



To:
Councillor Robert Smith
Cabinet Member for Education and Skills

BY EMAIL

Please ask for: Michelle Roberts
Gofynnwch am:
Scrutiny Office 01792 637256
Line:
Llinell
Uniongyrchol:
e-Mail scrutiny@swansea.gov.uk
e-Bost:
Date 30 April 2024
Dyddiad:

Summary: This is a letter from the Education Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member for Education and Learning following the meeting of the Panel on 18 April 2024. The Panel discussed the Religion, Values and Ethics education, voices of children and young people and Education Other Than At School Services.

Dear Cllr Smith,

Education Scrutiny Performance Panel – 18 April 2024

We would like to thank you, Dr J Andrews from Bangor University and the officers from the Education Directorate for attending the meeting and providing information for the Panel. We are writing to you to reflect on what we learnt from the discussion and to share the views of the Panel.

Religion, Values and Ethics (RVE) Education

We heard firstly from Dr Andrews about the recent research completed into this matter by Bangor University and then from Swansea's Religion, Values and Ethics Adviser about the work happening in Swansea. In 2023 the National Centre for Religious Education at Bangor University undertook research to explore how RVE was embedded within the Curriculum for Wales. Their research included both quantitative and qualitative research methods and included responses from fifty-eight schools from across Wales. The second part of the research involved in depth interviews with colleagues from across Wales. Dr Andrews outlined some of the findings from that research so far. We also looked at the report provided by Education Directorate giving details of the work done here in Swansea on the matter.

We heard that the research did highlight shortcomings in relation to RVE education in Wales including several areas where statutory obligations are not being met. We felt that it did seem that the teaching of RVE was reduced or even watered down within the

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new curriculum with it has becoming part of the humanities subject area rather than being a standalone subject.

We were concerned about the limited time that is given over to the subject in the curriculum by schools and about the lack of teacher training for new teachers on the matter. We did feel that there also needed to be more space in the initial teacher training for this subject.

We thanked the Religion, Values and Ethics Adviser for her detailed briefing on the subject. We were pleased to hear that Swansea Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE) has secured funding to improve the resources available to schools on the subject and that in Swansea we are further ahead than many other local authorities. Although this may be the case, we felt there is a lot more to do to improve RVE in Swansea schools. This is evident from the declining number of pupils who are entered for examinations or taking the subject at GCSE and A 'Level. We understand that SACRE are continuing to investigate this decline. We felt that it was important that we look at this again and will therefore put it into our work programme for next year, especially as it is a statutory requirement.

Hearing the voices of children and young people

We were encouraged to hear about the amount of activity that is taking place not only in education settings but also more widely in the community to engage with and gain the views of young people. We heard that this is completed by both the education directorate and the Partnership and Involvement Team from Social Services. We were pleased to see the different ways in which young people's voices are gathered and then included in decision making here in Swansea. We were particularly interested in how those quiet voices are gained and how they are fed into departments across the council.

We are pleased to see this activity being embedded in the work of the Council and we recognise that it is vital that children and young people engage in shaping both their own lives and the council priorities. The Panel were keen that young people should be invited to participate in the education scrutiny process.

Education Other Than At School Services (EOTAS)

We heard about the review of EOTAS services, including the consultation exercise that took place with the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) Management Committee, staff at the PRU and learners attending the PRU and/or in receipt of other EOTAS services. We were told that this consultation exercise was crucial in developing the new model.

We heard that the consultation feedback was grouped into what worked well, what did not work with suggestions for improvement. These findings and the proposed new model were shared in a report to Swansea Cabinet in January 2024. We were pleased to hear that as part of the review consideration was also given to data held by the local authority in relation to current, emerging need and future predictions and that the proposal aligned with the Council's corporate plans and commitments.

We understand that it is envisaged that the final staffing structure will be in place by April 2024, with the implementation of the new model proposed for September 2024.

We asked what the gatekeeping for the service will be. We heard that the EOTAS Panel will be the gatekeeper, they will also look at how each 'offer' will be tailored to the meet the young person's needs.

We raised the issue of the impact of the language used in relation to some services and activities like the Pupil Referral Unit and alternative curriculum. We asked if a more positive terminology be used for example 'appropriate' curriculum rather than 'alternative'.

We heard that although there will be a number of different pathways for EOTAS, schools will also continue to build capacity in mainstream alongside that, particularly in the prevention element.

We asked how the new model has been received by staff in the EOTAS services and whether there will be a net change in staffing levels. We heard that there will be a review of job descriptions and roles. It will be about how we use our staff resources rather than the numbers of staff. We were also told that staff have mixed views at present, which is to be expected through the change process.

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 response, but we would suggest consideration is given to the language used for EOTAS services and we felt that it would be a good opportunity, as part of the implementation of the new model, to introduce more positive wording where appropriate.

Yours sincerely

COUNCILLOR LYNDON JONES

Convener, Education Scrutiny Performance Panel

Cllr.lyndon.jones@swansea.gov.uk