



CITY AND COUNTY OF SWANSEA
DINAS A SIR ABERTAWE

**To/
Councillor Jennifer Raynor
Cabinet Member for Education**

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SPC/2015-16/4

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*Date
Dyddiad:*

28 October 2015

Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member for Education following the meeting of the Committee on 12 October 2015. It is about Gorseinon Primary School / Parc y Werin, School Budgets, Education Inclusion, School Attendance, and Safeguarding.

Dear Councillor Raynor,

Cabinet Member Question Session – 12 October

Thank you for your attendance at the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 12 October 2015 answering questions on your work as Cabinet Member for Education. 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 that gave us the headlines, as well as the more detailed background reading on the portfolio.

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:

Proposed New Primary School in Gorseinon

As you are aware we invite members of the public and other councillors not on the committee to suggest questions to us. We received a number of questions in relation to concerns about the proposed new primary school in Gorseinon and appropriation of land at Parc Y Werin. To summarise the questions received from Mr Aaron Phillips we asked you to advise on the current position with regard to the proposed new primary school and inform

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the Committee of the rationale for the project, options considered and how the public views have influenced the decision.

You stated that there had been numerous public meetings and previous correspondence with residents over concerns raised. You referred to a letter that had already been sent to the Parc y Werin Committee (resident's group) addressing their concerns. It would be helpful if you could supply a copy of that correspondence with your response to this letter.

You were very clear about the positives that the proposed new school would bring and community benefits, as well as providing assurance about the impact on Park and local area. You took us through the public engagement and decision making process.

We invited Mr Phillips to ask a supplementary question. You were asked about progress with a petition that had been submitted. In response you referred to 2 petitions that had been received on this matter and stated that the petitions were in the process of being validated and would then be dealt with in accordance with agreed protocols. We understood that a planning application would be considered by committee in the next few weeks, which still allowed for representations to be made.

With regard to a question on the display of statutory notices within the vicinity, you stated that you would look into this and provide respond in writing. There was some concern about the absence of notices around the Park.

Overall Performance

Despite difficult times, you stated that overall there were many positive stories about education in Swansea, for example in relation to national reading and numeracy tests; and we noted that at Key Stage 4 the Summer term 2015 GCSE results were the best ever for Swansea. There was also good performance at 'A' and 'AS' level.

You stated that there was no reason to be complacent and sit back because the financial situation was going to force a number of changes upon the authority and schools, and we needed to ensure that good progress can be maintained.

School Budgets

You pointed to the financial challenges facing all Councils. Whilst Education had received relative prioritisation as all council departments face large reductions in their budgets, this had still resulted in real-term cuts for many schools. Schools faced the challenge of developing new models of delivering services whilst maintaining standards.

We asked a question on school budgets and impact of 5% cuts, as well as measures in place to help schools in difficulty. You reported that many schools have been able to cope but recognised that things would be extremely challenging in future years and will impact on the delivery of services. It required Head Teachers to be innovative. We were informed that a number of areas were being looked in conjunction with schools that provided scope for change to meet financial pressures, but alongside this you were committed to increasing non-financial support and advice to help schools deal with challenges ahead and maintain standards.

We noted that 20 different areas have been discussed with Head Teachers and that 10 of these were being taken forward at pace, including: nursery provision; collaborative / joint working; use of VOIP instead of fixed landlines; use of schools as community resources; Additional Learning Needs provision; and removal of the cheque book facility. The use of schools as community resources was something that we were particularly enthusiastic about.

Schools with Outsourced Services

We asked a question about schools buying in services from outside of the local authority and what measures were in place to ensure consistency of standards. You stated that schools were aware of the need for due diligence when contracting out services. This was an issue for school governing bodies to ensure that sound decisions were being made and things were done properly when managing delegated budgets. You stated that schools were different therefore their needs will differ, so the issue was not necessarily about standardisation but making the best decisions for that particular school.

Education Inclusion

On our agenda for this meeting we were presented with and agreed the final report of the Education Inclusion Inquiry Panel, which asked how services were being improved for those children and young people who need or are at risk of being educated other than at school. This is being presented to Cabinet on 19 November and we look forward to the response in due course.

There was some discussion at the meeting about urgency and pace of change since issues were raised by Estyn in 2013 about performance and outcomes. Also, members were particularly concerned about some of the buildings within the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) of the buildings not being fit for purpose. You stated that you shared these concerns but told us that the service has presented very difficult issues which have taken time to resolve. With regard to accommodation you stated that alternative buildings were being identified but will most likely require reconfiguration, and you welcomed suggestions.

You cited that things have moved forward since the appointment of a new Chief Education Officer, and were now in a position to present proposals to Cabinet on 15 October. We had agreed for the Schools Scrutiny Performance Panel to undertake pre-decision scrutiny of your Cabinet report.

We were able to hear from the Chief Education Officer about the progress that has been made during the last year on taking the service forward, including: the Pupil Referral Unit coming out of special measures; appointment of a dedicated Challenge Advisor; the PRU Management Committee has been revised to include an independent chair (who is a Head Teacher), councillors and a challenge advisor; the setting up of an intervention board with external input, and the appointment of a new Head Teacher for the PRU.

School Attendance

We asked about school attendance. You stated that figures for secondary school attendance were positive. However, concerns remained with regard to primary school attendance, where there was a large variation between schools. You were looking at the role of Education Welfare Officers and Social Services. You stated that it was a big challenge to improve towards 100% because of illness, but were looking at incentive schemes (e.g. recognising best classes / rewarding achievement of targets) as well as penalty notices.

We asked whether the introduction of fines had made any impact on increasing levels of attendance. You stated that this differed school to school but felt that it did help to reinforce the seriousness of school absence in the minds of parents.

We did feel that data should be disaggregated from overall figures in relation to pupils using Special Teaching Facilities because they can have health needs which have significant impact on their attendance.

In terms of helping to avoid pupils being taken out for holidays during school terms we discussed opportunities for changes to school terms. You agreed this needed to be looked at, learning from experiences elsewhere.

Safeguarding

We asked about safeguarding and whether you looked at this when you visited schools and met with staff. You stressed that safeguarding was everyone's responsibility and that you would always speak to Head Teachers and staff if you had any specific concerns, and would not hesitate to refer matters to the Chief Executive where appropriate. You added that the Education Department included a Safeguarding Officer and there has been an increase in training offered to School Governors.

Issues for Scrutiny

You praised the work of the Education Inclusion Scrutiny Inquiry Panel and of scrutiny in general in terms of its contribution to service improvement and helping to tackle important issues in relation to education. You looked forward with interest to the conclusion of the School Governance Scrutiny Inquiry and recommendations for improvement. It was pleasing to hear you say that scrutiny was targeting the issues of concern.

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 request for copy of your letter regarding the new Gorseinon primary school / Parc y Werin;
- our query about the display of statutory notices around Parc y Werin; and
- our view that data should be disaggregated from overall attendance figures in relation to pupils using Special Teaching Facilities.

Please provide your response by 18 November. 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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