



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

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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 12 September 2019. It is about Elective Home Education and the performance of pupils receiving free school meals.

Dear Councillor Raynor,

Education Scrutiny Performance Panel – 12 September 2019

At our meeting on the 12 September 2019, we looked at two important issues in education, Elective Home Education and the performance/outcomes of children who receive free school meals. We would like to thank Judy Marks and Julie Rees from the Education Welfare Team and Helen Morgan Rees for attending and discussing the issues with the panel.

Elective Home Education (EHE)

We heard that the aim of Swansea Council in relation to EHE is to provide guidance for parents who are considering or have decided to Elective Home Educate their children. That Swansea Council respect and accept the rights of parents to educate their children at home and we endeavor to foster good relationships with the home educators. That currently there are 167 families that that we are aware of who are EHE but that these figures change frequently.

We were assured that Swansea EHE procedures are in line with the Welsh Government (WG) Non-Statutory guidance for local authorities. We heard that the guidance says that the parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause them to receive efficient full-time education, this should be suitable (a) to their age, ability and aptitude, and (b) to any special educational needs they may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU

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We were told that parents must provide their child with an 'efficient' and 'suitable' education. Parents may educate their children at home providing they fulfil the requirements of section 7 of the Education Act 1996. We were pleased to hear that Wales Government are in the process of updating this to become Statutory Guidance.

We recognise that the Local Authority is not responsible for the provision of EHE or under any statutory obligation to support it. However, we were encouraged to hear that under section 436A of the Education Act 1996, the LA does have a duty to make arrangements to identify children not receiving a suitable education. While there is no legal framework for the LA to regularly monitor provision of home education, we in Swansea are mindful of our wider duties of care, and we will contact parents to discuss their ongoing home education provision. We also understand that there is provision to take legal action if a child of compulsory school age is not receiving suitable education or by regular attendance at school. We heard that Swansea has not yet had to do this for EHE.

We asked if there was any pattern in the reasons why parents might be taking the decision to home educate. We were pleased to hear that there has been no adverse pattern identified, and that our data shows that this is similar to the wider picture across Wales.

We were concerned to hear that if a child has never attended school and is therefore not in the system, we may never know about them and therefore be aware of any safeguarding issues that may arise. We did note, however EHE children should be being seen by other professionals like, for example, doctors and health visitors who can alert the authority to any concerns.

The issue of the ability for home-educated children to sit exams was discussed. We were concerned to hear that local schools and colleges are often unable to accommodate EHE children and therefore parents have to arrange for exams to be taken in other locations. This is much more expensive and may be a barrier to children being able to sit the exams. We would like to see local colleges working with home educators in order to provide space for those children to be able to sit exams at a reasonable cost.

We did hear that the relationship with Health around home-educated children could be improved. Youth Services and others link in with Education Welfare Service but Health only do so when there is a concern. We agreed that it is important that all agencies are working effectively together with the Education Welfare Service and would ask further work is done to attempt to get Health more fully engaged.

Performance of pupils receiving Free School Meals (FSM)

We recognise that improving the attainment of pupils receiving FSM is proving to be a challenge not just for Swansea but also across the United Kingdom. We therefore wanted to find out what we are doing here in Swansea to improve pupil outcomes

We heard that:

- At Foundation Phase, the overall picture of performance is of decline with a sharp decline in FSM pupils. We heard that this is because the areas of learning changed in last two years, which have become harder and with new milestones introduced. Performance is based on teacher assessment and schools being more accurate and more secure in their assessments than ever before. It is important that this is happening in all schools across not only Swansea but also the ERW region so there is a level playing field.
- At Key Stage 2, there have been fewer changes and this is reflective in the data. It does show progress being made, although there has been declining performance but this is within reason.
- At Key Stage 3, there has been a big decline in all pupil performance but this has also been reflected across Wales and is within tolerance levels. We heard the full comparative performance data produced later in the year should help identify reasons for the decline. We have scheduled that into our work programme as we have in previous years.
- At Key Stage 4, the gap in performance between FSM and non-FSM has narrowed a little. However, performance has fallen this year and this is because there is a new suite of exams that are harder have been introduced. It is expected that this will also be reflected at a national level.

The Panel regarded the drop in educational attainment outcomes of FSM as serious and agreed that it is essential that we prevent further decline and urgently work to improve the outcomes for these our most vulnerable pupils. We feel that improving the education outcomes of FSM pupils must be a top priority and would therefore like to receive regular updates on progress and we will schedule these into our panel meetings over the coming year.

We heard that data is important but we must look at the improvement that each pupil is making year on year, demonstrating progress for them individually. We agreed that we must make sure all schools tracking processes for pupils is sound and we heard that that this is discussed when the challenge adviser visits the school.

We heard that key to improving the performance of FSM and vulnerable pupils is ensuring the teaching and learning is meeting the needs of all pupils including those who have dealt with difficult issues in their lives. We agreed that good quality teaching and learning is vital with each learner should be treated as an individual and the curriculum shaped for them. How schools spend the Pupil Development Grant is also important, monies must be targeted appropriately. We were pleased to hear that work is being done with schools around the most effective ways to spend their PDG.

We were encouraged to hear how the New Curriculum for Wales will better serve all pupils, with greater potential to promote good and exciting learning for all. We are looking forward to learning more about this at our meeting in November.

We welcome your thoughts on any of the issues raised in our letter but would ask for your response in writing on the following point by 22 October 2019.

1. Can you investigate how Gower College can work with home educators to provide suitable exam provision at a reasonable cost?
2. Can you look into why Health are not engaging fully in the multi-agency activity with the Education Welfare Service and how this can be improved?

Yours sincerely,

COUNCILLOR LYNDON JONES

Convener, Schools Scrutiny Performance Panel

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