



**To/
Councillor Jennifer Raynor
Cabinet Member for Education
Improvement, Learning & Skills**

BY EMAIL

cc Cabinet Members

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SPC/2018-19/5

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Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member following the meeting of the Committee on 8 October 2018. It is about Pupil Health, Local Development Plan, 21st Century Schools Programme, School Closures, School Funding, Pupil Development Grant, School Maintenance, Safeguarding, and Schools Admissions.

Dear Councillor Raynor,

Cabinet Member Question Session – 8 October

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 8 October 2018 and answering questions on your work as Cabinet Member for Education Improvement, Learning & Skills. The session also benefited from the attendance of the Director of Education, Nick Williams.

We appreciate you providing a written paper in support of your appearance. The Q & A session gave us an opportunity to explore priorities and achievements in relation to your areas of responsibility.

We are writing to you 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:

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Pupil Health

In our Q & A session last year we expressed some concerns about the risk to pupils' respiratory health from vehicles travelling to and from schools and parking outside schools. This included contracted buses / taxis as well as parents leaving engines running whilst parked in the vicinity of school gates. We had suggested a targeted information campaign to highlight the harmful effects particularly to younger children, and discourage this behaviour. We asked you to update the Committee on this.

We heard from you that on top of requirements that the authority has about vehicle safety transport companies have been informed about concerns regarding exhaust emissions, and this should be improving the situation. However, we were disappointed that there has been no wider campaign aimed at parents / carers. We stressed that more work was needed to inform parents / carers, for example through school governing bodies. You agreed that you would communicate with governing bodies and ask them to cascade the message in their communities as an important issue of health and wellbeing.

Whilst this was an important message we recognised some of the linked challenges for example, the distance pupils need to travel and ability of pupils to walk to school, affordability of electric vehicles etc. You also told us that there has been a disappointing take up of walking buses / walking routes to schools.

Local Development Plan

Linked to the issue of schools within communities and challenge to deliver sustainable schools of the right size and in the right location, we touched on the subject of school planning. There was some discussion about the pressure on existing schools from new housing developments. Example was given of areas where pupils were travelling significant distances to attend 'local' schools. We noted the ability for Section 106 agreements between the authority and developers in order that they provide for necessary education infrastructure / facilities as a consequence of large development.

21st Century Schools Programme

We asked you about decision making on the Welsh Government's 21st Century Schools Programme and allocation / utilisation of funding locally. In particular we talked about condition surveys that are carried, their role in the process and their availability to schools. You were questioned about the extent to which schools / governing bodies were privy to this information. You were also asked about the balance of funding between the east and west of Swansea.

You stressed that primarily allocations focussed on improving school buildings, but could also be informed by projected demand for places, including those for Welsh medium. You mentioned that Bishopston Comprehensive was one of those schools that will be benefitting under Band B of the programme.

You told us that survey findings are shared with schools and the Council's Corporate Building Services, therefore head teachers should be aware of school building condition assessments, and you would expect that this would be reported to the chair of governors / governing body.

You explained that decisions are taken on the programme in line with Welsh Government guidance involving a complex matrix of information which is completed by the authority to help identify the priorities, given limited budget. You added that local decisions are scrutinized by the Welsh Government before the approval of funding is received. We heard there were some issues with the quality of the Welsh Government surveys which they are addressing, meaning that some surveys are being repeated. It was not clear exactly when these would be completed, but you stated that these would be shared with relevant parties when available. Furthermore you assured us that should any school have any query about the 21st Century schools programme then the authority would be happy to respond and assist.

School Closures

We asked you about the rationale behind the possible closure of Craigeffparc and Felindre Primary Schools, and the current consultation process. We understood that you were unable to make specific comments whilst these matters were under consultation but you highlighted factors, including the need for sustainable schools, which were behind the proposed closures.

During Public Question Time members of the public asked questions and made comments about the possible school closures. You welcomed as many views as possible that will inform decision-making. We have forwarded a note of this to the Education Department so that these can be considered as part of the consultation process, which we understand closed on 18 October. This included:

- concern regarding increased airbourne pollutants around school premises especially if the proposed closure of Craigeffparc Primary School proceeds with children having to travel further to school, resulting in increased traffic movements in the area.
- a question whether there would be opportunity to see the Cabinet decision report before the Cabinet meeting.
- a question whether Cabinet would undertake a full site visit of the proposed school closures to assess the full impact and to ensure fully-informed and robust decision-making.

Please note that the Committee has asked the Schools Scrutiny Performance Panel to carry out pre-decision scrutiny on the relevant cabinet reports where a decision is expected on the possible closures. We understand there will be reports going to the 20 December cabinet meeting.

School Funding

We discussed current pressures facing schools and the local authority. Your written report warned of the increasing challenge to maintain a sustainable education service and risk of short term cuts with longer term consequences and costs. You mentioned the pressure following recent announcement regarding teachers' pay and pensions. You were forecasting impact on school delegated budgets and a fall in school reserves. However, despite difficult times you were proud of pupil attainment and achievement in Swansea, with some of the best schools in Wales, and were focused on trying to maintain good performance and practice.

Pupil Development Grant

We asked you about allocation and monitoring of the Pupil Development Grant. We discussed issues around understanding of the purpose of the Grant and what it is based on, including class data and the number of pupils entitled to free school meals. You stated that the Grant is heavily monitored, with a key role also for school governors to scrutinise objectives (ensuring they are clear and visible) and outcomes within their school. We heard that challenge advisers will also have a series of questions for schools with regard to their plans.

School Maintenance

The Committee asked for clarification about the division of maintenance responsibilities between schools and the Council. It was explained that there is a very detailed book that head teachers have which states what aspects of school maintenance should be covered by delegated budgets, and what issues would be a matter for the local authority. It was explained that issues such as replacement roof, overall electrics, heating systems or other large building repairs would be the responsibility of the authority, some of which would be carried out on a phased basis.

You told us about changes to thresholds that would help schools, eliminating the need for tendering exercises for maintenance spends up to £10k (up from £5k). You also stated that there is a memorandum of understanding between the authority and schools about maintenance - there is a clear expectation on schools to keep buildings in a good state of repair in order to prevent big issues arising.

Safeguarding

We asked about procedures regarding Disclosure Barring Service (DBS) checks, and position in respect of school governors. It was not clear whether school governors were required to have DBS clearance. We felt that given their standing in the school and position of trust, and possible contact with pupils, it should be mandatory. You agreed that all school governors should be DBS checked and stated that you would follow up on this matter and take appropriate action.

Schools Admissions

A query was raised about whether there was a policy on out of county school placements. We understood that the Council may have to send children out of Swansea in specialist education settings dependent on needs but this query was about mainstream Swansea schools admitting children from out of the county. You explained that parents could apply to any school, and dependant on meeting prescribed criteria, or surplus places, could be granted admission. For example, Looked After Children and pupils with Special Education Needs were a priority category for school admission. You assured the Committee that school admission arrangements in Swansea were in line with national guidance.

Your Response

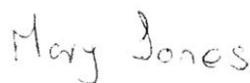
In your response we would welcome your comments on any of the issues raised in this letter. We would be grateful, however, if you could specifically refer to our request for you to:

- communicate with governing bodies about reducing the health risk caused by vehicle exhaust emissions around schools and asking them to cascade the message in their communities; and
- take appropriate action regarding DBS checks for school governors.

Please provide the response to this and any other comments about our letter by 30 November. We will then include both letters in the agenda of the next available Committee meeting.

We will arrange to follow up on portfolio developments and invite you to a future Committee meeting in due course.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR MARY JONES

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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