



City and County of Swansea

Minutes of the **Scrutiny Performance Panel – Education**

Remotely via Teams

Thursday, 22 October 2020 at 4.00 pm

Present: Councillor L R Jones (Chair) Presided

Councillor(s)

C Anderson
D W Helliwell
S M Jones
L J Tyler-Lloyd

Councillor(s)

A M Day
B Hopkins
M A Langstone

Councillor(s)

S J Gallagher
L James

Co-opted Member(s)

A Roberts

Co-opted Member(s)

Co-opted Member(s)

Other Attendees

Jennifer Raynor

Cabinet Member - Education Improvement, Learning & Skills

Officer(s)

Helen Morgan-Rees
Michelle Roberts

Interim Director of Education
Scrutiny Officer

Apologies for Absence

Councillor(s): M Durke

1 Confirmation of Panel Convener

Cllr Lyndon Jones was re-confirmed as Convener of the Panel.

2 Disclosure of Personal and Prejudicial Interests.

None

3 Prohibition of Whipped Votes and Declaration of Party Whips

None

4 Letters and Minutes

Letters received and considered by the panel. Minutes agreed.

5 Public Questions

No public questions were received.

6 Education Recovery and Return to Schools

The Panel met with the Cabinet Member for Education Improvement, Learning and Skills, Councillor Jen Raynor and the Interim Director of Education Helen Morgan Rees to discuss how education is recovering from the effects of Covid-19. The Panel heard and discussed the following:

- The priority in early September was to get as many pupils back to school as possible. Welsh Government gave a period of grace until the 14 September, when it was expected that all schools would be fully operational. We achieved this in Swansea successfully, through the hard work of Headteacher's and school staff and close working between all those involved in the Task and Finish Group that was set up to address this difficult time. The Task and Finish Group has now suspended activity but it will reconvene in December just to see if we need to review anything as time has gone on.
- The development of local operational guidance to schools on top of the operational guidance offered by Welsh government was key really to the success of our recovery and our return to education in Swansea. Including the development of a continuity of learning plan, that has served us well, especially in relation to the blended learning that is and has been required. A clear policy has been developed so that schools are far more able really to respond at short notice if children are asked to self-isolate.
- We are making provision for free school meals during the holiday periods between now and Easter 2021, we are still providing payments and will do so, either direct payments to bank accounts or food parcels during these holidays.
- Compulsory education started on the 14th of September and since then we have seen good, solid attendance in our schools across Swansea. In the early part of September, we did have as many as 60 requests from parents asking to electively home educate their children. However, since September, we have seen a good rate of attendance across schools and this has remained stable for this period.
- Very difficult decisions have had to be made by our Headteacher's and school leaders in or to keep schools as Covid secure as possible. The Council took a stance that if they were making any decisions based on a very solid risk assessment, that the council would support those decisions and it was made very clear to them right at the start of term. We have focused on the wellbeing of school staff and in particular school leaders. We have had to make very difficult decisions right to the start of term to make sure their establishments were working well and we have tried to encourage over governors to ask those questions of their Hedteacher's in particular to ensure that their wellbeing is being looked after.
- However, we do still need to challenge all the operations to ensure that they are continually operating at a safe level and those risk assessments are being implemented. This week the health and safety executive attended nine of our schools to make site visits to ensure that our schools are still Covid safe. We also received a visit a virtual visit from our education regulator Estyn.

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- In the main lock down, Councillors will have heard about a consistent set of principles for our schools to ensure a degree of consensus. We were moving forward together, and in doing so we were gaining strength by making decision with our teachers and Head's.
- We have increase the use of our digital platforms including Swansea Virtual School and the HWB platform, which I spoke to you about in July, we have seen even greater uptake, which is positive.
- Schools received a specific grant to help children catch up, called the 'accelerated learning program'. This was to enable them to add to their workforce capacity and learning time for specific groups of learners that need it the most.
- We tried to adopt in Swansea a proportionate response when we saw cases coming into schools from the community. The guidance and advice comes from environmental health officers. When a decision is made to reduce the operation in any school, it is made in partnership with the local test trace and protect service.
- We felt it vital that during these uncertain periods that our communication with parents and the whole of any school community had to be very clear.
- During September and October, the national curriculum was downgraded so to enable teachers to focus on the wellbeing and the welfare of children as they returned to education.
- The catalyst of the first lockdown was used to learn and to do things differently. Therefore, the way we operate now as a Department interfacing with our school partners is very different and we do not intend to switch back on this.
- We did provide our schools during the summer months with advice on resilience and the transition back. Also on bereavement, which was provided in conjunction with our educational psychology service here in Swansea.
- We have had concerns about what will happen during the examinations. There has been an independent review of examinations in respect of 2020, which will be reporting shortly. In addition, we were expecting to hear from the Welsh Government on 9 November about what will happen in 2021.

Question: *Are there any children that we are struggling to be connected or to have access to computer equipment?* In the summer months, we issued a lot of kit, and adopted a very flexible approach to ensure that any digitally excluded pupil still receives that kit and the connectivity. We will continue to monitor that carefully. We are encouraging our schools to communicate with us so we can help them if they need it, but in the main, we are confident that have what is needed.

Question: *As far as attendance goes, what are we doing about the pupils who have not asked permission to be home? Do we keep numbers relation to that? How do we follow up on in relation to safeguarding?* Welfare officers follow up on some of those calls from schools to the home if required. We also have a safeguarding officer in education, if there are any particular concerns. We do work with others including social services to make sure that no child is left unseen and if children are not coming to school and we have no good reason, we will follow it up through our education welfare officers.

We have kept a specific list in terms of vulnerable children, so schools identify the ones they thought that were vulnerable and across Swansea schools we had about 3000. Learners were vulnerable for many reasons. We narrowed down that list to make sure that we were looking at the children where there was risk of harm during the lockdown period and that specific list has been scrutinised very carefully.

Question: How are we keeping track of precisely what has been and what has not been paid out? We have always been consistent in terms of the criteria we have offered to schools and have repeated this message often, that it has to be additional, an unavoidable cost. There could be refusal in terms of what we are claiming, the stipulations we have provided to schools, we are fairly confident that that money will follow from Welsh Government. There are no guarantees and in terms of contingency if any school is in a difficult position because they have overspent and not received any credit for it, then we would have to look carefully at a recovery plan.

Question: Are you concerned about the delay in test results coming through for school-based stuff? What action is being taken to push forward for quicker responses and is there anything further that we could be doing as a scrutiny Panel to support this? Yes, this is important because it is a whole council issue. The leader and a number of cabinet members are working on this. My understanding is that we were going to contact more of the universities and see if we can bring in more lab experience. One issue is that the school workforce do not always identify themselves as critical workers, so that is a piece of work we need to do to ensure that there taking the right box.

Question: Do you think the community hub model will be deployed again? There is no intention to revisit those emergency childcare hubs. The priority for Welsh Government and for us as education directors is to keep learning going as much as possible. There will be disruptions ahead but we can minimise these because we have made our schools as Covid safe as possible.

The Interim Director outlined the current priorities in education including:

- Successful EOTAS provision and positive behaviour strategy
- Additional learning needs improvement
- Keeping learners safe
- Building digital capacity in education
- Implementation of new curriculum
- Professional learning offer

The Cabinet Member Councillor Jen Raynor said that the Education Department is working fantastically well as a team, meetings including the Task and Finish Group which including a number of partners and Headteacher's had been open and frank, which are being useful for thrashing out any problems. There is a lot of confidence in our Headteacher's whose views have been seriously listened to and respected through this period. She said she is very pleased with the way the Department is running and is more than happy at we are.

The Panel agreed to send a letter to the Director of Education that she can pass on to all school staff thanking them for their excellent work over this difficult period.

7 Planning the Education Scrutiny Work Programme 2020/2021

The Panel discussed and agreed their work programme including adding Elective Home Education to the 19 November meeting and adding a meeting in May where they will look at Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) and the 21st Schools Programme. They would also like to receive regular updates on how Covid is affecting education and schools, the next of these will take place at the December meeting.

The meeting ended at 5.15 pm

Chair