

**To/
Councillor Jennifer Raynor
Cabinet Member for Children,
Education & Lifelong Learning**

BY EMAIL

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Scrutiny

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SPC/2017-18/7

09 November 2017

Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member for Children, Education & Lifelong Learning following the meeting of the Committee on 9 October 2017. It is about 21st Century School Programme, Sale of Surplus Education Land, Welsh Education Strategic Plan, Education Inclusion, School Catchment Areas, School Curriculum, Challenge Advisors, Education Psychologists, School Governing Bodies, Delegated School Budgets, Pupil Health and Free Childcare Pilot.

Dear Councillor Raynor,

Cabinet Member Question Session – 9 October

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 9 October 2017 and answering questions on your work as Cabinet Member for Children, Education & Lifelong Learning. We wanted to explore priorities, actions, achievements and impact, in relation to your areas of responsibility.

Thank you for providing a written paper, giving headlines from the cabinet portfolio, in support of your appearance. We also thank the assistance of Nick Williams, Chief Education Officer, and Kathryn Thomas, Head of School Support Unit, in our discussion. You took the opportunity to highlight the following:

- Improved performance in pupil attainment in the Foundation Phase and Key Stages 2 and 3
- Submission in respect of the Welsh Government 21st Century Schools Programme

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- Cynnydd Project - European Social Fund project to support young people (11-24) at risk of becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) which is making a difference

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:

21st Century School Programme

We asked about the Council's priorities for the Welsh Government's 21st Century Schools and Education Programme. Committee Members wanted to understand the prioritisation process that determines which schools across Swansea will benefit, subject to funding approval.

We were told that all schools have condition surveys which have informed suitability for inclusion in the programme, taking into account guidance that has been provided by the Welsh Government about local assessments. You stated that primarily allocations focus on improving school buildings, though we noted that the projected demand for places was also a relevant factor.

You reported that the Band B submission was for £149.7m, which was reflection of a consistent objective assessment and prioritisation of condition, suitability and sustainability issues as well as areas of basic need for additional provision. You were expecting to hear the outcome from the Welsh Government in November.

Sale of Surplus Education Land

We queried that total sale value of surplus school field sites disposed of since 2012, how capital proceeds have been used, and what percentage such proceeds represent in relation to overall school capital spend over the period.

You clarified that no school land or facility, that was required for education purposes, had been disposed of. However, some parcels of land with school estates had been sold which were either vacated or surplus and not being used for education (e.g. at Cefn Hengoed, and the former Pupil Referral Unit building). Although we did note that Olchfa Comprehensive School have come up with a proposal in relation to their playing fields.

You confirmed that in relation to surplus education land / assets £3.6m has been receipted since 2012, but this represented a very small percentage of overall capital requirements, for example the scale of investment for the 21st Century School Programme Programme's first phase (known as Band A) was £51.3m, with a local contribution of 50%.

Welsh Education Strategic Plan

You reported that the new Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) 2017-2020, which has been out for consultation, has been revised in accordance with amendments required from Welsh Government, following their review of all WESPs in Wales. We noted that this is due for publication in November 2017.

Committee members recognised improvements to the Plan and asked specific questions about proposals and outcomes. There was concern amongst members about targets for Welsh medium provision e.g. Outcome 1 (More 7-year-old children being taught through the medium of Welsh) - 18% of 7 year olds by 2024 We wanted to know the evidence base for developing this as a challenging target. You undertook to provide more information on this.

We also asked about the LDP (Local Development Plan) Strategic Sites which will see additional housing developments and increase demand for school places. We asked about the criteria that will determine whether additional provision, which would likely include S106 developer contributions, would be for Welsh or English medium. You explained that decisions would be informed by data about language, type of housing development, and pressures on existing Welsh medium education, and provision would be allocated accordingly.

With regard to Outcome 2 (More learners continuing to improve their language skills on transfer from primary to secondary school) we noted just under a 79% progression rate from Welsh medium childcare settings to Welsh medium nursery and primary. This is in contrast to a high progression rate from primary to secondary. You provided assurance to the committee that there were plans to improve upon this transfer rate.

Education Inclusion

We invite all scrutiny councillors to suggest questions that we should raise with cabinet members. We were asked on this occasion to find out about steps you have taken to ensure that education is valued by all and even the most challenging students are enabled to thrive.

You told us about the additional support provided to Looked After Children (LAC) in the school system, helped by the Pupil Development Grant. You reinforced the message that all schools should have a LAC Governor.

You also referred to the training that is available to schools (run by the regional education school improvement consortia, ERW) to improve awareness, and help schools and teachers understand and deal with children and young people affected by bereavement, attachment issues, family break-ups or other adverse experiences, that may be affecting their learning.

You also spoke about the improved collaborative working between education and social services resulting in a whole family approach, with initiatives such as 'Team Around the Family' and 'Team Around the School' where additional support is required.

We stressed the need for every school and every teacher to champion inclusion, and have the resilience to support challenging pupils.

We asked you about progress with plans for the development of a new facility to house Education Other Than At School provision on the Cockett House Site. You told us that site investigations have commenced, but plans are subject to the outcome of the authority's Band B submission to the Welsh Government. However this was noted as being the Council's number one priority within the 21st Century Schools and Education Programme.

School Catchment Areas

You were asked to explain the criteria used to determine catchment areas for schools, and whether revisions have been made over time.

The committee noted the history in terms of developing catchment areas and purpose. We recognised the change over time in relation to growth in parental choice and the inability of the LEA to guarantee school places based on residence within catchments.

We were advised that a review of catchment areas was unnecessary and unlikely to have significant benefits within the current system. However, any review would be aligned with the future capital programme (and Local Development Plan) as it could affect the education footprint within Swansea.

School Curriculum

Further to a recent Council question about declining take up of modern foreign languages in school we asked you about your influence, and that of the LEA, generally on the school curriculum and teaching in schools.

You stressed that the national curriculum is set and schools have delegated budgets and make the decisions about teaching and subjects. It was down to schools and school governing bodies to plan long-term, and this would be influenced by financial pressures. We acknowledged that whilst the council can try to influence it cannot direct the curriculum, which dictate that certain things have to be taught, or the choices made by schools and available to pupils.

We were concerned whether important issues such as global citizenship and sustainability (including environmental issues) were given due regard within the curriculum. We were told that this is part of the new curriculum and teaching of these issues would be commented upon by inspectors.

We also asked whether there was any impact on Wales following the changes to the GCSE grading system in England. You stated that it was too early to assess impact, and no issues were apparent, but would be closely followed.

Challenge Advisors

We have previously discussed with you the work of Challenge Advisors, issues relating to staff recruitment and retention, and continuity / connection with schools.

In your update we noted that there is a consistent challenge to schools which has shown strong progress since the local authority inspection in 2013. You reported that there are now effective standardised processes in place to ensure rigorous challenge (i.e. deep data analysis, tighter reporting mechanisms and quality assurance procedures).

We asked about the relationship they have with schools, and whether there have been issues, e.g. where there may have been conflicting views about performance of a school and categorisation. We understood that there was a process of mediation if necessary however you were not aware of any instances of break-down in communication. The relationship with Estyn inspectors was also raised.

We also asked you about the training provided to Challenge Advisors and respective role of the ERW regional consortia and local efforts in developing the team of officers. We heard that as well as regional events there are group meetings held locally to ensure strategic direction, consistency, quality assurance, and sharing of practice.

Education Psychologists

We asked about the provision of Educational Psychologists allocated to schools. We understood that there was a figure of 20 hours per year offered but asked how much flexibility there was e.g. whether some schools could access more should some schools require less. We heard that there were limited resources, and a formula was used to determine the level of service, but the general position was that most schools would like more. We recognised there was pressure on this service.

It was unclear to us whether all schools were allocated a fixed set of hours and were told further information on this would be provided. We wanted clarity about whether there was scope for a particular school to be able to access more than the quoted 20 hours.

School Governing Bodies

We asked about confidence in relation to the effectiveness of school governing bodies, which we understand is something which Estyn inspectors are looking more closely at.

The committee acknowledged that whilst there was some excellent practice, practice varied across Swansea. However it was highlighted to the committee that there is now a greater link between governing bodies and work of Challenge Advisors. There was also support from the Pupil and Governor Unit to help governing bodies to provide more effective challenge, including an initiative to attend governing body meetings to provide direct support to governors.

Delegated School Budgets

We were interested in the level of devolved budgets and delegation of funding. We understood there was a Welsh Government target of 85%. You told the committee that last year the figure was 83.7%, which was felt to be lower than expected.

Pupil Health

Members were concerned about the risk to pupils' respiratory health from contracted school buses / coaches transporting them to/from school e.g. engines left running around the school gates. We asked you about steps taken, or planned, to minimise this risk to health.

You recognised that there was work to be done on this. However, you stated that the Council already had requirements in place in relation to the age of vehicles that can be used and roadworthiness, and compliance with statutory emission limits. You explained that diesel vehicles required a certain temperature for fuel efficiency which may explain why engines are left running. You stated that some car users dropping / picking pupils were also contributing to the problem.

You agreed that an information campaign was necessary to highlight the harmfulness of vehicle exhaust emissions around schools, given the particular vulnerability of the developing lungs of young people of school age, as well as toddlers, who are closer to ground level. You stated that you could contact transport contractors / taxi firms to get them to stop, as well as discourage parents / carers. The committee agreed that a campaign was necessary, given the serious health implications.

Free Childcare Pilot

We discussed the recently announced 30 hour free childcare pilot, which we understand will be available to a number of areas in Swansea, for working parents (minimum 16 hours per week). You flagged up one issue concerning requirements that all childcare schemes must be registered with the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW). You pointed out that this disadvantaged extensive schemes that schools may be offering but not necessarily recognised as qualified under CSSIW rules.

We noted that Swansea is one of a few places to be chosen in Wales and as a pilot it will tease out any issues that will inform improvements to the scheme and any further roll-out across Wales.

Your Response

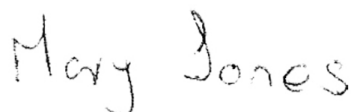
In your response we would welcome your comments on any of the issues raised in this letter. We would be grateful, however, if you could specifically refer to our request for:

- Further information about the evidence base used to develop the target within the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (Outcome 1 - More 7-year-old children being taught through the medium of Welsh; 18% of 7 year olds by 2024.
- Clarity about the level of Education Psychology service that is available to schools and scope for a particular school to be able to access more than their allocation.
- An information campaign to reduce the health risk caused by vehicle exhaust emissions around schools, including advice to transport contractors / taxi firms used to drop off / pick up pupils.

Please provide your response by 30 November. We will then include both letters in the agenda of the next available committee meeting.

We will arrange to follow up on portfolio developments and hearing about achievements and impact in due course.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR MARY JONES

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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