

Councillor Paxton Hood-Williams

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Our Ref: JR/JW

BY EMAIL

Your Ref:

Date: 1 July 2019

Dear Councillor Hood-Williams

**JOINT MEETING OF THE SCHOOLS SCRUTINY PERFORMANCE PANEL AND THE
CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES SCRUTINY PERFORMANCE PANEL**

Thank you for your letter dated 10 June 2019.

Please find my responses to your questions below.

Response to questions posed from a Youth Ambassador for the Fostering Network

1. Why was the decision made?

The Looked after Children (LAC) element of the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) is a sum of money issued by Welsh Government (WG) to be used as a school improvement grant. It is distributed to Local Authorities, via their regional consortium. For Swansea that is ERW, (Education through Regional Working).

Historically, ERW have provided local authorities (LAs) with the full grant to be used in a way that was deemed most appropriate for the needs of LAC, those subject to a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) and those who had been adopted within individual authorities. Most authorities within ERW have used this grant to centrally employ staff to work with these vulnerable learners. In Swansea, we employed three project workers to carry out this work. Often, these most vulnerable young people experience high mobility between schools, and LA staff can provide a constant support for the young people if they do move between settings, as well as advocating for the needs of the learner.

Prior to the financial year 2018-2019, LAs were given information from ERW that they were working towards a WG model of delegating the grant to school clusters to bring the funding in line with the wider PDG. We were subsequently informed that this would be a transition year and that any monies delegated to employees could be retained for this year, however the new model of working would be implemented in the financial year 2019-2020. All employees at risk were informed of this.

On 11 December 2018, Gareth Morgans, (Director of Education for Carmarthen), circulated a letter to all Directors following correspondence from Steve Davies, Welsh Government's Director of Education, calling for more consistency in the use of PDG-LAC. In it Steve Davies wrote,

"It is evident that, to date, there have been a range of approaches across Wales and that there is a need for a more coherent, national approach from April 2019. There is acceptance from Welsh Government that 2018-19 is a transition year in which we move towards greater consistency. There is a very clear expectation from Welsh Government that, in line with the PDG, the LAC element should go directly to schools with the aim of moving 'to a model with greater consistency, equity and robustness...'"

In the following workshops he was also able to convey the concerns that most local authorities have. These included issues of capacity within some clusters of schools, clusters with low numbers of LAC, resource demands of complex cases, flexibility of approaches, regional training packages, linking in with other services and key stage 4 support packages.

Despite the concerns raised, WG have continued to maintain that the grant is a school improvement grant, and as such should be distributed to schools, rather than be held centrally. This new way of working has now been signed off by Kirsty Williams, Education Minister.

2. Why was the decision made so abruptly not giving young people time to adjust?

At the time of the communication from Gareth Morgans, described above, officers were still unsure whether we would have the funds to ensure that we could allow the project workers to continue. Various avenues were being explored. ERW had mentioned that they may implement a hybrid scheme, which would see part of the PDG-LAC kept centrally and part distributed to clusters. Although a seemingly good offer, this did not come to fruition.

There was also exploration into whether the project workers could be jointly funded through Child and Family Services and Education and a meeting was convened on the 28 January 2019, with all relevant staff. Unfortunately, budgetary demands would not allow this. It was also felt that due to the nature of the job description of the project workers, the very nature of their work was not strategic. Their support only reached a small percentage of the LAC population in Swansea.

Officers also met with headteacher representatives from both primary and secondary schools, to investigate the possibility of school clusters 'buying in' the services of the project workers. This is not an avenue in which schools wished to pursue. The overall feeling was that they would be able to utilise any funds received in a more strategic and equitable way.

Such negotiations do take time, but were necessary as the benefit to the young people of having such a worker in their lives is recognisably positive. This coupled with periods of sick leave of some of the project workers themselves, regrettably left very little time to prepare the young people as fully as we would have liked.

3. Why the young people effected were not consulted?

It is recognised that young people respond best to those adults with whom they have formed a strong bond of trust with. This is the very nature of the project workers remit, and as such it seemed most natural for them to inform the young people of the Welsh Government decision.

In hindsight, it would have been better to work with school staff to consult with the young people. However all decisions were made with the best of intentions at the time.

4. How LAC young people will be supported, now this service has changed?

In terms of the partnership with the Reaching Wider 'Diamond Project', the service has continued and young people still enjoy the experience of attending Swansea University every week. Further collaboration has been planned and successfully implemented for a project with primary aged LAC learners; and the Education for Looked after Children's coordinator will be meeting with representatives from Reaching Wider during the summer, to hopefully plan future events, as funding dictates. This is an extremely important partnership and essential in raising the aspirations among our LAC population.

Schools will receive the PDG-LAC as WG have dictated. This will be monitored in line with regional guidelines. Unfortunately, to date, LAs have not been given any information about the grant, and it still hasn't been distributed to schools. So schools find themselves in a position whereby they have no support from the LA, nor have the funds from the grant.

Response to questions posed by the panel

1. How will the new Facility in Cockett improve the education of our most vulnerable children including LAC?

The new facility at the Council's Cockett House site will provide a new base for the EOTAS (Education other than at School) service. The new teaching facility will replace existing and outdated pupil referral accommodation that is currently scattered at various locations across the city.

Class sizes will be small – with a maximum of 7 pupils to 2 members of staff. This allows for a more bespoke approach to supporting pupils to develop the skills necessary to enable them to access learning and develop appropriate and relevant social, emotional and behavioural skills.

Staff in the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) will work closely with partner agencies to provide a wrap-around support to vulnerable pupils and their families, with the explicit aim of supporting well-being outcomes. The work is currently on-going with the PRU support work team to align assessment and intervention work with that of SSD and will serve to provide a more continuous and integrated approach to the assessment of well-being needs and inform more targeted support to pupils with a high level of need.

The co-location of services including the Home Tuition Service and Behaviour Support Team, alongside the planned Early Intervention Team, will enable the new facility to provide timely and targeted support to schools to prevent pupils from requiring EOTAS provision. It will also enable the service to provide support to develop the capacity of schools to better meet the needs of pupils exhibiting challenging behaviour and emotional difficulties.

Low self-esteem and a history of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), is often a contributing factor to poor behaviour. The Council investment in this new facility will support staff to ensure that the children and young people recognise their worth and the importance the LA places on them, ultimately increasing self-worth and resilience.

2. How will it be inspired by cutting-edge best practise?

The new facility is designed with the new curriculum for Wales in mind. Its design is one of its kind, which poses an exciting opportunity for vulnerable pupils in Swansea.

The Head of the PRU has worked closely with the architects and Council planning team to inform the design of the new building. This means that the building is designed specifically to meet the needs of pupils with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties. There has already been a lot of interest in the project from other LAs.

The new build will provide bespoke spaces for the different ages and needs that will be attending. It will house areas to support sensory and therapeutic support in addition to specialist subject areas such as design and technology, science and art rooms. The addition of these rooms will greatly enhance the curriculum opportunities that are already judged as good by Estyn.

Research into supporting the needs of pupils who have undergone trauma or ACEs; or who have issues associated with mental health or neuro-developmental difficulties will underpin the teaching and well-being support strategies that will be used to support pupils who attend the new PRU. Staff training is currently being focused on areas such as trauma informed practice and supporting mental health, in addition to understanding the implications of the new curriculum in relation to the PRU context.

The Head of the PRU has also established a strong regional network for staff working in the PRU sector. This was recognised as a strong feature in the recent Estyn Inspection. This work will enable regional school to school sharing of good practice, and development of sector leading practice.

3. Can the use of alternative school data, such as FFT data provide a better mechanism for monitoring the educational progress of vulnerable children?

Fischer Family Trust (FFT) data can be used to monitor the progress of various pupil groups. The management systems unit (MSU), currently use it alongside other data we have in our analysis of school and pupil performance.

FFT shows value-added for a number of groups which are pre-defined on their system. However, as LAC numbers are low, in most cases LAC cannot be viewed as a group, although an individual learner's value added attainment can be viewed. FFT currently measure progress in key stages 2 and 4, but locally we also have a tool known as the VAP+ (Vulnerable Assessment Profile) which can be used to show progress at all key stages.

All schools are given the VAP+ each September but it can be run for various groups on demand at any time. LAC learners are a key vulnerable group and as such the MSU produce a VAP for them as a group each April which scores them on 14 different aspects of vulnerability.

In summary, FFT data is very useful to show progress, but it is best used alongside the other tools used to measure outcomes.

Yours sincerely



**COUNCILLOR JENNIFER RAYNOR
CABINET MEMBER FOR EDUCATION IMPROVEMENT, LEARNING & SKILLS**