



To:
Councillor Jennifer Raynor
Cabinet Member for Education
Improvement, Learning and Skills

BY EMAIL

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Dyddiad:

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 22 October 2020. It covers Education and Schools Recovery from Covid-19 Pandemic.

Dear Cllr Raynor,

Education Scrutiny Performance Panel – 22 October 2020

We would like to thank you and the Interim Director of Education Helen Morgan Rees for attending our meeting on the 22 October where we discussed the education and schools recovery from the effects of Covid-19. We are writing to you to reflect on what we learnt from the discussion and to share the views of the Panel.

Education Recovery and Return to Schools

Helen told us that in early September the priority was to get as many pupils back to school as possible. We were told that the Welsh Government had given schools a period of grace until the 14 September when it was expected that all schools would be operational. We were pleased to hear that this was achieved successfully in Swansea and we recognise this was down to the hard work of our Headteacher's and school staff. We were encouraged to hear about the development of close working between all those involved through the Task and Finish Group. You told us that this Group has now suspended activity but it will reconvene in December to see if we need to review anything as time has gone on. We will ask you for an update on this at our meeting in December.

We heard that developing local operational guidance to schools on top of the guidance offered by Welsh Government was key to the success of our recovery and our return to

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education in Swansea. This included, importantly, the development of a continuity of learning plan. Hearing this has served us well, especially in relation to the blended learning that has been required through this period. We were pleased to hear about the clear policy that has been developed, so schools are far more able really to respond at short notice if children are asked to self-isolate.

We are pleased that Swansea is making provision for free school meals during the holiday periods between now and Easter 2021 and that we are still providing payments and will continue to do so, either directly to bank accounts or food parcels, during these holidays.

Helen told us that since the 14 September we have seen a good, solid attendance in our schools across Swansea. Although, 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. We asked what action is being taken when parents have kept their children at home without permission and what is being done to following up on this, particularly relating to safeguarding. Helen said that we have a safeguarding officer in education, who can highlight any particular concerns. She also said we work closely with others including social services, to make sure that no child is left unseen and if children are attending school without good reason, we can follow it up through our education Welfare Officers.

We recognise that difficult decisions have had to be made by our school leaders to keep schools as Covid secure as possible. We are pleased the Council took a stance with schools that when they are making any decisions based on a solid risk assessment, the Council would support them in those decisions. This was made very clear to them right at the start of term. We were reassured to hear that the Council has focused on the wellbeing of school staff and in particular school leaders. We heard school governors have been encouraged to ask questions of their Headteacher's in particular, to ensure that their wellbeing is being considered. However, it is important that decisions are still challenged to ensure that we are operating at a safe level and risk assessments are being implemented. We also understand that the Health and Safety Executive has recently made nine site visits to our schools to ensure that they are Covid safe.

We heard there has been an increase in the use of our digital platforms including Swansea Virtual School and the HWB platform, which is positive. We asked whether there are any children that are struggling to be connected to or who do not have access to appropriate computer equipment. We were told that in the summer months we issued a lot of kit, and adopted a very flexible approach to ensure that any digitally excluded pupil could still receive that kit and the connectivity. In the main, we are confident pupils have what they need. We are reassured to hear that you will continue to monitor this carefully and that schools are encouraged to communicate with you if they need help.

We understand that schools received a specific grant to help children catch up, called the 'accelerated learning programme'. We felt this was very positive, enabling them to add to their workforce capacity and to learning time, especially for those specific groups of learners that need it the most.

Helen explained that the Council has tried to adopt a proportionate response when we saw Covid cases coming into schools from the community and that the guidance and advice on this comes from Environmental Health Officers. Therefore, 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 did express our concern about what will happen during examination time. Helen told us that there has been an independent review of examinations in 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.

We asked how are we keeping track of precisely what has been and what has not been paid out. Helen told us that the Council has always been consistent in terms of the criteria that has been offered to schools and have repeated the message that spend has to be an 'additional and unavoidable cost'. There is no guarantee that Welsh Government will meet these claims but we are confident that the guidance provided to schools will see the money follow. We also understand there are no guarantees in terms of contingency and if any school finds itself in a difficult position because they have overspent and not received any credit for it, then we would look carefully at a recovery plan.

We asked about the delay in receiving Covid test results by school staff. You told us that teaching staff must declare themselves as critical workers.

You told us that the Education Department is working fantastically well as a team and you are very pleased with the way the Department is running and that you are more than happy with where we are currently. We are reassured to hear your comments and are supportive of this. We are impressed with how both schools and the Education Department as a whole has responded to this national health crisis. We plan to write to the Chief Executive and the Director of Education asking them to share our thoughts and a thank you to our council staff, schools and governing bodies more widely.

Your Response

We hope you find this letter useful and informative. We would welcome your comments on any of the issues raised but on this occasion do not require a formal written response.

Yours sincerely

COUNCILLOR LYNDON JONES

Convener, Education Scrutiny Performance Panel

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