



CITY AND COUNTY OF SWANSEA
DINAS A SIR ABERTAWE

**To/
Councillor Jennifer Raynor
Cabinet Member for Education**

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SPC/2016-17/5

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*Date
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01 September 2016

Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member for Education following the meeting of the Committee on 8 August 2016. It is about the New Primary School in Gorseinon at Parc Y Werin, Education Other Than At School, Flying Start, School Improvement, Surplus School Places, School Budgets, School Attendance, and the Education Department Structure.

Dear Councillor Raynor,

Cabinet Member Question Session – 8 August

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 8 August 2016 and answering questions on your work as Cabinet Member for Education. Thank you for providing a written paper that gave some headlines from this cabinet portfolio in support of your appearance.

We wanted to explore priorities, actions, achievements and impact, in relation to your areas of responsibility. We are writing to you to reflect on what we learnt from the discussion, share the views of the committee, and, where necessary, raise any outstanding issues / actions for your response. The main issues discussed are summarised below:

New Primary School in Gorseinon at Parc Y Werin

We discussed this at length when we met you in October 2015. At that time there was some public concerns about the plans, particularly the appropriation of land at Parc Y Werin, and the planning application for the new school build was imminent.

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Since then we understand that an application has been made for village green status for the Parc y Werin site, which has obviously stalled progress with the new build. We were concerned however that the process appears to be taking some time, and no doubt at significant cost. We asked about the cost of legal fees incurred to date by the Council dealing with this matter, and likely cost should inspectors recommend an inquiry.

We also queried play area provision within the new school and accessibility for community use. We sought clarification on how much, in percentage terms, would the whole school build (including outside play space) actually occupy? The information before scrutiny and various press releases talk about 12% of the park for the school building itself.

Education Other Than At School (EOTAS)

We followed up on the concerns we had last year about urgency and the pace of change since issues were raised by Estyn in 2013 about performance and outcomes for children educated other than at school. Scrutiny councillors had particular concerns about some of the buildings within the Pupil Referral Unit not being fit for purpose. We understood in October 2015 that there had been some difficult service issues that have taken time to resolve but that alternative buildings were being explored.

Although the service has begun to see improvement it was very disappointing to hear that little progress has been made since last October in finding more suitable alternate accommodation. The poor conditions these vulnerable children are exposed to will undermine efforts to improve teaching, and action is urgently needed. It is unacceptable that it has taken so long. We would appreciate clarification on the current position with this accommodation and how you intend to tackle this issue in the coming months.

The Education Inclusion Scrutiny Inquiry Panel originally raised these concerns and it is meeting in November to follow up on the implementation of agreed recommendations and the impact of its work. The Panel will no doubt ask about progress with this, along with its other recommendations.

Flying Start

We asked about the programme for the future in respect of the Flying Start. You told us that there was no indication from Welsh Government of any increase in funding. The on-going challenge facing the Council was how to extend the programme in other areas as provision is currently limited geographically. We agreed that poverty was not limited to those areas.

One of the issues you identified was being more proactive about take up; taking steps in local communities to get those people involved that need the service. We discussed how important the Programme was for child development and you were clear the impact needed to be greater.

The committee has already identified Preparedness for School as a potential scrutiny inquiry. This work will begin soon and will no doubt explore the success or otherwise of Flying Start, and other initiatives, during any evidence gathering.

School Improvement

We were concerned to hear that teaching staff at one primary school had refused to provide pupil books for review or participate in lesson observation by Education Improvement Service staff, following a trade union directive. We noted that the level of support for each school is dependent on identified needs within the school and that means a higher level of support where issues are identified. You shared our concern about the refusal of support and we agreed that it was vital that the school participates, as our common interest is to ensure consistent teaching and learning, and improvement in pupil educational outcomes. You assured the committee that the service provides rigorous and consistent challenge to schools, with standardised processes in place, i.e. deep data analysis, tighter reporting mechanisms and quality assurance procedures. You stated that this can come as a bit of a shock to schools not operating within a strong performance management framework.

We noted that school inspections have been generally positive throughout 2015-16 and currently only two Swansea schools have been identified in the 'red' support category. We asked for a prognosis for those two schools identified as causing concern. You told us that one of these was a secondary school which was showing improvement, and it was anticipated that it would move out of that category. The other was a primary which was still in need of a high level of support for improvement.

The work of Challenge Advisors was also discussed, and we noted that staff recruitment and retention continues to be challenging, most notably in the secondary sector. We shared our concern that has been expressed by schools, about a lack of continuity of advisors. You argued that there was a high level of consistency amongst advisors and, whilst personalities may change, the quality of support would be the same and should not hinder school improvement. You felt there was no need for a 'personal' connection between advisors and schools, however stressed that changes are not made for changes sake. You added that Challenge Advisors met regularly as a group to ensure consistent standards and share practice. It would be helpful if you could provide more information to help us understand the work of Challenge Advisors and standards, including their allocation across schools.

Surplus School Places

We asked about the current number of surplus school places, in both primary and secondary, and the associated cost. You undertook to respond in writing. It was remarked however that some schools were oversubscribed and it was particularly frustrating for parents, for example in Penllergaer, who have been unable to secure a school place within their own area and have had to transport children to a school out of catchment. You explained that most parents do get the school of their choice but surplus places can be filled with children out of catchment, and this can result in fewer places for children in that area about to enter primary school. We acknowledged that this was a difficult issue, exacerbated by new housing developments.

School Budgets

We discussed the issue of devolving budgets and the relationship between the authority and schools. You felt that things were at the tipping point as it was clear that schools did not generally want any further delegation of funding and the responsibilities that would go with it. . You pointed out the Minister's target of 85%, which is where Swansea is operating at.

We noted that the Welsh Government has still not finalised the terms and conditions for the Education Improvement Grant for 2016/17, and that Pupil Deprivation Grant (Looked After Children allocations) were still not known. When asked you were not sure of the reason for any delay. We agreed that the delay was unsatisfactory and hoped that things will be clearer soon given the impact and uncertainty this will have on schools and service planning.

School Attendance

There has been discussion in various forums about school attendance and whether it was an effective measure of school performance. The concern amongst scrutiny councillors has centred on the impact that a marginal dip in attendance can have on a school's performance figures. The committee expressed concern about the meaningfulness of existing attendance national performance measures particularly how small variations might impact on a school with relatively small number of pupils, putting some schools at a disadvantage when being inspected and judged. Whilst recognising that attendance was important we queried whether Estyn's approach may be different in the future.

We were interested to hear that the Department has decided to appoint an Incentivising Attendance Officer, with an incentivising attendance scheme planned for launch in early in the autumn term.

Education Department Structure

We noted that a revised structure for the Education Department has been implemented and has been in place for six months. Your written report to the committee included the departmental / team structure. We would be grateful if you could add the names of lead officers to the various positions and service areas, including the number of staff in each area.

You told us that a new central base to deal with inquiries (the Education Support Unit) has been set up within the Department in order to provide a better and more efficient service to customers. We were interested to know about this new process and benefits in terms of handling requests and communications.

We talked about the recent hoax bomb scare at Gwyrosydd Primary School and evacuation of pupils in terms of business continuity. We wondered whether the experience in May has led to the Department reviewing its emergency and contingency plans, should an incident take place for example at one of the large comprehensive schools, or during exams. You provided assurance that discussions have taken place at local, regional and national level to help ensure incidents are managed effectively.

Your Response

In your response we would appreciate your comments on any of the issues raised in this letter. We would be grateful, however, if you could specifically refer to our request for you to:

- Tell us about the cost of legal fees incurred to date by the Council dealing with the village green application for Parc Y Werin, and likely cost should inspectors recommend an inquiry;
- Clarify the area of the whole school build at Parc Y Werin (including outside play space) as a proportion of the park;
- Clarify the current position with Pupil Referral Unit accommodation and how you intend to tackle this issue in the coming months;
- Provide more information on the work of Challenge Advisors and standards, including their allocation across schools;
- Confirm the current number of surplus school places, in both primary and secondary, and the associated cost;
- Provide a revised Education Department team / management structure with the names of lead officers in the various positions and service areas, including the number of staff in each area; and
- Tell us about benefits arising from the new Education Support Unit.

Please provide your response by 22 September. We will then include both letters in the agenda of the next available committee meeting.

We look forward to meeting you again to follow up on portfolio developments and hearing about achievements and impact.

Yours sincerely,

Mary Jones

COUNCILLOR MARY JONES

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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