



**To:**  
**Councillor Jennifer Raynor**  
**Cabinet Member for Education**  
**Improvement, Learning and Skills**

**BY EMAIL**

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**Summary:** This is a letter from the Education Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member for Education Improvement, Learning and Skills following the meeting of the Panel on 15 July 2020. It covers Service Specific Update on Covid-19 Pandemic.

Dear Cllr Raynor,

#### **Education Scrutiny Performance Panel – 15 July 2020**

I would be grateful if you could pass on the thanks of the Panel to Head teachers, Teachers, and support staff across Swansea as well as to Nick Williams and his team for the work they have done since the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

In addition, we would like to note the innovative work that has been done by a number of schools in producing PPE for the NHS and local communities. This has literally been lifesaving.

As you know, the Panel met on 15 July to receive an update on the Covid-19 Pandemic in relation to Education. We would like to thank you, Nick Williams and Helen Morgan-Rees for attending to present the item and answer the Panel's questions. We appreciate your engagement and input.

We are writing to you to reflect on what we learnt from the discussion, share the views of the Panel, and, where necessary, raise any issues or recommendations for your consideration and response. The main issues discussed are summarised below:

#### **OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU**

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## **Service Specific Update on Covid-19 Pandemic**

We understand the Department kept in touch with approximately 140 most vulnerable children during lockdown, contacting them by phone/email, offering child care spaces and querying why places were not taken up. You stated that you recognise there will be vulnerable pupils who will need to continue with remote working indefinitely.

We asked if the system has been able to cope with remote learning and if there have been any problems with bandwidth etc. We were informed that no problems have been reported and that accessibility was more of an issue as it took time to get devices out to families who did not have IT. We heard that you worked closely with schools, especially secondary, to repurpose machines. We also heard that dongles have been allocated. We understand that schools will need machines back by 14 September and this is a challenge but you think a solution can be found.

We asked about the level of engagement through digital learning and heard that engagement was patchy. However, where engagement was patchy, schools queried with parents/learners what the barriers were to remote digital learning and paper based learning and how engagement could be improved, and that most schools were proactive in seeking feedback and responding to feedback.

We expressed concern that the good stuff learnt from new remote digital learning is not lost. You confirmed that one of the biggest lessons learnt is the need to continue developing the digital strategy and putting more training in place, both in case of further lockdown and it offers more flexibility; and to share expertise across schools so a full raft of learning materials is available either at home or in a classroom situation. We were pleased to hear that in a similar way you want to work with post-16 providers.

We understand that broadband width of all schools was increased substantially before lockdown, and if the expectation is for pupils to continue working digitally you will need to look at improving black spots in certain areas of Swansea that have problem with WIFI.

We asked about the working relationship with Social Services, how we get the balance right between Social Care and Education and if there is a need for more integration, for example, if there is scope to have more Social Services staff based in or linked to schools from September. We heard that the relationship was already good but the crisis has forced departments to work in a slightly different way and there has been a great deal of integration during the crisis that will continue; that the relationship developed with officers working across departments is key and if we can integrate other resources it can only be good news. We were informed that Social Services is moving ahead with early help hubs despite the crisis and that first indications suggest it is successful. We were very pleased to hear this.

In terms of mental health, we asked about preparedness, when schools return to fulltime in September, to deal with increase in demand from pupils who will have anxiety. We heard that it is difficult to gauge demand and that the Department will be re-issuing guidance on successful transition back to school. We understand that getting back to the routine of learning in school will help but there will be pupils who are more vulnerable and that they will be monitored carefully. We also heard that

staff will be offered more training including bereavement training. We heard that there will be a stretch on resources and you referred the Panel to information provided to Cllr Peter Black's question at last Council meeting on how you intend to spend the extra money Council has received for well-being and mental health. We understand that there will be two separate funds used to provide additional support.

Health and safety was discussed and we asked if a Local Authority employee would visit schools next term to check on health and hygiene. Officers confirmed that 100% of schools in Swansea have already been contacted about health and safety, 90% of schools have received a visit from a Health and Safety Officer, and a telephone conversation was held with the remainder. We heard that the Legionella test procedure has also taken place in all schools that needed it.

We discussed support for disadvantaged pupils who missed out during lockdown. We heard that some of the check in and catch up time in schools enabled disadvantaged pupils to go in and catch up. Schools also checked that all pupils were not falling too far behind. We understand that, in September, there will be a period of transition to check everyone gets what they need - basics in literacy and numeracy will be checked before moving forward with the curriculum, and this may take time. Schools will not be too quick to assess pupils and will ensure well-being first.

We heard that there is a need to be aware of staff well-being. It will be a difficult period of learning when schools go back in September and how this is supported will be key. We understand that Welsh Government has announced funding for additional staff but there is no clarity yet on how this will be provided or what it means for each school.

We asked if schools that operated as hubs during lockdown, would receive any financial compensation for doing so, because by comparison those schools that did not do so, were effectively mothballed, so were able to make savings on operating costs, thus putting them in a better financial position than those schools that remained open.

You told us how the Department has proactively worked with the Home Office to support asylum seeker families to ensure funding via special cards for free school meals and that Swansea is the only area in the UK apart from Northern Ireland to adopt this practice. You told us how very proud you are of staff for doing this. You also told us how the Department were able to work with pupils with additional learning needs (ALN).

We expressed our concern about the return to school in September and asked for assurances that there will be a structured approach. The Director of Education confirmed there would be a staged approach to return for the first two weeks but that all schools in Swansea will be fully open from 14 September as instructed by Welsh Government.

You asked about bringing an item to an early future meeting on what has been learnt and changes going forward from September. We agreed this would be a good idea and will add 'Impact of Covid-19 going forward' to the work programme.

Finally, on behalf of the Panel, we would once again like to thank Nick Williams, Helen Morgan-Rees and the team in Education and head teachers and staff in schools for the

tremendous job they have done during the crisis and also thank pupils who have risen to the challenges.

### **Your Response**

We hope you find this letter useful and informative. We would welcome your comments on any of the issues raised but please provide a formal written response by 02 September to the following:

- Confirmation about the financial position of schools that operated as hubs during lockdown.

Yours sincerely

**COUNCILLOR LYNDON JONES**

Convener, Education Scrutiny Performance Panel

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