



**To/
Councillors Elliot King & Will Evans
Cabinet Members for Children
Services**

BY EMAIL

cc Cabinet Members

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Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Members following the meeting of the Committee on 12 November 2018. It is about Child & Family Services Inspection Reports, Child Protection and Safeguarding, Regional Adoption Service, Flying Start, Play Therapy, Apprenticeships, Youth Inclusion & Citizenship, Cultural Opportunities for Vulnerable Groups, and Children's Rights

Dear Councillor,

Cabinet Member Question Session – 12 November

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 12 November 2018 and answering questions on your work together as Cabinet Members for Children Services. The session also benefited from the attendance of the Head of Child & Family Services, Julie Thomas.

We are aware the portfolio is shared and split with designated responsibility for Early Years and Young People, and recognised that you were both relatively new to this role. You highlighted issues around Child Protection & Safeguarding, Looked After Children and Corporate Parenting which were paramount and cut across this divide. We appreciate you jointly providing a written paper in support of your appearance. The Q & A session gave us an opportunity to explore priorities and achievement in relation to your areas of responsibility.

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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:

Child & Family Services Inspection Reports

You highlighted recent positive Care Inspectorate Wales findings in relation to Child & Family Services and Foster Swansea and praised the staff working in these areas for achieving this outcome. You reported that inspectors found good quality practice with positive outcomes achieved for most children and families. Additionally they found that services were effectively delivered by staff that were dedicated, well supported and enjoyed working for a local authority where there was a culture of support.

However, you felt there was no room for complacency and recognised that the report identified a number of areas for improvement, for example there is scope to improve support and opportunities to help children and young people to achieve good educational outcomes. We noted the aim for Looked After Children to succeed in school and to have opportunities for further education, higher education, employment or training, but asked what data there was around the educational attainment of Looked After Children and entry into higher education. We recognised this was an area which the Corporate Parenting Board and Cabinet Member for Education Improvement, Learning & Skills would have involvement in, though you undertook to provide this information to us in writing.

Child Protection and Safeguarding

As one of the Council's corporate priorities we were aware that training for councillors and staff on child protection and safeguarding was compulsory however the position was less clear in the case of school governors. We acknowledged that Cllr Mark Child, Cabinet Member for Care, Health & Ageing Well, had lead responsibility for Corporate Safeguarding, and that the Cabinet Member for Education Improvement, Learning & Skills may also have a view on this. It would be helpful if you could inform the Committee whether training on safeguarding is mandatory for school governors.

We noted from the work of the Child & Family Services Scrutiny Performance Panel some concern about the percentage of children on the Child Protection Register that have been registered previously, with most of these children not coming back for the same reason – something that needs to be monitored closely. It was noted that this concern was shared within Child & Family Services and it was explained to us that this was not necessarily because of any lack of awareness of issues but that some children will present with new issues depending on their individual circumstances and changes that may happen after initial intervention. For example neglect can be followed by domestic violence issues later on.

Regional Adoption Service

We discussed progress with the regional adoption service and performance. We heard that a very small percentage of children are placed for adoption and these will be the very young children. We noted that as children get older there is a decreased likelihood of adoption. We also noted that the service is seeing an increasing number of complex cases, and there are also a number of large sibling groups, which, as a consequence, makes these children difficult to place. We acknowledged that some of these children will have had traumatic life experiences due to a range of issues included domestic violence, substance misuse and mental health, making it very challenging to find such permanent solutions for them.

It was agreed to provide the Committee with relevant performance data relating to the adoption service. Members were keen to know how many children were awaiting adoption and the trend, and process timescales which some members observed can be too long.

Flying Start

We asked you about Flying Start which you reported offers free, high quality part-time childcare for children aged two in targeted areas in the more deprived areas of Swansea. The aim was to help improve readiness for school and to help their families support their children. The Committee asked you about spending on Flying Start (which you agreed to provide to us in writing), coverage across Swansea, and improvement plans. Whilst recognising that Flying Start has long term focus, we also asked about the measures of outcomes and success of the programme.

We noted that in 2017/18, 2,955 children benefitted from the Flying Start programme and the childcare attendance average remained on target above the national average at 80%. In addition, the Council has successfully applied to the Welsh Government for capital grants for Flying Start centres in the City, with more than £100,000 to be spent improving pre-school facilities for young children in some of the most deprived areas of Swansea. You told us that it will be used to improve and upgrade children's areas, add additional facilities and improve security and safety at seven sites. We were particularly curious about the security and safety issues that needed to be addressed.

You stressed that the Flying Start programme is operating within clear objectives, funding, guidelines and criteria prescribed by the Welsh Government with designated Flying Start areas in Swansea. However there are additional projects and initiatives in place, for example the Families First Programme including 'Team Around the Family in schools' initiative and multi-disciplinary 'Jig-so' project, as well as other interventions, information and advice giving to support early years.

Based on your experience, you spoke highly of the Flying Start Programme in child development and reducing barriers to education, though acknowledged that the funding means limited coverage across Swansea. We also recalled positive findings from previous discussions within scrutiny, including a visit to the Flying Start setting at Seaview.

Play Therapy

The Committee asked about the provision of Play Therapists within the Council, and how this service is managed and delivered. We were told that there are three play teams within the Council, which linked with family therapists and regional teams. In addition the Council worked closely with the Third Sector to ensure needs are met.

Apprenticeships

You reported on close working with other Cabinet Members to ensure opportunities for children and young people, particularly Looked After Children, to benefit from apprenticeships. We noted that collaborative work between Corporate Building Services and Social Services has resulted in significantly improving opportunities for Looked After Children to secure apprenticeships. 55 apprenticeships trained in 2017/18, with three apprenticeships being secured by Looked After Children. You felt this was a direct result of promoting and targeting the scheme to Looked After Children. We were interested in whether apprenticeship opportunities extended beyond Corporate Building Services and were told that this is something which you intended to achieve.

Youth Inclusion & Citizenship

You reported on work to engage children and young people in the decisions that affect them, through various forums, survey work, and 'Big Conversation' events. We were interested in the engagement of children and young people from Swansea in the first ever Welsh Youth Parliament. We understand that a ballot was being held for 11-18 year olds during November that will determine Swansea's representation, as well as that across the rest of Wales. We heard that 480 young people applied to be candidates, and were pleased that there has been a high level of interest in Swansea. The Committee looks forward to hearing about the outcome of the Welsh Youth Parliament elections, and would be grateful if you can share any further information that you may have in your response.

Cultural Opportunities for Vulnerable Groups

In support of national well-being goals we were interested in how your work is contributing to more cohesive communities. Your report mentioned the Fusion Programme which is bringing together the Council and third sector to create more cultural opportunities for more diverse communities. You stated that

regular free culture sessions are now being provided for vulnerable groups which include looked after children, carers and NEETS, as well as improving access to cultural venues across Swansea.

Children's Rights

At the meeting we also received the Annual Progress Report on the Children's Rights Scheme. We heard directly from Jane Whitmore, Partnership and Commissioning Manager, and Katie Spendiff, the Children's Rights Co-ordinator about achievements in relation to implementing the Scheme and embedding the UNCRC across the Council, and ensuring due regard is paid.

We agreed that it was a positive report demonstrating good progress and achievement of key objectives. The Committee was particularly pleased with the commitment to hearing children's voices and valuing their opinions, however highlighted the need to ensure information on children's rights (including promoting the Big Conversation) is accessible, which may not necessarily be through the Council website. We thanked the Officers for their hard work.

Your Response

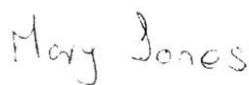
In your response we would welcome your comments on any of the issues raised in this letter. We would be grateful, however, if you could specifically refer to our request for you to:

- Provide data on the educational attainment of Looked After Children and entry into higher education.
- Confirm whether training on safeguarding is mandatory for school governors.
- Provide relevant performance data relating to the adoption service.
- Confirm spending in Swansea on the Flying Start Programme.
- Share any further information about the Welsh Youth Parliament elections.

Please provide the response to this and any other comments about our letter by 3 January. A single co-ordinated response letter would be appreciated. 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 invite you both to a future Committee meeting in due course.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR MARY JONES

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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