



**To/  
Councillor Jen Raynor  
Cabinet Member for Education  
Improvement, Learning and Skills**

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**20 February 2020**

## **BY EMAIL**

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 13 February 2020. It is about the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools Programme and School Transport.

Dear Councillor Raynor,

### **Education Scrutiny Performance Panel – 13 February 2020**

At our meeting on the 13 February 2020, we looked at progress with the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools Programme and had a briefing on School Transport. We would like to thank you, Brian Roles, Head of Education Planning and Resources and Cath Swain, Integrated Transport Manager for attending and discussing the issues with us. We looked closely at the detailed reports that you provided and will now reflect on the issues in this letter.

### **21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools Programme**

We heard that it is a positive update on the programme, that things have been moving forward well in what is a long-term approach to improving school provision and is consistent with the aims of the Wellbeing and Future Generations Act. That Band A is nearing completion and this has had a major impact. That we are now moving to Band B, which is three times the size of Band A. Good progress is being made with £61 million pounds already been drawn down from Welsh Government. The work is phased and prioritised in the programme, as with Band A, and includes at present:

- Gorseinon Primary new build
- Pupil Referral Unit new build
- YSS Tan-y-lan Welsh Medium Primary new build
- YSS Tirdeunaw Welsh Medium Primary new build

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- Extension and remodelling of YG Gwyr Welsh Medium Secondary School to increase capacity by 195 pupils
- Pre-construction phase works for remodelling, refurbishment and extension of Bishopston Comprehensive School
- In addition, work will continue to develop detailed business plans for the remaining capital schemes, as capacity and officer resources allow.

We were told that Swansea is delivering the programme now with less officer capacity and resources across the Council than previously including less education and legal support. There is also a lack of resilience and capacity outside of the Council to deliver on schemes. The number of contractors on the current framework has reduced and the financial risks for those remaining have increased. We also heard this reduced capacity and resilience is exacerbated by the demands of other capital funding initiatives that the Council is also seeking to deliver in relation to reducing infant class sizes, childcare grant, Flying Start and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Hubs.

We recognise there is fragility in the construction sector and understand the difficulty the council can experience in recruiting and retaining skilled people when higher wages are offered elsewhere. We were pleased to hear that the Council is trying to improve the deficit in the number of construction contractors able to bid for work by providing training and support for the medium size companies. These contractors will then be able to enter and bid in this market alongside those larger organisations who have teams of people trained and employed to make bids. This will not only help to get more companies into the market but also help in employing more people locally.

We asked about the current backlog figure for structural maintenance across schools in Swansea and we were informed there is currently a buildings condition survey being carried out on all schools in the area. We understand that the overall maintenance figure will be based upon the results of this condition survey. We would like to see the buildings condition survey report and breakdown of structural maintenance figures once they are available.

We are pleased and excited by the number of schemes that are coming through and would like to thank all those involved for their hard work in moving these projects forward so efficiently.

### **Briefing on School Transport**

We were pleased to hear that there is much better countywide provision for Additional Learning Needs (ALN) pupils and this has borne out showing savings in the transport budget, due to not needing to transport as many pupils long distances to school.

We understand free transport is provided for pupils who live two miles or more from their catchment area primary school or three miles or more from their catchment area secondary school. The distance is measured by the shortest available walking route and this along with ALN transport information is contained within the Council's Home to School Transport Policy which is based upon the Learner Travel (Wales) Measure 2008 and associated statutory provision and operational guidance.

We heard that the number of pupils requiring free school transport in Swansea has remained stable. However, the overall cost of transport provision has increased significantly. Hearing the medium term financial plan and operational plans reflect the need to identify further significant actions to mitigate the cost pressures and seek to ensure longer-term stability.

We were interested to hear about the significant savings that have been delivered over recent years, through consistently robust management of the service and regular re-tendering of bus and taxi operator contracts and routes, to as far as possible optimise efficiency of delivery. We were encouraged to hear that the savings have been achieved without use of costly external consultancy support.

We asked a question about purchasing of, and the use of, council owned vehicles for school transport and particularly for ALN learners. We were informed that wherever possible the fullest use of the Council's in-house fleet is considered before contracting with other providers. We were pleased to hear some of the older fleet is being replaced with vehicles that will be more accessible and therefore more flexible in their use, but we noted that would not provide extra capacity.

We pleased to hear about the creation of new/improved walking routes between schools (and communities) but Panel members raised concerns about:

- a) Lighting and safety of walking routes in winter because of our role in safeguarding pupils.
- b) Possible increase in traffic around those schools concerned, as parents may start to drive children to school when school buses are no longer available.
- c) That the estimated potential savings £280,000 from stopping the provision of school buses, in these three areas, has already be taken out of budget.

We welcome your thoughts on any of the issues raised in our letter and on this occasion do not require a formal written response. However, can you please provide the schools building condition survey report and breakdown of structural maintenance figures, once they are available?

Yours sincerely,

**COUNCILLOR LYNDON JONES**

Convener, Schools Scrutiny Performance Panel

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