfortunately this has not led to a significant increase in the numbers.
- 6.4.6 In September 2020, 8 full-time pupils and 2 part-time pupils were registered at the school, compared with 2 part-time pupils and 7 full-time pupils in September 2019.
- 6.4.7 As a result of the low pupil numbers, the number of surplus places in Ysgol Abersoch (Reception - Yr 3) is 26 (76%).
- 6.4.8 It is noted in the School Organisation Code 011/2018 that "It is important that funding for education is cost effective. Relevant bodies should consider the following factors in relation to the resourcing of education: What effect proposals will have on surplus places in the area; Some spare places are necessary to enable schools to cope with fluctuations in numbers of pupils, but excessive numbers of unused places that could be removed mean that resources are tied up unproductively."
- 6.4.9 Projections - Comments were received which questioned the accuracy of the projections contained in the consultation document and suggesting that numbers may increase in the future.**
- 6.4.10 In accordance with the requirements of the School Organisation Code 011/2018, the proposers are asked to note "five year forecasts of pupil on roll at all existing schools likely to be affected by the proposals, currently (i.e. based on the existing configuration of schools)".
- 6.4.11 The five-year pupil projections have been created by using information about past trends. Three-year projections are provided by the headteachers of the individual schools and the year 4 and 5 projections are calculated by the Authority.
- 6.4.12 It is acknowledged that calculating projections is not a science, and numbers may vary a little in reality. Nevertheless, the Education Department is of the opinion, based on the numbers in September 2020, and the average admission numbers of the previous 3 years, that the numbers will remain low at Ysgol Abersoch for the next five years:

Table 1 - Number projections for Ysgol Abersoch

	M	D	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
September 2020	2	3	2	0	3	-	-	-	10
September 2021 Projection	3	2	3	2	0	-	-	-	10
September 2022 Projection	2	3	2	3	2	-	-	-	12
September 2023 Projection	2	2	3	2	3	-	-	-	12
September 2024 Projection	2	2	2	3	2	-	-	-	11
September 2025 Projection	2	2	2	2	3	-	-	-	11

- 6.4.13 In September 2020, of the 26 pupils (3-8 years) who lived in the Ysgol Abersoch catchment area, 5 of those children attended Ysgol Abersoch, with 21 (81%) of them attending schools outside the catchment area. As a result, in response to comments noting that the numbers and population of children in the area will increase over the next 20-25 years, based on the figures for September 2020, it is concluded that it cannot be guaranteed that those children would choose to attend Ysgol Abersoch.
- 6.4.14 Class sizes - Some responses questioned the size of mixed classes that existed at Ysgol Sarn Bach. Concerns were noted that nearby schools already exceeded 20, which is contrary to the Education Department's Strategy, and that implementing the proposal would exacerbate the situation. Concern was noted that the proposal would mean that pupils were educated in overfull classes.**

6.4.15 With 21 surplus places (and 4 surplus places in the Nursery), Ysgol Sarn Bach has sufficient capacity for the number of pupils from Ysgol Abersoch and Ysgol Sarn Bach, currently and for the next five years.

6.4.16 Should the proposal be realised, it is anticipated that there would be 21 children in the Foundation Phase and 37 in KS2 at Ysgol Sarn Bach. It would be expected for the Headteacher and Governing Body of the alternative school to give due attention to determining suitable class sizes and school staff resources to respond to the latest numbers. The increase in their annual budget would facilitate options to consider additional class(es) and staff.

6.4.17 In accordance with the School Organisation Code 011/2018, in the case of a proposal to reorganise schools, the consultation document had to include details about all the surrounding schools to which it might reasonably be considered that pupils may wish to transfer. As a result, details of Ysgol Sarn Bach, Ysgol Llanbedrog and Ysgol Foel Gron were included in the document in addition to the details of Ysgol Abersoch.

6.4.18 It is emphasised that the proposal that was the subject of the statutory consultation was to close Ysgol Abersoch and to offer a place for the pupils at Ysgol Sarn Bach. As noted in the consultation document, *"This consultation only relates to Ysgol Abersoch and Ysgol Sarn Bach; therefore, responses to this consultation should only refer to the proposal as described in paragraph 1.1 above."* Therefore, it is not considered that the class sizes of nearby schools (Ysgol Foel Gron and Ysgol Llanbedrog) are relevant to the proposal.

6.4.19 Advantages of small schools - A comment was received suggesting that the fact that Ysgol Abersoch had a low number of pupils had been of advantage during the COVID-19 period.

6.4.20 All schools in Gwynedd have followed appropriate procedures for keeping pupils and staff safe in accordance with Public Health Wales, Welsh Government and Authority guidelines.

6.4.21 Quality of the education - Some comments noted that the education at Ysgol Abersoch was excellent. Others were of the opinion that the proposal would not strengthen the education, and believed that the documentation did not note the successes and strengths of the school.

6.4.22 Based on the outcome of the assessment of the Probable Impact on the Quality and Standards of Education, it is concluded that the quality of the education provided at Ysgol Sarn Bach is at the same level as the quality of education at Ysgol Abersoch. Consequently, it is not anticipated any negative impact would derive in terms of the quality and standards of education from the proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch and transfer the pupils to Ysgol Sarn Bach. The information in the assessment followed the latest Estyn inspections of the schools in question, noting that each of the schools had been placed in at least an equivalent category to Ysgol Abersoch, and each of the schools had been placed in the yellow or green in terms of the Welsh Government's support category.

6.4.23 A summary of the latest Estyn reports:

School	Inspection year	How good are the outcomes?	How good is the provision?	How good are leadership and management?
Abersoch	June 2017	Good	Good	Good

* (Note that Estyn had introduced five areas for inspection by October 2017.)

School	Inspection year	Standards	Well-being and attitudes to learning	Teaching and learning experiences	Care, support and guidance	Leadership and management
Sarn Bach	October 2017	Good	Good	Good	Good	Good

- 6.4.24 In assessing the likely impact of the proposal on Estyn's five inspection areas, in the context of 'Leadership and Management' the Authority identified that the likely impact of implementing the proposal would be neutral, given that Estyn's judgment of the quality of leadership at Ysgol Abersoch and Ysgol Sarn Bach was that they were as good as each other.
- 6.4.25 In addition, Estyn noted in its response to the statutory consultation that it was "of the opinion that the proposal is likely to at least maintain the existing standards of primary education in the area".
- 6.4.26 Realising this option would give pupils an opportunity to be educated in peer groups with much less of an age range and an opportunity to improve the educational and social experience of the pupils, on a daily basis. The needs of any vulnerable groups, including children with additional learning needs, would be assessed and implemented in line with the Authority's policy and procedures. The quality and standards of education are elaborated upon further in Section 7.2 of the consultation document and a full assessment of the probable impact on the quality and standards of education can be seen on the website www.gwynedd.llyw.cymru/modernisingeducation.

6.5 The Welsh language

- 6.5.1 A number of comments were received referring to the school's influence on the language and culture of Abersoch and in losing the school, this would have a negative impact on the amount of Welsh being spoken in everyday circumstances in the village of Abersoch.**
- 6.5.2 Comments were received noting that the residents and businesses of Abersoch were aware of the existence of the Welsh language because of all the work done by the teachers and pupils to promote the language, with a number of shops displaying bilingual signage as a result.**
- 6.5.3 In response to these observations, the Council acknowledged Ysgol Abersoch's efforts to develop the learners' bilingual skills as well as promote the importance of the Welsh language and culture more broadly in the community, and conveyed appreciation of the community's consequent support to the school and to the Welsh language. In response to the comments, it was noted that the Council also acknowledged the concerns regarding the potential impact on the Welsh language. Nevertheless, the Authority expects that all primary schools in the county support and improve the use of the Welsh language as a medium of education and as the social language of pupils, as the linguistic expectations are the same for all Gwynedd primary schools.
- 6.5.4 To mitigate any potential negative impact on the community should the proposal be implemented, the language impact assessment notes the importance of ensuring that the community of Abersoch is included in the activities of the alternative school, and to encourage community collaboration between the alternative school and the Abersoch community, where appropriate. In addition, the Council noted that the community impact assessment notes that it is anticipated that there would be some negative impact as a result of closing the school. However, it was noted that 9 (35%) of Nursery - Yr 3 pupils who live in the Ysgol Abersoch catchment area already attended Ysgol Sarn Bach; therefore, it is concluded that a link already exists between the school and the broader area.
- 6.5.5 Reference was also made to the success of Ysgol Abersoch in gaining the Welsh Language Charter gold award for its efforts to promote social use of Welsh, thus realising one of the main priorities of the Council and Welsh Government.**
- 6.5.6 It is acknowledged that Ysgol Abersoch has worked hard to develop the learners' bilingual skills and promote the importance of Welsh culture and that the school gained the Welsh Language Charter gold award in 2019. Therefore, it is vital that the proposal acknowledges the need to support and continue with this work.

6.5.7 A number of the respondents also refer specifically to the ambitious aspiration of Welsh Government to promote Welsh-medium education and the use of Welsh in the workplace, in order to reach the target of a million Welsh speakers by 2050, and that the proposal to close the school is contrary to this national goal.

6.5.8 In response to the comments, it was noted that the Council, in the consultation document, had noted that any discussions relating to reorganisation needed to acknowledge Welsh Government's effort to reach the target of a million Welsh speakers by 2050. It was also noted that the Council acknowledged the concerns regarding the possible impact on the Welsh language and had completed an assessment of the proposal's linguistic impact from closing Ysgol Abersoch and educating the pupils at Ysgol Sarn Bach. In the assessment, it is concluded that no negative impact is anticipated on the Welsh language should the proposal be implemented, mainly as a result of the expectations of the Language Policy, so the provision would be the same for the pupils, regardless of what school they choose to attend. It also appears that the linguistic situation of Ysgol Sarn Bach is strong, with 57% of the school's pupils coming from Welsh-speaking homes, compared with 33% of Ysgol Abersoch pupils who come from Welsh-speaking homes.

6.6 Cylch Meithrin / Cylch Ti a Fi

6.6.1 It was felt that the school was sustainable due to the impact of the Cylch Meithrin and Cylch Ti a Fi.

6.6.2 The Authority recognises the influence of Cylchoedd Ti a Fi and Cylchoedd Meithrin on pupil numbers in schools where they are located. However, in the case of Ysgol Abersoch, given the scale of the increase that would result from the Cylch Meithrin, it was likely that the challenges facing Ysgol Abersoch would continue.

6.6.3 The projections in the consultation document were based on three-year projections submitted by school headteachers. Estimated five-year projections are based on average school admission numbers over the last three years. As a result, the Education Department is of the opinion, based on the numbers in September 2020, and the average admission numbers of the previous three years, that the numbers will remain low at Ysgol Abersoch for the next five years:

Table 1 - Number projections for Ysgol Abersoch

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September 2024 Projection	2	2	2	3	2	-	-	-	11
September 2025 Projection	2	2	2	2	3	-	-	-	11

6.6.4 It should be noted that the projections above were calculated on the basis of numbers in the September following the establishment of the Cylch Meithrin.

6.6.5 In addition to this, in September 2020, of the 26 pupils (3-8 years) who lived in the Ysgol Abersoch catchment area, 5 of those children attended Ysgol Abersoch, with 21 (81%) of them attending schools outside the catchment area. As a result, in response to comments noting that the numbers and population of children in the area will increase over the next 20-25 years, based on the figures for September 2020 and previous trends, it is concluded that it cannot be guaranteed that those children would choose to attend Ysgol Abersoch.

6.6.6 As shown in the table above, we note a projected increase of 2 by September 2022. In order for any option to respond to the challenges facing the school, the increase in numbers would have to be substantial. The Authority is not of the opinion that an increase of 2 pupils is an adequate increase to address the school's challenges.

6.6.7 The Future of the Cylch Meithrin - Several of the comments noted concerns regarding the future of the Cylch Meithrin and the Cylch Ti a Fi in Abersoch, should the proposal be implemented and that the Council should have begun to discuss options for its future before now.

6.6.8 In response to the comments, it is noted that closing the Cylch Meithrin is not part of the proposal under consideration and that the Council is eager to see the continuation of the Cylch in Abersoch. It is noted in the community impact assessment "A Cylch Meithrin and Cylch Ti a Fi is held in the school building. Should a decision be made to close the school, options for the post-use of the school would have to be considered, taking the activities currently held at the school into account."

6.6.9 Should the proposal go ahead, the Council is eager to discuss the possibilities with the relevant representatives - the possibilities could include staying at the current location, relocating to the alternative school, or moving to another site in the village of Abersoch.

6.6.10 Discussing these possibilities with the Cylch before the Cabinet made the final decision on the future of Ysgol Abersoch would have been premature and created a risk that the Council would be seen as prejudicing the process.

6.7 The Statutory Process

6.7.1 A number of comments were received noting discontent with the decision to hold the consultation, specifically in relation to the COVID-19 restrictions. In addition, some responses expressed discontent with the decision to hold virtual meetings instead of public meetings.

6.7.2 The Education Department is confident that the statutory consultation process held was in compliance with the requirements and guidance of the School Organisation Code 011/2018. As part of the statutory consultation:

- A consultation document was published, as well as the relevant background documents, in the form of an electronic copy on the Council's website (with hard copies available upon request).
- Electronic copies of the document were distributed to the relevant stakeholders.
- Written observations/responses were received through the post and via e-mail.

6.7.3 The Code does not impose a requirement to hold public/consultation meetings. Instead, the Code notes that "Proposers may use other ways to engage consultees as they think appropriate".

6.7.4 In previous consultations, the Education Department has held "drop-in" sessions to discuss the proposal with the parents, governors and staff of the school in question. As a result of COVID-19 restrictions, it was not possible to conduct the "drop-in" sessions in the same manner. Nevertheless, in order to ensure that the stakeholders of Ysgol Abersoch had the same opportunity to receive information, ask for an explanation and make insertions, "drop-in" sessions were held via virtual meeting software. A maximum of 3 was set for each virtual session in order to ensure that everyone who attended benefited from a comprehensive and fair discussion. 0 sessions were offered over 4 evenings, and 7 people attended the virtual drop-in sessions.

6.7.5 In addition, an opportunity was given to stakeholders to submit questions regarding the proposal via e-mail to the Education Department.

6.7.6 Sympathy was expressed with the concerns of holding a consultation during the pandemic; nevertheless, it is emphasised that we, as an Authority cannot commit not to deal with the school for an unspecified time. In addition, Welsh Government published a notice on 8 January 2021 to allow proposals regarding school organisation to continue, where not all schools were open.

- 6.7.7 It is believed that the number of responses received to the consultation is evidence that conducting it during the COVID-19 period has not unduly disrupted the consultees' ability to participate.
- 6.7.8 Some respondents noted discontent with the process of consulting with children and young people.**
- 6.7.9 In accordance with the School Organisation Code 011/2018, it is required, as part of any statutory consultation, to hold a consultation with the children and young people of the schools that are the subject of the consultation in order to ascertain their feelings about the proposal.
- 6.7.10 Virtual consultation sessions were held with a representation of pupils from the primary schools that were the subject of the consultation. Arrangements were made for an independent facilitator to hold virtual sessions with schools that were part of the consultation in order to ascertain the views of pupils.
- 6.7.11 As part of the consultation with children and young people, appropriate documents were prepared for the pupils of Ysgol Abersoch and the Ysgol Sarn Bach School Council, and arrangements were made that a facilitator held three meetings over the internet (Google Meet) with both schools to discuss the proposal with the children in order to ensure that they understood what was being proposed and in order to give them an opportunity to express an opinion about the proposal. The parents of Ysgol Abersoch were present and they were encouraged by the facilitator to speak on behalf of their children in order to strengthen the process of ascertaining the views of the children on the potential impact on them, should the school close.
- 6.7.12 Each session took forty-five minutes to complete, and pupils were divided into three groups, Year 3 Pupils in Ysgol Abersoch, Foundation Phase Pupils in Ysgol Abersoch and Ysgol Sarn Bach School Council. The session included an explanation of the proposal and gave the pupils an opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings.
- 6.7.13 Some comments were received which noted the opinion that the impact assessments and the details noted on the response form were insufficient.**
- 6.7.14 As part of the statutory process, when developing a proposal(s) for school reorganisation, the Authority must carry out assessment in accordance with the School Organisation Code 011/2018. We are of the opinion that the assessments submitted as part of the consultation correspond with Welsh Government's national guidance for school reorganisation. Similarly, the Authority is confident that our processes and response form met the requirements of the Code.
- 6.7.15 A number of objections were received noting that the Cylch Meithrin had not been included in the consultation process.**
- 6.7.16 We received a response from Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin and Cylch Meithrin Abersoch as part of the consultation. Unfortunately, after the consultation closing date, it became apparent that the representatives of the Cylch Meithrin had not received a copy of the e-mail, informing them of the statutory consultation. As noted in the consultation document, we had included the Cylch as a consultee in the distribution list for sharing information about the consultation, but it appears that the Cylch's e-mail address was spelt incorrectly and so the information was not received. We wish to apologise for this error.
- 6.7.17 In order to ensure that the representatives of the Cylch Meithrin had an opportunity to consider the consultation document in accordance with the timetable provided in the Organisation Code 011/2018, the Cylch was given an opportunity to send any further comments to us by 1pm on Wednesday, 21 April 2021. No further response was received from the representatives of the Cylch during the extended consultation period.

6.7.18 Some noted that there were errors in the consultation document, and that this undermined their confidence in the consultation.

6.7.19 The Council is confident in the accuracy of the information submitted in the consultation document. The Council accepts that the location of Ysgol Sarn Bach on the map in the document is incorrect but that this did not affect the consultation.

6.7.20 Comments were received alleging that the decision had been made and that the Council had not taken sufficient account of comments received from stakeholders during the statutory consultation.

6.7.21 In response to the comments that the decision had already been made, it is emphasised that the consultation on the proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch and offer a place for pupils in Ysgol Sarn Bach, was held between 12 January and 23 February 2021 and, in accordance with the requirements of the School Organisation Code 011/2018, following the statutory consultation, a report on the consultation was submitted to the Cabinet in order to summarise the matters raised by the consultees and note the Council's response to those matters. After considering this comprehensive report, the Cabinet approved the issuing of a statutory notice on the proposal and held an objection period to give anyone the opportunity to object to the proposal. This report sets out the objections and the Council's response to them for the Cabinet's consideration and final decision on the future of Ysgol Abersoch. It is believed that these actions are clear evidence that the decision has not been made and that the Authority's processes ensure that fair consideration is given to stakeholders' comments and objections before deciding.

6.7.22 Comments were received asking why one response to the statutory consultation was not published in the Cabinet report of 15 June 2021.

6.7.23 There was one response received which referred to the arrangements and standard of a presentation given at consultation meeting (School Review Panel) held with stakeholders in Ysgol Abersoch, citing concerns regarding a lack of inclusivity as not everyone could follow the presentation.

6.7.24 As this part of the response did not respond directly to the proposal and contained personal information about the author of the comment as well as that of another individual present at the meeting, it was felt that it would not be appropriate to publish the response in full. It was therefore decided to respond to the issue and complaint in question by contacting the individual directly, stating:

"We can confirm that part of your response was edited because it contained personal information and was considered a complaint about the arrangements of a specific meeting held prior to the statutory consultation and that the comments raised were not in relation to the consultation itself.

It was felt that the appropriate way to respond to this particular matter was to reply to you directly. I would therefore like to apologise sincerely that the format of our meetings has caused you concern. In response to your concerns, when arranging future meetings, particular attention will be paid to the format of the presentations, and we assure you that invitations to the meetings will include the opportunity for participants to note any further requirements."

6.7.25 The remainder of the letter was published, along with responses to the other relevant points, as part of the report presented to Cabinet on 15 June 2021.

6.8 Transport and Travel

6.8.1 Some comments noted how convenient Ysgol Abersoch is as it is possible to walk to the school and that taking the children to Ysgol Sarn Bach would be inconvenient for parents. Others noted concern at the potential impact on travel arrangements to the school, drawing attention to the fact that the walking route from Ysgol Abersoch to Ysgol Sarn Bach is dangerous.

- 6.8.2 The Gwynedd Council Strategy for primary education aims to restrict travel from home to school to a one-way journey of no more than 30 minutes. Free transportation is available for primary school pupils who live two miles or more from the school in their catchment area.
- 6.8.3 By moving to the alternative school, it is not anticipated that any pupil will need to travel an unreasonable distance to reach an educational site, in accordance with the strategy. Ysgol Abersoch is located 1.4 miles from the current Ysgol Sarn Bach site and it is anticipated that the journey would take approximately five minutes each way in a car or bus.
- 6.8.4 In line with Gwynedd Council's transport policy, learners who receive a primary or secondary education (with the exception of learners with additional learning needs or disabilities), would be expected to walk up to two miles to meet any modes of transport provided by Gwynedd Council along the shortest route.
- 6.8.5 As the route from Abersoch to Ysgol Sarn Bach is considered a dangerous one, transport would be provided in accordance with the County's school transport policy.
- 6.8.6 Clarification was sought on the increase in transport costs if the proposal were implemented, and how the estimated transport costs were calculated.**
- 6.8.7 A primary school bus is already operational between Abersoch and Ysgol Sarn Bach, and it is anticipated that there would be enough empty seats for the current pupils of Ysgol Abersoch - therefore, no additional transport costs are anticipated from implementing the proposal.
- 6.8.8 However, as noted in the consultation document, if transport would need to be provided for all pupils in the Ysgol Abersoch catchment area, including those pupils already attending Ysgol Sarn Bach, then there would be a need to adapt the current transport arrangements at Ysgol Sarn Bach.
- 6.8.9 The current cost of transporting pupils from Abersoch to Ysgol Sarn Bach is £16,500. If the current arrangements would need to be amended, it is estimated that a 49 seater bus would be needed, to provide transport for all pupils in Reception to Year 6 in the catchment area, at a cost of £30,500. Therefore, this would lead to an increase in costs of £14,000.
- 6.8.10 Some comments noted that the proposal would have an impact on the environment as there would be a need to travel further to the school.**
- 6.8.11 As a bus already carries key stage 2 pupils from Abersoch to Ysgol Sarn Bach, and we anticipate that there will be enough room on that bus (or a larger bus) for children in the Abersoch catchment area, an increase in CO2 emissions is not envisaged.
- 6.8.12 It was asked how many pupils will need transport to Ysgol Sarn Bach.**
- 6.8.13 Should the proposal be implemented, we will arrange a survey with the parents/guardians of children who wish to transfer to Ysgol Sarn Bach in order to ascertain how many pupils will require free transportation from Abersoch. This will give the Authority definitive numbers to decide whether a larger bus will be needed.
- 6.8.14 It was asked how many pupils were taking advantage of the empty seats scheme, and whether those pupils were paying for the transport in accordance with the policy.**
- 6.8.15 As part of the Empty Seats Scheme, the Council is willing to consider applications from learners who attend a school (or school site) other than the catchment area school (or school site) to take advantage of any

empty seats on contracted vehicles by paying the current out-of-catchment fee. Taking advantage of the scheme is subject to:

- The availability of empty seats
- The vehicle not having to divert from its usual route
- No additional costs to the Council
- Paying the current fee for empty seats.

6.8.16 All learners who applied for transportation would have paid for an empty seats scheme to travel on the designated school bus. Between 3 and 6 learners have taken advantage of this scheme since 2017.

6.8.17 Discontent was noted about the lack of a transport offer for nursery age pupils.

6.8.18 In accordance with the Gwynedd transport policy, it is the responsibility of parents to make transportation arrangements for nursery age pupils.

6.9 Impact on learners

6.9.1 Comments were received that children would suffer if Ysgol Abersoch closed as they would have to start again at a new school.

6.9.2 In response to these comments, the Authority acknowledges that this period is one of uncertainty that could lead to stress and an impact on learners. However, should the proposal be implemented, the Authority would make every effort to assist the learners to transfer and settle at their new school.

6.9.3 The Council is of the opinion that the option of closing Ysgol Abersoch and offering a place for the pupils at Ysgol Sarn Bach would lead to:

- Reducing the number of surplus places within the schools
- Offering experiences for pupils to socialise and collaborate with peers on a daily basis
- Educating the children in more suitably-sized classes
- Reconciling the cost per pupil range for all pupils in the County
- Ensuring that the children transfer only once in their primary and secondary education, rather than twice

6.9.3 The alternative school also offers an education of equivalent standard at least, and provides pupils with more opportunities for collaborating and socialising with their peers, and enables the pupils to gain a range of curricular and extracurricular experiences.

6.10 Impact on staff

6.10.1 An objection was received which questioned what would happen to school staff if a decision was made to implement the proposal.

6.10.2 Should the proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch be implemented, it is anticipated that the staffing implications will lead to redundancies as the posts will end when the school closes. There was consultation with staff and Union representatives specifically as part of the statutory consultation period. Any redundancies arising as a result of the proposal will be required to comply with the relevant employment law and the Gwynedd Redundancy scheme. Clear and open communication with staff will be a core part of the implementation of any proposal.

6.10.3 During the consultation, virtual drop-in sessions were held where arrangements could be made for officers from the Council's Human Resources service to be in attendance, if any member of staff wished to discuss his/her situation. Staff were informed that they were welcome to contact the Human Resources service directly if they wished to have one-to-one discussions. A support package will be offered, including training, if appropriate, to all staff affected by the proposal.

6.10.4 Subject to the Cabinet decision, the Human Resources Service will follow relevant processes with the school staff in accordance with employment law.

6.11 Nearby schools

6.11.1 A number of objections were received noting that Ysgol Llanbedrog was over capacity.

6.11.2 In response to these comments, it is noted that Gwynedd Council operates in accordance with the County's School Admissions Policy. The admissions policy corresponds to the requirements of Welsh Government's School Admissions Code.

6.11.3 The Authority is not of the opinion that the situation regarding numbers at Ysgol Llanbedrog is relevant to the proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch and offer a place for the pupils at Ysgol Sarn Bach.

6.11.4 An objection was received which questioned whether there was enough space at Ysgol Sarn Bach for Abersoch children.

6.11.5 With 21 surplus places (and 4 surplus places for Nursery), Ysgol Sarn Bach has sufficient capacity for the number of pupils currently at Ysgol Abersoch and Ysgol Sarn Bach and for the next five years.

6.11.6 One or two referred to the impact of building an extension at Ysgol Llanbedrog on the pupils' education.

6.11.7 In response to this, it was explained that there was no intention to build an extension to Ysgol Llanbedrog as a part of the proposal that was the subject of the consultation. For clarity, the proposal is to close Ysgol Abersoch, and offer a place for the pupils at Ysgol Sarn Bach.

6.11.8 One objector noted that plans were afoot to develop new housing on the Penrhos Polish site which would create between 70-100 units over the next 3-4 years and questioned the wisdom of closing Ysgol Abersoch as there would not be room for them at Ysgol Llanbedrog.

6.11.9 In response to the objection, it is noted that the Penrhos Polish site falls within the catchment area of Ysgol Gynradd Llanbedrog therefore any children in the new houses would be offered a place at that school.

6.12 Financial Matters

6.12.1 Many objectors felt that the proposal focussed excessively on financial criteria.

6.12.2 It is emphasised that the proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch was not decided solely on financial grounds.

6.12.3 The school has been prioritised for a review of the educational provision as it faces a number of challenges. Pupil numbers at the school have fallen consistently since 2016 and has been fragile for some time. Consequently, it is likely that the school is facing increasing challenges, including:

- Low pupil numbers: In September 2020, 8 full-time pupils and 2 part-time nursery pupils were registered at the school.

- Projected numbers: It is anticipated that the numbers will continue to be low over the coming years (September 2021 = 10; September 2022 = 12; September 2023 = 12).
- High percentage of surplus places: Based on the figures for September 2020, there were approximately 76% of surplus places at the school (26 in total) (R - Yr 3).
- Small class sizes: The 10 pupils are taught in one mixed-age class.
- Broad age ranges within classes: The pupils are taught in one class with an age range of up to five years (3-8 years).
- Pupil residence: 2020 data shows that 26 children between 3-8 year old live in the Ysgol Abersoch catchment area with 21 (81%) of them attending schools outside the catchment area.

6.12.4 A comment was received that cost per pupil is a flawed concept. Usually, in a small school where numbers fluctuate from year to year, the theoretical cost per pupil will go up and down correspondingly, but the actual amount of money spent will remain the same.

6.12.5 Because of low pupil numbers, Ysgol Abersoch has for some years been receiving an additional amount to the usual allocation via the minimum staffing protection policy (which ensures at least a headteacher and teacher at each school, and a headteacher and an assistant in schools with fewer than 15 pupils).

6.12.6 As a result, the cost per pupil at Ysgol Abersoch in the 2020/21 financial year was £17,404 which is significantly higher than the average cost in the county per pupil for the same year of £4,198.

6.12.7 Projections suggest that low numbers will continue and mean that the need for additional funding will also continue.

6.12.8 Clarification was requested on how the savings estimate was calculated.

6.12.9 Ysgol Abersoch's allocation for 2020/21 was £137,140, and transferring the pupils at Ysgol Abersoch would lead to an additional allocation of £27,078 for Ysgol Sarn Bach. From the balance of £110,062 there will be potential additional transport costs of £14,000, leaving a likely saving of £96,062.

6.12.10 It was asked whether redundancy, consultation and maintenance costs were included in that estimate.

6.12.11 The figures do not take into account any maintenance costs at the Ysgol Abersoch or Ysgol Sarn Bach site. If these costs had been considered, it would mean more savings as there would be no future maintenance costs for Ysgol Abersoch.

6.12.12 Any redundancy costs will be funded from these savings.

6.12.13 Consultation costs have not been included in the calculation of savings as they are independent of the actual running costs of the schools concerned.

6.12.14 It was asked, should the proposal proceed, whether Ysgol Sarn Bach would require an additional resource, and whether the children would receive a school uniform grant.

6.12.15 Ysgol Sarn Bach has an official school uniform and the school encourages everyone to wear it. It is expected for the parents of year 3 pupils to buy a school uniform when they transfer to Ysgol Sarn Bach in any case. The children who transfer from Ysgol Abersoch can continue to wear their school (Ysgol Abersoch) uniform up to the end of year 3, if this is their parents' wish.

6.13 Alternative options

6.13.1 Objections were received asking the Council to delay the process and give the school an opportunity to increase the numbers and give the Cylch Meithrin an opportunity to thrive.

6.13.2 In response to these objections, we as an Authority cannot commit not to deal with the school for an unspecified period. Pupil numbers at Ysgol Abersoch have fallen consistently since 2016 and the figure has been fragile for some time. The Authority is of the opinion that continuing with the current education provision is not a viable option for the future. The Education Department is of the opinion that it is impractical to continue with the current situation, mainly because of:

- Very small classes.
- Low numbers and a lack of daily opportunities for pupils to socialise and collaborate with peers.
- Projections for the future, showing that numbers will remain low over the next five years, with 11 pupils attending by 2025.

6.13.3 The Council is aware that a Cylch Meithrin and Cylch Ti a Fi opened on the school site in February 2020. However, and despite acknowledging the potential positive impact that locating the Cylch Meithrin on the Ysgol Abersoch site can have on numbers, it is not possible to guarantee that it would lead to a substantial increase in numbers, and it is anticipated that the school's challenges would continue.

6.13.4 In addition, it is noted that Ysgol Abersoch already receives additional funding on top of the usual allocation through the minimum staffing policy (which guarantees at least a headteacher and a teacher at every school, and a headteacher and assistant at schools with fewer than 15 full-time pupils). The total additional funding for the 2020-21 financial year (based on the numbers in September 2019) is £52,582. The cost per pupil at Ysgol Abersoch is £17,404 (2020-21); the average cost in the county per pupil is £4,198.

6.13.5 This is not sustainable in the long term because the projected numbers remain low and consequently, the financial challenges would continue.

6.13.6 As noted in the consultation process, the Authority considered 10 different options following discussions with Ysgol Abersoch. It is not anticipated that allowing more time to do further work would offer any resolution to the challenges facing the school.

6.13.7 Some questioned why options for changing the age range to 3-9 were not considered for the future of the school.

6.13.8 In any procedures like this, it is essential to give detailed consideration and weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of any model, and this is what can be seen in the Options Appraisal (www.gwynedd.llyw.cymru/modernisingeducation).

6.13.9 As noted in the consultation document and then in the consultation report, the option favoured locally was the option to extend the school's age range to 3-9 years, including the development of the Cylch Meithrin. This option was favoured locally for practical reasons, such as improved use of the empty space in the school and providing a location for the Cylch Meithrin, and to mitigate the potential impact that the change could have on the numbers of Ysgol Sarn Bach (the school that provides an education for 9-11 year old pupils in the Ysgol Abersoch area).

6.13.10 The 3-9 years option was disregarded for the following reasons:

- It is not anticipated that adding one educational year would lead to a sufficient increase in the numbers. Consequently, the challenges facing the school would continue.
- The age range would not be consistent with the majority of the county's primary schools.

- It would not allow for the school to offer a comprehensive KS2 provision. The pupils would continue to transfer to Ysgol Sarn Bach to complete their primary education.

6.13.11 In September 2020, all Ysgol Abersoch (Nursery to Yr 3) pupils were educated in one class with 10 pupils. The average class size at Ysgol Sarn Bach in September 2020 was 24.

6.13.12 The table below shows the class sizes of Ysgol Abersoch and Ysgol Sarn Bach in September 2020.

School	Nursery	Reception	Yr 1	Yr 2	Yr 3	Yr 4	Yr 5	Yr 6	Total	Number of classes	Largest class	Smallest class	Average class size
Abersoch	2	3	2	-	3	-	-	-	10	1	10	10	10
Sarn Bach	3	2	5	4	8	5	10	11	48	2	34	14	24

Source: September 2020 Annual School Census

6.13.13 Delivering the proposal would mean that Ysgol Abersoch pupils would be educated in more sustainably sized classes, with more children from the same age group.

6.13.14 With 21 surplus places (and 4 surplus places in the Nursery), Ysgol Sarn Bach has sufficient capacity for the number of pupils currently delivered at Ysgol Abersoch and Ysgol Sarn Bach and for the next five years.

6.13.15 If the proposal is realised, it is expected that the Governing Body of Ysgol Sarn Bach will give due attention to determining class sizes and the distribution of school staff resources.

6.13.16 After further consideration, it was concluded that the option to extend the school's age range to 3-9 years would not be a sustainable solution to the future for the school. It is not anticipated that adding one educational year would lead to a sufficient increase in the numbers. Consequently, the challenges facing the school would continue. It is anticipated that the numbers and projections would remain low, classes would remain small, and the broad age range within classes would continue.

6.13.17 Some questioned why options for federalisation were not considered for the future of the school.

6.13.18 In any such procedure, it is essential to give detailed consideration and weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of any model, and this is what can be seen in the Options Appraisal (www.gwynedd.llyw.cymru/modernisingeducation).

6.13.19 A discussion was held and consideration was given to the three different versions of the federalisation option as part of the statutory consultation. In addition, it was suggested during the consultation that consideration should be given to two further versions of the option, namely:

- Federation between Ysgol Abersoch, Ysgol Llanbedrog, Ysgol Sarn Bach and collaboration arrangement with Ysgol Foel Gron
- Enlli Federation (Abersoch, Llanbedrog, Sarn Bach, Pont-y-gof, Crud-y-werin, Botwnnog Secondary and collaboration arrangement with Ysgol Foel Gron).

6.13.20 Officers from the Education Department met the headteacher and chair of governors of Ysgol Sarn Bach and Ysgol Llanbedrog in January 2020 to discuss the option of federalisation with Ysgol Abersoch. Because of the informal nature of these discussions, the meetings were not minuted. This meeting was also an opportunity to update headteachers and chairs regarding the options discussed at the local meetings, highlighting any potential impact that some of the options could have on their school. Neither of the two schools declared an interest in carrying out a further investigation into a federal model.

6.13.21 Note that in order to get the best from a federal model, the schools usually, but not necessarily, share a headteacher. As there is a headteacher in post at both schools, the Council is of the opinion that the most effective federal model could lead to compulsory redundancies.

6.13.22 Despite the advantages of federalisation, the Authority is of the opinion that it is unlikely that the option would address the main challenges faced by Ysgol Abersoch, such as low numbers, small class sizes, and consequently, the school's financial challenges would continue.

6.13.23 After weighing up the pros and cons of the model, it was concluded that federalisation would not be a sustainable solution for the school. There is no clear evidence that federalisation would lead to an increase in numbers. Consequently, should this option be realised, it is anticipated that the challenge of low numbers, small class sizes and the financial challenges faced by the school, would continue. Therefore, it is considered that federalisation is not the best option for the school's situation.

6.13.24 Two objections were received that recommended considering an option to establish a Multi-site School between Ysgol Abersoch, Ysgol Llanbedrog and Ysgol Sarn Bach.

6.13.25 During the Local School Review meetings, many possible models were proposed and discussed, in accordance with the requirements of the School Organisation Code 011/2018. In the case of the Multi-site Area School model, the school would be one school and a single legal entity that serves a broad area. However, a multi-site area school provides an educational provision on a number of sites.

6.13.26 The benefit of this type of model is the ability to restructure the managerial arrangements, yet retaining the presence of education in more than one community. It is a model that can work well in very rural areas where there are long travelling distances before arriving at the alternative school. Also, it means that small school sites are not left in isolation, but rather as part of a larger education establishment. Therefore, better use can be made of resources, e.g. one headteacher for more than one site, sharing resources and staff between sites and bringing pupils from sites together to hold activities with a higher number of pupils.

6.13.27 After weighing up the pros and cons of the model, following the statutory consultation, it was concluded that a Multi-site School would not be a sustainable solution for the school. There is no clear evidence that it would lead to an increase in numbers. Consequently, should this option be realised, it is anticipated that the challenge of low numbers, small class sizes and the financial challenges faced by the school, would continue. Therefore, it is considered that a Multi-site School is not the best option for the school's situation.

6.13.28 A number of objections recommended possible developments to the school, e.g. Beach School, Cultural Centre, Complete Education and Knowledge of the Locality.

6.13.29 The Council notes the options for developing the school.

6.13.30 Ysgol Abersoch has been prioritised for a review of the educational provision as the school is facing a number of challenges. Pupil numbers at the school have fallen consistently since 2016 and has been fragile for some time. Consequently, it is likely that the school is facing increasing challenges.

6.13.31 It is acknowledged that these options can make better use of the school building. However, when considering the options against the factors of the Excellent Primary Education for Children in Gwynedd Strategy, it is concluded that the options would not manage to address or resolve the main challenges faced by the school, e.g. low pupil numbers, small class sizes, broad age-range within classes and high pupil costs per head.

6.13.32 Some objections were received that questioned why a catchment area review was not considered.

6.13.33 In response to these comments, it is noted that the Council Cabinet, at its meeting on 17 September 2019, had permitted the Education Department to hold formal discussions with Ysgol Abersoch to enable a range of possible options relating to the future of the school, as a result of concerns regarding pupil numbers at the school and concerns regarding the projections that anticipated numbers remaining low.

6.13.34 The Excellent Primary Education for Children in Gwynedd Strategy notes:

"Relevant professional information should also be considered so as to draw attention to urgent situations within the County that directly impact quality of pupils' education and experiences (e.g. very low pupil numbers within a school, very poor condition of a school building, difficulties in headteacher recruitment).

Situations of serious and immediate concern as evidenced by relevant professional specialist information and including specific requests from individual schools will be a key consideration when prioritizing catchment areas for review."

6.13.35 It is emphasised that the review of the situation of Ysgol Abersoch is not a part of a broader strategy for education in the area, but rather, is a response to a crisis situation at an individual school.

6.13.36 Some comments claimed that alternative options raised during the consultation had not been fully considered and discussed thoroughly.

6.13.37 The School Organisation Code 011/2018, notes that consultees can suggest other alternative options as well as observations on the proposal in question during the consultation.

6.13.38 Five other alternative options were suggested during the consultation. (A number of the responses also suggested that further consideration should be given to the option to extend the school's age range to 3-9) However, after appraising these options against the factors of the *Excellent Primary Education for Children in Gwynedd* strategy (whilst considering the School Organisation Code 011/2018 and other relevant considerations), it was concluded that the proposal of closing Ysgol Abersoch and providing a place for all the children of the Ysgol Abersoch catchment area at Ysgol Sarn Bach remained the most appropriate option to respond to the challenges faced by the school (for the reasons noted in section 4.1 and 4.7 of the report on the consultation www.gwynedd.llyw.cymru/modernisingeducation).

6.14 Well-being Act

6.14.1 An objection was received noting that the seven aims of the Well-being Act had not been considered in full.

6.14.2 The Council has committed to the principles within the Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015) in order to improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of the communities of Gwynedd. The Council's vision:

"Our vision as a Council is to support all the people of Gwynedd to thrive and live full lives in our community, in a county which is one of the best counties to live in."

6.14.3 It was noted in the statutory consultation document - following consideration and an assessment in line with the requirements of the Well-being Act, the conclusion was reached that the proposal did satisfy the seven well-being goals within the Act, and the Council's well-being objectives. The proposal will allow us to respond to and meet the children's needs today, and also strengthen their future well-being.

6.15 Post-use of the school site

6.15.1 Some questioned where community activities held at the school will be provided if the school is closed, and what will happen to the school buildings and grounds if the school is closed. Some also highlighted that the land and building were a gift to the community.

6.15.2 Should the proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch be implemented, the Council has a school building post-use policy and this policy would be followed when considering the future of the site.

6.15.3 The Council would need to discuss and consider any binding legal terms or restrictions that could come into force if the school site would cease to be a site for an educational provision.

6.15.4 We are aware that the Cylch Meithrin and Cylch Ti a Fi are held on the school site. Should a decision be made to close the school, options for the post-use of the school would have to be considered, taking the activities currently held at the school into account.

6.15.5 Therefore, in terms of the Cylch Meithrin provision, if this proposal goes ahead, the Council is eager to discuss the possibilities with relevant representatives. The possibilities for discussion could include staying at the current location, relocating to the alternative school, or moving to another site in the village of Abersoch.

6.16 Implementation date of the proposal

6.16.1 Objections were received which questioned the intention to implement the proposal in the middle of a school year.

6.16.2 Despite the consultation being held on the proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch on 31 August 2021 and provide a place for pupils in Ysgol Sarn Bach from 1 September 2021, after considering the comments received in the consultation expressing concerns about the outline timetable, it was decided that deferring implementation until 31 December 2021 would allow more time for the Education Department to put arrangements in place in order to ensure a smooth transition for pupils from Ysgol Abersoch to Ysgol Sarn Bach.

6.16.3 Subject to the Cabinet's decision, it was considered that this would allow enough time for the Education Department to work with the two schools to put all the necessary arrangements in place prior to transferring pupils to Ysgol Sarn Bach at the beginning of January 2022.

6.17 Other

6.17.1 Merched y Wawr submitted in their objection that its principles should be considered “To promote any cause for the benefit of women in Wales, and in particular to empower public education and to promote Welsh culture, education and the arts in Wales through the Welsh language” in considering the proposal.

6.17.2 Our expectation is that the County's primary schools support and enhance the use of the Welsh language as their pupils' social language and educational language.

6.17.3 When developing any proposals relating to schools' reorganisation, full consideration must be given to the potential impact on the Welsh language. Sustaining and improving the use of the Welsh language as a social language and educational language is always a key consideration when drawing up proposals and when assessing options.

- 6.17.4 In accordance with the School Organisation Code 011/2018, an assessment was completed of the linguistic impact of the proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch and educating the children at Ysgol Sarn Bach. The assessment is available on the Council website www.gwynedd.llyw.cymru/modernisingeducation.
- 6.17.5 It is concluded in this assessment that no negative impact on the Welsh language is anticipated, should the proposal be realised. This is specifically so as the alternative school offers a Welsh-medium education, as currently offered at Ysgol Abersoch. The Language Policy is the same for all Gwynedd primary schools, therefore the provision would be the same for the pupils, regardless of which school they would choose to attend.
- 6.17.6 Others noted that it is beneficial for children to be educated close to home.**
- 6.17.7 If the proposal is realised, the children of the catchment area would be offered a high-quality education at Ysgol Sarn Bach, which is 1.4 miles from the village of Abersoch.
- 6.17.8 Some noted that Llanengan Parish contributes over 4% of the tax collected in Gwynedd and that a small proportion of the money generated by these second homes could be allocated to support the village school.**
- 6.17.9 The Council notes the comments/objections and notes that the school receives an additional amount to the usual allocation via the minimum staffing protection policy (which ensures at least a headteacher and teacher at each school, and a headteacher and an assistant in schools with fewer than 15 pupils). The total additional funding for the 2020-21 financial year (based on the numbers in September 2019) was £52,582. The cost per pupil at Ysgol Abersoch is £17,404 (2020-21); the average cost in the county per pupil is £4,198. This is not sustainable in the long term because the projected numbers remain low and consequently, the financial challenges would continue.
- 6.17.10 One objector expressed dissatisfaction that there was no mention in the report of the 150 new jobs when a hotel is built and opened in Abersoch, encouraging local families to stay in the area and creating an opportunity for new families to come to the area.**
- 6.17.11 In response, it is noted that there is no guarantee that demographic changes in the future and an increase in local jobs would increase pupil numbers at Ysgol Abersoch. The children of the catchment area would be offered a high-quality education at Ysgol Sarn Bach, which is 1.4 miles from the village of Abersoch.
- 6.17.12 Some objections were received that questioned the decisions of Gwynedd Council committees, and questioned whether a fair hearing would be held in the case of Ysgol Abersoch.**
- 6.17.13 A decision taken by the Cabinet on 15 September 2020 was called in for scrutiny by the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee. In its meeting on 8 October 2020, the committee considered the Council Cabinet's decision to hold a statutory consultation to the proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch on 31 August 2021, and provide a place for pupils at Ysgol Sarn Bach on 1 September 2021.
- 6.17.14 After careful consideration, the Committee decided that it remained concerned about the situation and that the matter should be referred back to the Cabinet for reconsideration.
- 6.17.15 Following careful consideration and a detailed discussion of the Scrutiny Committee's views at its meeting held on 3 November 2020, the Council's Cabinet decided that its original decision taken on 15 September 2020 to conduct a statutory consultation on the proposal, should not be amended, and to adopt this as its final decision.
- 6.17.16 A number of comments were received noting the second home problems in Abersoch and the impact that this had on the school. In addition, a number of comments were received noting that one of the reasons why the number of pupils had not increased over the past years was the lack of affordable housing.**

6.17.17 *The Council notes the comments/objections, however, the Council wishes to note that it does not have control over the open housing market.* In December 2020, Gwynedd Council adopted an Action Plan that will invest £77m in over 30 specific plans to tackle the increasing challenge of a lack of suitable housing for the County's residents, including increasing the number of affordable housing available for local people. The Plan will be implemented over the next six years, including projects such as increasing the number of social housing in Gwynedd; purchasing former social housing and private houses to let at an affordable rent to the residents of Gwynedd; developing our own houses to increase the opportunities for Gwynedd residents to compete; refusing applications to remove a local person condition on former "Council houses"; Homebuy Scheme and First Time Buyers' Grants to renovate empty houses. The exact locations of some of these schemes are to be confirmed following an exercise of consulting with communities in order to establish their housing needs.

6.17.18 The Council is aware that a set of measures will be required, a number of them currently beyond the direct control of the Council, if we are to be able to achieve genuine fairness for local residents in the field of housing. This Housing Action Plan is one of these measures and allows us to aim to directly act to the best of our abilities in order to attempt to reconcile the current situation. We also acknowledge that we will continue to campaign for further national changes in order to strengthen our ability to operate within Gwynedd and the Council will continue to do so at every possible opportunity in the field of housing, taxation, licensing and planning.

7. IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

7.1 Several impact assessments were conducted in line with the requirements of the School Organisation Code 011/2018, including:

- *Assessment of the probable impact on different transport arrangements*
- *Assessment of the probable impact on the community*
- *Assessment of the probable impact on the quality and standards of education*

7.2 Following the consultation period, in accordance with the requirements of the School Organisation Code 011/2018, a further assessment of the proposal and each of the alternatives considered was completed and included as an appendix to the report submitted to of the Cabinet on 15 June 2021. A copy of the full assessment can be viewed on the Council's website www.gwynedd.llyw.cymru/modernisingeducation

7.3 The conclusions of the assessment of the likely impact on different travel arrangements are noted, which would mean that the option of closing the school would require pupils from Ysgol Abersoch to travel further to their school each day. Ysgol Sarn Bach is located 1.4 miles from Ysgol Abersoch, and it is anticipated that the journey takes approximately five minutes each way in a car or on a bus, which is within the reasonable distance expected for primary children to travel to their school in accordance with the '*Excellent Primary Education for Children in Gwynedd Strategy*' of 30 minutes each way. Transport to the alternative school would be offered in line with Gwynedd Council transport policy.

7.4 The assessment of the probable impact on the community states that there would be some negative impact from closing the school. In addition, it is noted that a vast number of responses to the consultation emphasised that the proposal to close the school would have a negative impact on the village and the local community. Nevertheless, the Authority notes that 35% of pupils (N-Yr 3) who live in the Abersoch catchment area already attend Ysgol Sarn Bach; therefore, it is concluded that a connection already exists between the school and the broader area. To mitigate any potential negative impact on the community should the proposal be implemented, the assessment notes the importance of ensuring that the community

of Abersoch is included in the activities of the alternative school, and to encourage community collaboration between the alternative school and the Abersoch community, where appropriate.

7.5 The assessment of the probable impact on the quality and standards of education notes that it is concluded that the standard of education provided at Ysgol Sarn Bach is of the same level as the quality of education at Ysgol Abersoch. Consequently, it is not anticipated any negative impact would derive in terms of the quality and standards of education from the proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch and transfer the pupils to Ysgol Sarn Bach.

7.6 The Education Department remains of the opinion, that after holding the objection period, none of the other options, including federalisation and extending the age range of the school, would address the main challenges facing the school, namely:

- low pupil numbers,
- projections showing a further decline over the next five years,
- current pupils being taught in classes that are small in number with a broad age range within those classes.

8. FURTHER CONSIDERATION

8.1 In addition to the impact assessments noted above, a number of other impact assessments were undertaken and updated during the process. These assessments are included as an appendix to this report (Appendix C) and to the report presented to Cabinet on 15 June 2021 and their conclusions are summarised below.

8.2 Well-being Assessment (Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015)

8.2.1 Following consideration and an assessment in line with the requirements of the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015, the conclusion was reached that the proposal did satisfy the seven well-being goals within the Act, and the Council's well-being objectives. This proposal will allow the Council to respond to and meet the children's needs today, and also strengthen their future well-being.

8.2.2 It is acknowledged that should the Cabinet decide to proceed with this proposal, it may result in the closure of a school in the community of Abersoch, however a large number of the children living within the school's catchment area already attend other schools, including the alternative school, and therefore there is already a link between Ysgol Sarn Bach and the community of Abersoch. Every effort will be made to mitigate the impact on the community by encouraging links between the communities. Should the proposal be approved, discussions will take place to discuss the possibility that Ysgol Sarn Bach's community activity includes the Abersoch community, where appropriate.

8.2.3 The proposal will ensure that the children of the area are educated on a site that is suitable and in a naturally Welsh-speaking society, thus increasing the opportunities to socialise and collaborate with others, and to give them a fair opportunity to thrive among their peers.

8.3 Equality Assessment

8.3.1 Policies and procedures are in place to ensure that the proposal considers and complies with equal rights.

8.3.2 An equality assessment was held on the options, which focuses on different elements of equality such as race, sex, disability, language, religion or belief, and age.

8.3.3 The equality assessment stated the importance of positively promoting equal opportunities in light of the proposal, and that measures should be in place to ensure that unlawful discrimination and harassment does not occur. Arrangements are also in place to monitor and review the situation. The assessment can be seen in **Appendix C**.

8.4 Language Impact Assessment

8.4.1 It is not anticipated that the proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch and provide a place for the pupils at Ysgol Sarn Bach would have a negative impact on the linguistic ability of the children. The option would mean that pupils at Ysgol Abersoch continue to be educated in a Welsh medium school. It is noted that a higher percentage of pupils in Ysgol Sarn Bach come from Welsh-speaking homes (57%), compared with Ysgol Abersoch (33%). When transferring pupils from Ysgol Abersoch to Ysgol Sarn Bach, it is anticipated that the percentage of pupils who come from Welsh-speaking homes would be around 54%. On the basis of this, it is anticipated that there would be more opportunities for the pupils of Abersoch to use the Welsh language informally with their peers both inside and outside the classroom, and that the level of vibrancy of Welsh and the informal use of the language would strengthen. Ysgol Abersoch has worked hard to develop the children's bilingual skills and promote the importance of Welsh culture. Therefore, it is important that the proposal to move the children acknowledges the need to support and continue with this work.

9. CONCLUSION

9.1 Although the Authority received a total of 211 objections and 2 petitions during the objection period, having considered all the objections received, the Council remains convinced that this proposal is the most appropriate response to the main challenges faced by the school.

9.2 Analysis of the comments and objections received is examined in *Section 6* of this report, and the responses are available in full in **Appendix A**.

9.3 It is envisaged that the proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch and offer the pupils a place at Ysgol Sarn Bach will respond to the challenges facing Ysgol Abersoch (outlined in section 3.2) and will lead to more consistent opportunities for children in the catchment area, by aiming towards the strategic aspirations of Gwynedd Council to *"offer education of the highest possible quality that will give the County's children the experiences, skills and confidence that would enable them to develop to be bilingual, successful and full citizens"*. This would be in line with the targets of the 'Excellent Primary Education for Children in Gwynedd' Strategy:

- Class sizes (and age ranges) - Pupils to be educated in more suitably-sized classes than the current situation. Implementing the proposal would lead to better consistency in class sizes and reduce the age range within primary school classes in the area.
- Population and Pupil Numbers - Pupils to be educated at a school where the numbers and projections are more robust and sustainable for the future, and reduce the rate of surplus places in the area's schools.
- Leadership - robust leadership and management in a school with numbers gives fairness to the Headteacher to be able to professionally lead and manage at the school.
- The Community - To mitigate any potential negative impact on the community should the proposal be implemented, the assessment notes the importance of ensuring that the community of Abersoch is included in the activities of the alternative school, and to encourage community collaboration between the alternative school and the Abersoch community.
- Financial Resources - Rationalising the per pupil cost in schools which would reduce the range in the per pupil cost for all Gwynedd children. It is estimated that realising the proposal would lead to a per pupil cost of £4,683 at Ysgol Sarn Bach compared to the current £17,404 per pupil cost at Ysgol

Abersoch. The county-wide average for the same period is £4,198 per pupil. It is estimated that the proposal would create an annual saving of £110,062, less additional transport needs costs (£14,000) - which is approximately £96,062 per annum.

- The Welsh Language - Pupils to be educated at a Welsh-medium school, as the current situation, and at a school where social use of the Welsh language is strong.
- Geographical Factors - Pupils would continue to receive their education at a school within reasonable distance of their homes and receive transport in accordance with Council policy.

10. RECOMMENDATION

- 10.1 Following consideration of the objections and comments received, it is recommended for the Cabinet to finally confirm the proposal issued through statutory notice, to close Ysgol Abersoch on 31 December 2021, and provide a place for the pupils at Ysgol Sarn Bach from 1 January 2022, in accordance with Section 53 of the School Standards and Organisation Act (Wales) 2013 and the requirements of the School Organisation Code 011/2018.

11. NEXT STEPS

- 11.1 Following the Cabinet's final decision, in accordance with section 54 of the 2013 Act, within 28 days of the Cabinet's decision, the following bodies can refer the proposal to Welsh Ministers for a decision:
- i. Another Local Authority affected by the proposals;
 - ii. The appropriate religious body for any school affected;
 - iii. The governing body of a voluntary or foundation school subject to proposals;
 - iv. A trust holding property on behalf of a voluntary or foundation school subject to proposals;
 - v. A further education establishment affected by the proposals.
- 11.2 The body making the referral will have to note why it believes that the decision made by the local authority is wrong. Welsh Ministers will decide whether the proposals affect the bodies and whether they need to consider the proposals.
- 11.3 If the final decision by the Cabinet is to proceed with the proposal and if the proposal is not referred, the next steps and timetable will be as follows:

November - December 2021	<p>The Education Department to collaborate with the two schools to put all the necessary arrangements in place prior to transferring pupils to Ysgol Sarn Bach at the beginning of January 2022.</p> <p>The Human Resources Service will follow relevant processes with the school staff in accordance with employment law.</p>
31 December 2021	<p>Implementation of the proposal: Ysgol Abersoch officially closes, subject to the Cabinet's decision.</p>

12. THE VIEWS OF THE STATUTORY OFFICERS

The Monitoring Officer:

The report has been the subject of advice from Legal Services no observations to add in relation to propriety.

Head of Finance:

I confirm that the financial figures within sections 3.3 (v) and (vi), 6.12, 6.13, 6.17 and 9 of the report, and also the figures in Gwynedd Council's response within Part (Ng) of Appendix A, reflect the true cost or a fair estimate (where appropriate) having considered the cost of transport.

There are clear reasons to support the proposal to close Ysgol Abersoch on 31 December 2021, including financial reasons such as an annual saving of £96,062 in revenue costs, and a per pupil cost of £17,404 at Ysgol Abersoch compared to a county average of £4,198. Therefore, I support the recommendation.

The Local Member:

"... my response dated 22/07/21 which opposes the closure of the school, the reasons and comments are still relevant and nothing has changed.

In addition to the report which emphasizes the negative impact on the Welsh language and culture in the village- the negative effect on the children's education. The loss of an important historic resource to the Village and so important in many ways to the area.

I have recently received information from the Housing and Property Department that they are looking at building houses in the Village and that the housing association already owns land that lies within the development boundary and is hopeful through a Welsh Government grant application to build houses for local people.

It is clear that when this development comes into force that educational resources will not reach the requirement- there is no word in the report on the ability to respond to this type of development. It must be recognized that the capacity of schools in the area is overcrowded and the capacity does not accommodate more children.

Recently I was listening to the Planning Committee discussing the erection of 12 houses in the Penygroes area and that there is a local demand for this type of development for local people. One of the concerns raised was the capacity of local schools to accept more children that will increase with this development. It highlights the fact that resources within the society are important in the upcoming plans. This decision is completely opposite to the Council's ambition.

I have to say that the decision to close the school was unwise but to close the school in the middle of the School Year and move the children to another School does not make any sense and will have a negative impact on the children's education, if the School will have to close, then why not defer it until the end of the School Year.

I am disappointed that again I am in the position of having to respond to a report within two days although I have complained in the past that this is unfair in terms of giving me appropriate time to communicate with Parent Governors and society as a whole, you could say that this is intentional because this has happened repeatedly throughout the process. For these reasons I ask the Cabinet to reconsider its decision and keep this resource open or at least until the School Year is over."

Appendices:

Appendix A: Analysis of objection comments

Appendix B: Statutory Notice

Appendix C: Equality and Wellbeing Assessments

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTATION - All relevant background documentation on the proposal is available on the Council's website through the following link: www.gwynedd.llyw.cymru/modernisingeducation.