



CITY AND COUNTY OF SWANSEA
DINAS A SIR ABERTAWE

**To/
Councillor Christine Richards,
Cabinet Member for Services to
Children & Young People**

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SPC/2015-16/2

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16 September 2015

Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member for Services for Children & Young People following the meeting of the Committee on 10 August 2015. It is about Children's Social Services, Flying Start, Children's University, Youth Services, Education for Gypsy & Traveller Children, and the Children & Young People's Rights Scheme.

Dear Councillor Richards,

Cabinet Member Question Session – 10 August

Thank you for your attendance at the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 10 August 2015 answering questions on your work as Cabinet Member for Services for Children & Young People. We wanted to explore priorities, actions, achievements and impact in relation to your areas of responsibility. Thank you for the written information also provided to the committee.

We are writing to you in order to reflect on what we learnt from the discussion, share the views of the committee, and, where necessary, raise any outstanding issues / actions for your response. The main issues discussed are summarised below:

Child & Family Services

You reported good progress since we last met in the autumn. However, you reminded the committee that Child & Family Services remained a fragile area of the Council's work. We were particularly pleased to hear you praise the way you and the service felt challenged by the Child & Family Services Scrutiny Performance Panel, vital to ensuring that the service continues improving and does not return to the issues of recent past. You remarked on

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the high quality of scrutiny and questioning in relation to service performance, and how you valued the exchange of letters with the Panel.

We discussed the financial strategy for Child & Family Services noting that the service had cost £3m less in 2014/15 than two years ago. We asked how this has been achieved. You said that the Safe Looked After Children Reduction Strategy has helped, with the levels of Looked After Children (502) being at their lowest for some time. The strategy has included identifying where it is safe for a child to stay with family, as well as there being an increase in Foster Swansea carers which is cheaper than private providers, and more locally based. We recognised that the budget had been increased a few years ago due to issues but that it was now coming down.

We did raise an issue about the use of Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) which we understand are being encouraged, and are reducing the numbers of Looked After Children. We noted that SGOs have less financial and other support, so wanted reassurance that this was working well and were not being used primarily because of financial pressures.

Child Sexual Exploitation

As you are aware we invite members of the public and other councillors not on the committee to suggest questions to us. We asked, on behalf of Councillor Linda Tyler-Lloyd, whether you were confident that everything was being done to ensure that vulnerable young people were being protected against gangs who might want to sexually exploit them.

You referred to a recent council question on the same matter but reiterated that there was close working with partners (particularly the Police) to identify any signs of such gangs operating here, and all the available information suggested that there was not. We recognised that unfortunately we do see cases of sexual abuse or exploitation in the area but were pleased that there was no sign of organised activity.

You highlighted the council's corporate parenting and safeguarding role and stressed the importance of people not being afraid to report any concerns in the community. You mentioned the key role played by the Western Bay partnership in safeguarding, and also the work of the Local Service Board. You mentioned the conference which took place last autumn in the Liberty Stadium on child sexual exploitation where all sectors were represented, and of course recognised that work must continue.

We discussed the importance of all councillors completing the available online training on child sexual exploitation awareness training and supported moves to make such training compulsory. We understand you are in discussion with the Head of Democratic Services / Democratic Services Committee about this. We were pleased to hear about the work to improve the level of staff engagement across the organisation with training / online materials to raise

levels of awareness and ensure people know what to do to report concerns. The committee emphasised the need to be vigilant of any form of exploitation.

Employment Opportunities for Looked After Children

We asked you about progress in relation to employment opportunities that the council provides for Looked After Children. You stated that you were passionate about this issue and regarded the council as the 'Family Firm'. You told us that you were looking at what pots of money (e.g. grants) could help support this aim, and have asked officers to devise a possible scheme to support this. We felt this is an important issue which has also been raised in other forums, such as the Corporate Parenting Forum, and progress needs to be made.

We also asked about quality of provision for post-16 Looked After Children / care leavers. You felt that things have improved although accepted more needs to be done. You said that Child & Family Services were undertaking a commissioning review for post-16 services, however you expressed the view that children should continue to be supported and looked after until they are ready to leave care, regardless of age.

Flying Start

This is something which the Service Improvement & Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel looked at in some detail last year. You clarified some of the performance figures around the % of eligible 2 year olds taking up Flying Start Childcare, in that more children are becoming eligible. This would suggest a rise in child poverty, but it was not clear whether things were getting better or worse. You explained that although the criteria had changed meaning more people were entitled to Flying Start, that it was not in itself an indicator of poverty.

We noted the areas for development including plans to have additional childcare settings up and running at Parklands, Plasmarl and Pontarddulais, which meet the criteria for Flying Start. You also confirmed that a Welsh medium childcare facility was being sited at the old Daniel James school site. We asked whether you could provide us with more information about the criteria which determined how areas become eligible for Flying Start, as some areas do not have the service but would benefit from it.

We also talked about ensuring proper access to information for young people and impact of potential closure of facilities (such as libraries) in rural areas (e.g. Pennard). You assured the committee that equality impact assessments are carried out before any decisions are made and this includes children & young people. You argued that there was a need to work smarter and leaner in order to sustain services and felt that there was an important role for schools in this. You argued that whilst we may not have libraries in communities we do have schools, and there was potential innovation to be

explored in terms of future library / information service provision, given financial pressures on the council.

Children's University

We asked you about the council's support for the UK wide Children's University initiative, and raised concern about resources which we believed had been cut back or stopped, despite this scheme playing an important role in prevention and early intervention. We asked for clarification on the current position.

You agreed to look into this and provide a fuller response to the committee. However, you mentioned that a meeting was taking place in the next few weeks to discuss the local situation. You added that most of the work was done outside of the council although there has been a supporting role in terms of gathering information from participating schools and issuing certificates etc. You stated that the council was looking for ways to develop this, and we look forward to hearing more. We did also wonder about the levels of awareness about the Children's University amongst local schools / children.

Youth Services

You talked about the reconfiguration of the Youth Service that has taken place, due to financial pressures, which has seen the integration of the service as part of early intervention and prevention approaches. You stressed the importance of the work of Youth Leaders in the positive development of children and young people in Swansea.

We also asked about recent changes to the opening hours of the InfoNation Service, and concern about lack of access for young people in the evening and weekend. You told us that there had been consultation with young people but there have also been staff shortages. You stated that the issue was being looked at in conjunction with the Local Health Board. One of the issues you pointed out was that the ABMU Health Board funded Neath Port Talbot Council under the Public Health initiative around £40k to promote young people's sexual health but in comparison Swansea did not receive such support. With regard to access you did clarify that InfoNation was not the only source of information but part of a coordinated effort in the centre of Swansea which has many different organisations serving young people.

Education for Gypsy & Traveller Children

We asked for clarification whether there had been changes to the education service for gypsy & traveller children. We understand there has been a move from Education into the Poverty & Prevention service. You said that a lot of good work was going on with gypsy & traveller families and the service designation had no impact on the work itself.

There was still some concern amongst the committee that it created a distance from the Education service given that it is effectively an education service being provided. This had the potential to stigmatise these children as being different, especially as other services such as the Education Other Than At School service are within Education. You responded that it was important that services were joined up and not working in silos but clarified that the staff working with the children were the same. We agreed it was critical to build trust with the young people and their families. The rationale for the change was still nevertheless unclear to the committee, aside from organisational convenience. You stated that this work was about early intervention and prevention and this is education beyond the school gates, and therefore sat well with the Poverty & Prevention Service Unit.

Children & Young People's Rights Scheme

You spoke about the launch of the Children & Young People's Rights Scheme last October and the good progress being made in relation to schools signing up to UNCRC and becoming Rights Respecting, and the positive impact on children. At our meeting on 14 September we discussed the role of scrutiny in monitoring the implementation of the Children & Young People's Rights Scheme across the council and impact, and how scrutiny councillors can champion children's rights more generally in our scrutiny of the work of the council. We have been invited to an awareness raising training session on 29 October to develop our understanding of children's rights and the policy context within which they sit in Swansea. We are scheduled to review the Children and Young People's Rights Scheme Annual Report at our committee meeting on 9 November in order to assess progress and impact.

Issue for Scrutiny

You raised an issue about the Children & Young People's Partnership (CYP) and invited scrutiny work. We noted recent changes which meant the CYP was now part of the Single Integrated Plan (the One Swansea Plan) and the CYP Executive Board presumably was sub set of the Local Service Board. We were very concerned to hear that the CYP Board has not met for some time and things appear to have got lost in the big picture. You felt there was a need to revitalise joined up work around CYP Board. We shared your concern about the profile of this work within the One Swansea Plan and strategic direction.

It is not clear why the CYP Executive Board is not meeting, and what progress there has been in relation to CYP Partnership activities, and what role the LSB is meant to play in this. Perhaps as lead / designated member you should raise your concerns at the earliest meeting of the Local Service Board to discuss the effective functioning of the CYP Partnership. We recognise this is an issue which depends a lot on partner engagement.

If after discussion with the Local Service Board you feel there may still be a role for scrutiny in this matter we would be pleased to hear from you and will take a view on our involvement.

In the meantime we will make the Local Service Board Scrutiny Performance Panel aware of this issue.

Your Response

In your response we would appreciate your comments on any of the issues raised in this letter. We would be grateful, however, if you could specifically refer to:

- our concern about the use of Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) and provide reassurance about the positive impact / benefits;
- our request for information about the criteria which determines how areas become eligible for Flying Start provision;
- the current position with regard to the council's support for the Children's University and plans for development; and
- our recommendation that you take up issues regarding the Children & Young People's Partnership with the Local Service Board.

Please provide your response by 7 October. We will then include both letters in the agenda of the next available committee meeting.

Finally, we look forward to meeting you again to follow up on portfolio developments and hearing about achievements and impact.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR MARY JONES

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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