



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

**BY EMAIL**

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*Date* 2 February 2021  
*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 21 January looking at the current Covid situation in Education.

Dear Cllr Raynor,

### **Education Scrutiny Performance Panel – 21 January 2021**

We would like to thank you and the Interim Director of Education Helen Morgan Rees, for attending our meeting. We are writing to you to reflect on what we learnt from the discussion and to share the views of the Panel.

We heard that the position we are in is still a volatile one. Schools are open for vulnerable pupils and children of critical workers. That a wide range of critical workers have now been identified, so we must have due regard for this but we have to risk assess our schools to ensure that we can accommodate them safely. We have switched back to remote learning for the majority of pupils and there is an expectation that school years 10, 11, 12 and 13 will receive four hours of synchronous learning a day.

You told us that as a local authority we are not prescribing what schools should be doing, because we believe our Headteacher's know their communities best. They know what kind of blended learning or remote learning offer should be provided for their pupils. We heard that most pupils in Swansea will have a blend of recorded and live lessons, paper packs and work books, with the blend depending on the pupil's age and aptitude. We were pleased to hear about the Swansea Virtual School and how it has been enhanced and reviewed this term.

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We were encouraged to hear that the local authority had invested 5 million pounds using the infrastructure project to provide both kit and connectivity for schools. It was good to hear that to date we have delivered over 8,000 devices in Swansea, that we have 2,000 devices being prepared for distribution, as well as awaiting a delivery of a further 2,000 devices. You told us that you were proud of this but that the situation will continue to be monitored, as we are still becoming aware of families that do not have the most appropriate devices and of children having to share devices.

We asked how many pupils currently did not have devices. We understand that from a recent survey approximately 2000 pupils do not have appropriate devices, for example using gaming devices. Also that this number is likely to be much lower now as things have moved from that survey with more equipment going out to schools. We would like you to update us on the current figure including the number of pupils on Free School Meals who need equipment or connectivity.

We asked whether people who have 'used' devices can donate them to schools. We heard that this is possible provided the device was appropriate, secondary schools with ICT staff could be contacted directly about this. For Primary schools they are asked to please contact [education@swansea.gov.uk](mailto:education@swansea.gov.uk) inbox as Primary Schools do not have ICT staff to do this.

You told us that on the 16 January an announcement had been made by Welsh Government about examinations/assessments in our schools and that these will not take place this summer term but will be in the form of internal assessment by Teachers. We also heard that examination boards will assist by providing an assessment framework which will give first stage standardisation. Thereafter, there will be a degree of moderation across schools and across pupils. The Local Authority is awaiting further information from the Welsh Government on this. You agreed to keep the panel updated as things progress.

We heard that confidence needs to be built back in our school workforce so they can feel they feel able to return to buildings safely, especially after hearing about the new variants being far more contagious. We heard that some staff working to provide close care with our vulnerable pupils including in our Pupil Referral Unit will be prioritised for the Covid vaccine. You told us that the evidence is that schools themselves are not unsafe and that there is a need to use the same control measures as used before. We understand discussions are taking place with Welsh Government about the return of pupils to school including which age groups will return first but all this will depend on the R rate.

We recognise that unless the R rate drops significantly pupils will not return to 'in school' learning until before 22 February. You were currently unsure how this will look, we would be grateful if you could keep us informed.

We asked how the learning offer was taking place in different schools and how we support schools to communicate expectations to parents and pupils. We heard that was a matter of balance about what suits a particular school and a particular age group. You told us that each school has different language and accessibility needs, so we have given schools the tools in the form of clear guidance which they can communicate to parents.

We also heard about the pressures on teaching and education support staff and we asked what resources were in place to ensure appropriate support. We heard that this had also been raised by the Schools Forum. You told us about the resources available and how they can be accessed. Also available is a positive psychology model that can be used in a crisis, opportunities for Headteacher's from National Academy to have Headspace discussions and a helpline available to all education staff.

A question was also raised about the Looked After Children Pupil Development Grant and a recent underspend that had been identified. The Panel heard that not all claims will have come in for the monies spent up to this point but will do so over this quarter of the year. The end figure therefore will be different.

You told us that schools and the Education Department have been most heartened by the recent Estyn report about the education response to the pandemic and how it gives a number of examples of good practice from schools across Swansea. We agreed to schedule this into our future work programme.

We would like to take this opportunity to once again thank our staff in the education directorate and in Schools through this challenging time.

### **Your Response**

We hope you find this letter useful and informative. We would welcome your comments on any of the issues raised but would ask for a response to the following point by 23 February 2021.

1. Can you update us on the current figure for the number of pupils requiring computer equipment and/or connectivity including how many of these are pupils entitled to Free School Meals?
2. What is the current underspend on the Looked After Children Pupil Deprivation Grant. Why is this the case and how would any underspend be used?

Yours sincerely

**COUNCILLOR LYNDON JONES**

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