



To:
Councillor Robert Smith
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 21 October looking at the harassment in schools, Welsh in Education Strategic Plan and the implementation of the New Curriculum for Wales.

Dear Cllr Smith,

Education Scrutiny Performance Panel – 21 October 2021

We would like to thank you, Helen Morgan Rees, Damien Beech and Rhodri Jones for attending our meeting. We are writing to you to reflect on what we learnt from the discussion and to share the views of the Panel.

Harassment in Schools

You told us that officers had looked specifically at the Swansea schools that were named on the 'everyone's invited' website but they were not able to cross reference any of the concerns highlighted with reports to the schools. You explained that support has been provided directly to schools making sure that they have appropriate safeguarding arrangements in place. Also, that officers report that they felt reassured by what they were told by schools and that safeguarding procedures were in place and that those were robust.

We heard, in the meantime Welsh Government has asked the Commissioner to undertake a thematic review of the issues raised by this website and that work is ongoing. We will be keen to see that once it is available.

You told us that safeguarding is taken very seriously by this Council. Some of the work undertaken more generally included the Education Child Protection and Safeguarding Officer leading on work linking a pilot for the new relationships and sex education

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curriculum with the whole education approach to violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence.

You also told us that many of the actions highlighted are in part in response to the disclosures on that website but also the ongoing commitment by the Council to keep pupils safe in schools and that the Council will also continue to respond to issues if and when they arise. You said you recognise that it is key to promote healthy relationships and to ensure that all learners feel safe and comfortable in the environment in which they find themselves.

The Director told us that there was no confirmation that any of the disclosures mentioned on the website took place within the school environment. She said from what we know, across the schools that were named nationally, six were in Swansea. We heard that our safeguarding training for schools makes it abundantly clear that teachers and staff really need to be seen as safe people to go to within a school environment, so pupils are able to disclose and share in confidence. We were concerned about those pupils who did not feel comfortable enough to raise issues in school but did recognise that there are many variables in a pupil's life that may stop them from doing so and they may not be ready to disclose at this particular time in their life. The Director agreed to provide more information to us about the position of strength Swansea is in with respect to safeguarding.

We discussed the idea of having a telephone line that young people could call if they do not feel they want to, or are comfortable to, go to a teacher or other professional in their school. We heard that Child Line provide an important service in relation to this and that this number should be displayed in all school settings so that pupils are aware of this service.

Welsh in Education Strategic Plan Presentation

We thanked Rhodri for the comprehensive presentation he provided. We heard that the vision for the development of Welsh-medium education in Swansea is clear, robust and ambitious. That the work to be done is multi-faceted and multi-layered, and the next step after approval of the strategy will be to develop an action plan for the next 10 years. Also, that the clear use of data will enable the Council to set specific targets, which will allow us to measure the impact and success of the work.

We raised the issue of every teacher in Wales being able to and/or being trained to use the Welsh language in the classroom and how we are going to do that? We were told that this will be one of the biggest challenges faced by the Plan, with the need for the whole education profession to get on board with it. We were encouraged to hear that our teacher training providers locally are doing a lot on this with new teachers into the system. You also told us that Universities have been providing sabbatical schemes as opportunities for serving teachers, but that this and initial teacher training needs to be further supported by Welsh Government.

We welcomed the overall 10 year vision and strategic plan for the development of Welsh education and were pleased to see definite actions and proposals to move forward. We recognise that resourcing this plan will not come cheaply and emphasised the importance of ensuring that it is financially supported both locally and nationally.

Progress with the Introduction of the New Curriculum

We heard that overall, the impact of the pandemic has slowed the Local Authorities and schools' preparations for the new curriculum. Although despite the pandemic, elements of curriculum development and related aspects have continued. For example, schools continued to share good practice related to teaching and learning through our networks. Practice shared has had a strong focus on developing effective teaching and learning approaches through a digital technology. This has led to many innovative approaches being developed that will support the new curriculum well. In addition to this, during the pandemic, the training delivery and offer to governors has been modernised.

We heard that at the national level, despite the pandemic, the Welsh Government has pressed ahead with its curriculum reform agenda. In light of the document the 'Welsh Government's, Curriculum for Wales: the journey to curriculum rollout', officers will need to consider re-establishing the Swansea Curriculum, Teaching and Assessment Group (SCTAG) Network and updating the local implementation plan.

We heard concerns remain over schools capacity to engage fully with curriculum reform. Currently, the pandemic is affecting school staff significantly, and the ability of schools to release staff for curriculum-related development is difficult. The Welsh Government has recognised this challenge, somewhat, in its new guidance with a more sensitive language around readiness, for example, it states: "We do not expect schools to have perfected or completed all aspects of curriculum design reform by roll-out". We stress the need to get this right including teacher engagement, otherwise those who suffer will be the pupils themselves. We agreed that it is important the School Improvement Advisers and Curriculum Advisers sensitively monitor and support schools in areas related to curriculum development.

Your Response

We would welcome your comments on any of the issues raised in this letter but would ask that you provide a written reply covering the following issue/s by 25 November 2021.

- Provide us with some more information, as mentioned by the Director, of the position of strength we are in Swansea in relation to harassment in schools and safeguarding.

Yours sincerely

COUNCILLOR LYNDON JONES

Convener, Education Scrutiny Performance Panel

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