



To:
Councillor Robert Smith
Cabinet Member for Education
Improvement, Learning and Skills

BY EMAIL

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Date
Dyddiad:

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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 9 December looking at the Education Performance against key objectives, the Swansea Skills Partnership and the Regional Education Partnership.

Dear Cllr Smith,

Education Scrutiny Performance Panel – 9 December 2021

We would like to thank you and Helen Morgan Rees 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

Thank you for updating us in relation to the recently published national Estyn report relating to harassment in schools. We heard that the report contains three recommendations and the Education Directorate are considering these and will be progressing them via a working group. You agreed to update the Panel on progress.

School Meals

We asked you to update us on the policy in Swansea in respect of the provision of school meals when a family is in debit in their school meal account. You told us that no child in Swansea should go hungry when at school and that there are contingencies in place for schools should parents not have monies in the school meal account. You said we are here to support families and would encourage any family struggling to pay for school meals to have a confidential dialogue with their child's school.

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU

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Performance against identified education priorities (RAG)

You told us that the report gives a positive set of outcomes especially given the complications caused by the pandemic. We understand that the annual performance report from the statutory chief officer for education we normally receive is not available. Also, during the pandemic externally verified examinations have ceased and Welsh Government no longer collects end of key stage assessments. In addition to this, the national categorisation of schools is suspended alongside the inspection of schools by the education inspectorate Estyn. As a result, it is difficult to make comparisons and report on schools' performance. We were therefore pleased to look at the education performance against its key objectives including the RAG status.

We heard that it has been an unprecedented and difficult year in education, but you did point to several successes in that time, including for example the work around the Additional Learning Needs Reform agenda that is ensuring we are responding appropriately to new Act.

Your report concluded that performance against key objectives is good for the majority of objectives and reflects a status of suitable progress, addressing the priorities in most aspects. Only minor aspects require further attention. However, performance against a few priorities and a few objectives is weaker due to resource issues, the effects of the pandemic or by other external factors but importantly, the evaluation of progress is honest. Where there are key blockers to performance, matters are reported as part of the corporate risk management process. Overall, the performance against historic key headline indicators is impossible to report with the key assurances for school management, governance and performance are now mainly achieved through monitoring and evaluation by education officers.

We discussed a number of issues with you, including how the statements in the document are actually measured. Also, who determines the assessment of each category. We heard that this is not done in isolation. However, the Education Directorate work as a team and as a group of senior leaders you challenge each other about each part of the RAG status. Also, it is not just a team leader or a head of service determining this, conversations are had with all those involved and feedback is asked for.

We heard that in the last seven years Swansea Autistic Spectrum Disorder pupils have increased threefold, which indicates a demand for specialist places. We were encouraged to hear that we are creating more places here and bringing pupils back from out of county places into Swansea closer to home. We were pleased to see that making sure there are places for all our learners was a key objective for Swansea.

In light of the recent publicised tragic child death in England, we asked you how you are ensuring that education and schools are communicating effectively with council departments and across its partners including Health? We heard that schools and the education department are continually monitoring to ensure vulnerable and at-risk children are on our radar, making sure information is shared between education, children services and other relevant agencies. Regular meetings take place between the Director of Education and Head of Services in Child and Family to ensure all relevant issues are looked at. We also heard that education and schools work with health visitors and young people's mental health services in relation to this. Training is

provided, both from a child protection and safeguarding perspective and general training relating to younger children who are not always able to speak for themselves. We were reassured to hear that these things allow children to be observed carefully. Also, when teachers have concerns, they share these with the designated child protection officers in their school.

Swansea Skills Partnership Update

We were pleased to hear Partneriaeth Sgiliau Abertawe/ Swansea Skills Partnership has made suitable progress during the last year by building on the early foundations we heard about at our meeting this time last year. You outlined some of those successes including for example: the promoting, maintaining and developing Swansea as a Learning City and developing a local action plan focussing on digital capacity and guidance for learners in order to inspire learners to consider the types of jobs and opportunities within the Swansea Bay City Deal.

We were particularly pleased to hear about action taken and the focus on Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETs) by the Partnership. You told us about the progress made in relation to this strand, hearing that a real traction had developed in the last academic year and that the partnership had blossomed with a range of partners working together on this issue.

We were disappointed that little progress had been made with regard to engaging with and including the business community on the Partnership. You did tell us that the Partnership does have links with the regional Learning Skills Partnership and they are represented on the board. Also, that each of the partners have their own links with businesses and that link is fed in through the partnership. You said that there have been difficulties in identifying those business who would participate but there is clear desire for this to happen. We were pleased with how the Partnership is progressing but agreed that we do need more involvement from the business community and this extra element would make a big difference because businesses are the job creators.

We would also encourage the Education Directorate to have a conversation with different partners to gain some indicative feedback. We feel it is important to ask them about how they want to see the partnership develop further and how they think this should happen.

Regional Education Partnership

We were pleased to hear that the legal agreement for the new regional education partnership known as Partneriaeth has been established with all three local authorities agreeing it at their individual Cabinet meetings this Autumn.

We heard that the legal agreement will now allow the Partnership to have a Joint Committee that can start to make decisions. We were pleased to hear that the agreement contains a strong governance structure which includes a Scrutiny Councillor Group.

We understand that ERW still needs to be wound down by closing down the accounts so will need a final ERW Joint Committee meeting for that to happen. The Director

confirmed that costs arising from the winding down of ERW will be borne by all original Local Authorities that were members of ERW.

We heard that staffing is still in a position of flux as the existing staff structure is going through change. Some staff have been retained but others have moved on and there are also some positions to fill. The size of the organisation has much reduced, and the staffing reflects that. The staffing structure should be in place by the end of January.

Your Response

We would welcome your comments on any of the issues raised in this letter but on this occasion do not require a formal written reply.

Yours sincerely

COUNCILLOR LYNDON JONES

Convener, Education Scrutiny Performance Panel

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