



**To/
Councillors Elliott King & Sam
Pritchard
Cabinet Members for Children
Services**

BY EMAIL

cc Cabinet Members

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SPC/2019-20/9

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Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Members following the meeting of the Committee on 11 November 2019. It is about Flying Start, Child Poverty, Safeguarding, NEETS Reduction, UNCRC, Play Opportunities, CAMHS, and Youth Offending Service.

Dear Councillor,

Cabinet Member Question Session – 11 November

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 11 November 2019 and answering questions on your work as Cabinet Members for Children Services. We also thank the Head of Child & Family Services, Julie Thomas, and Partnership and Commissioning Manager, Jane Whitmore, for their support and contributions to the session.

We appreciate you providing a written paper in support of your appearance at November's Committee meeting. The Q & A session gave us an opportunity to explore priorities and achievements in relation to your areas of responsibility. We also acknowledge receipt of your additional paper, which provided some additional information in response to some of the questions raised with you.

We are writing to you to reflect on what we learnt from the discussion, and share the views of the Committee, and highlight any outstanding issues / actions for your response. The main issues are summarised below:

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU

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Flying Start

We noted that during 2018-19, almost 3,000 children participated in the Flying Start 'early years' programme in Swansea. You were asked whether the programme was considered a success, and whether there was a shared understanding across the authority of what the programme was aiming to achieve, with the right outcomes being tracked to assess success. The Committee was also interested in how local performance compared with other across Wales.

We heard that research points to a range of educational and social benefits, when looking at the quality of interactions and their impact on child development. You referred to University commissioned evaluation of Flying Start and annual quality assurance of Flying Start settings, which considers Flying Start in Swansea to be good practice. Nevertheless, there were areas for improvement. You mentioned positive impacts in relation to the issue of low birth weight, and support for young mothers, but the impact on an issue like school attendance was not clear.

Your written report to the Committee provided some indication of performance during 2018-19:

- Average childcare attendance for the Flying Start programme - 79%.
- 29% of children reached or exceeded their speech and language milestones on childcare entry and 61% of children reached or exceeded their speech and language milestones on childcare exit.
- Just over 40% of children achieved 'Gold' in Personal & Social Development on childcare entry and 72% of children achieved 'Gold' in Personal & Social Development on childcare exit.
- 143 families attended a Flying Start Parenting group and 370 people attended a drop in session

You were pleased with the extent of understanding across the Council, and pointed to collaborative working across departments to support the programme, for example between education, social services and housing e.g. transition to foundation phase, and inclusion of the new council houses in Penderry within Flying Start.

You told us that there is a national annual report on Flying Start published by the Welsh Government, which provides a statistical overview of how the programme is working, however you felt there were limitations in the breakdown of information and how it captured performance, and questioned whether it enabled effective comparisons to be made with other local authorities.

We noted that a Commissioning Review will be underway that will include a focus on elements of Flying Start activity in Swansea and will, amongst other things, address any current issues, such as the number of health visits / face-to-face contacts which are down on the previous year.

Committee Members acknowledged the benefits of the programme but limited coverage across Swansea, which meant that some children and families in Swansea who might benefit did not have the opportunities to do so. We would welcome expansion of the programme but understood it was currently targeted to specific areas according to Welsh Government guidance and funding. One of the issues however around identifying areas according to postcodes was that not all children that will be attending the same school may have had access to the Flying Start programme, and perhaps areas targeted may be better based on catchment areas instead.

We discussed the challenge therefore of creating new opportunities around early years, outside of the national programme, and smarter working that can stretch resources across all areas of Swansea, particularly around health visiting and parenting support. You undertook to provide more information in writing on the framework for parenting support.

It is clear however that significant improvement in early years support e.g. expansion of the child care element of Flying Start, will require an injection of additional funding. We also recognised the contribution other organisations are playing in early years, such as Faith in Families a recipient of Communities First Legacy Funding.

Child Poverty

Given the predicted increases in child poverty, which we are already seeing in evidence as Universal Credit rolls out, we asked whether you felt satisfied with the council's benefit take-up / money advice / benefits advice offer to families with young children.

You recognised the scourge of child poverty in our society and expressed concern about Universal Credit and the effects of austerity, and impact on families not just in Swansea but across the UK. You told us that despite limited resources, the Council was making a good effort to identify families and helping them to maximise their income by getting the right advice and taking advantage of relevant schemes, e.g. child care offer, employability support, targeted financial inclusion support etc. You praised the efforts of the Council's Welfare Rights Team in working with those in need and providing appropriate advice based on family circumstances, whether in or out of work, and resolving issues around Universal Credit which we heard can be very time consuming.

We also discussed issues around the gap between the national minimum wage and an acceptable 'living wage' that may be keeping people in poverty.

Safeguarding

We referred to recent press regarding private sector care homes and allegations of abuse, and sought assurance about preventing such a situation in Swansea.

You clarified that private care homes were not subject to council regulation but subject to registration, robust inspection and review by the Care Inspectorate Wales, in order to provide service. We noted your confidence in the Inspectorate to help prevent any poor practice in relation to looking after children. You assured the Committee that no children would be placed in homes that were not properly regulated or checked for quality. You added that all children had regular reviews and advocacy, which should pick up on any concerns raised about their care provider.

We also discussed the situation of children from out of county being looked after in Swansea and arrangements for education e.g. mainstream or on-site specialist provision, depending on needs.

NEETS Reduction (Not in Education, Employment or Training)

You reported that the Council and its partners have made good progress in term of reducing the number of young people who are NEET since 2008, until fairly recently. The proportion of Year 11 school leavers who were NEET in Swansea fell from 5.8% in 2008 to 2.2% in 2017. We know from other sources that the figure for 2018 is 2.5%. We heard there were difficulties in relation to performance information on NEETS and comparison with others, who are not necessarily measuring on a like-for-like basis.

We asked why we have seen a slowdown and noted your response that numbers have not decreased any further due to the complex needs of a core group of NEETs who are either 'not available' or 'not ready' to enter employment or training and require a personalised package of support.

You agreed with us that it would be useful to know whether there was any correlation between NEETS and Flying Start and the importance of tracking children and young people as they progress from early years through schooling and beyond. We noted that work with NEETS will be part of a Commissioning Review and the issue of tracking can be covered in that review.

We noted that plans are currently being finalised to provide specific support to our Looked After Children to help them find and secure work under the umbrella of Swansea Working – an emerging programme that aligns employment support to ensure the right support is in place at the right time. You reported that this includes ring-fenced opportunities through the Council's apprenticeships programme. We were interested to know more about what these plans mean in practice and the sort of specific support that was likely to

be provided for care leavers. You agreed to respond in writing to this and other points raised in the discussion.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

We asked whether you felt that our position as a council, having adopted the UNCRC and declared a climate emergency, was adequately reflected in the work undertaken in Swansea schools to become more 'rights respecting' or 'eco' aware.

You talked about the range of activities in schools, including the work of Eco-Committees that encourage environmental action and emphasis on the education of sustainable development and global citizenship. We also noted that children and young people are discussing climate change and biodiversity issues in schools, showing a good level of awareness and understanding, possibly inspired by people like Greta Thunberg.

You added that the promotion of the UNCRC and respecting rights places importance on the pupil voice. We heard that consultation and engagement activities with children and young people, such as the Council-organised 'Big Conversation' shows increasing awareness of environmental issues and their importance to them, such as plastic reduction, and being pro-active in addressing these issues. You felt this positive outcome was a direct result of the rights work and promotional activities over the last few years within schools.

We also had an interesting discussion about the effect of the UNCRC and rights scheme on pupil behaviour, and whether there were any negative effects from children becoming more rights aware. You refuted any suggestion that this was, in any way, linked to misbehaviour and stressed that rights came hand in hand with respect and children would have a greater respect for the rights of others. If anything, you felt that this should be improving pupil behaviour in schools both with each other and with teachers.

The Committee looks forward to reviewing the Children & Young People Rights Scheme Annual Progress Report in due course.

Play Opportunities

The Committee asked about your portfolio responsibilities in relation to 'play opportunities'. You talked about the work within the Council in providing play provision, e.g. community playbus and other outreach work provided by the Council's Children's Play Team, as well as the requirement on the Council to carry out a play sufficiency assessment every three years and develop an action plan. We noted that the third Play Sufficiency Assessment for Swansea was completed in March 2019.

You reported that the Play Sufficiency Assessment involved ranking Swansea's play provision across 9 'matters' or areas in relation to meeting diverse needs, access to play, space, infrastructure, design, engagement and impact on key Council policies. It also takes into account the views of children and young people, parent/carers, professionals and the general public. You told us that out of 93 indicators, the Assessment showed that 51 indicators were fully met, 41 indicators were partially met and 1 area was unmet, representing a series of improvements compared to the previous Play Assessment in 2016. There was some discussion about the provision of Council play facilities across Swansea and fairness, e.g. absence of facilities in some areas including Gower. You also referred to a successful National Play Day celebrated in August at Swansea's Waterfront Museum by children and their families.

We asked about the public availability of the latest Play Sufficiency Assessment, which you agreed to share.

In the Q & A session last year we asked about the provision of Play Therapists in Swansea. Could you confirm whether there has been any increase in provision over the last year?

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAHMS)

Following the Scrutiny Inquiry into CAMHS and follow up last year, it was agreed the ongoing monitoring should be carried out by the Child & Family Services Scrutiny Performance Panel. We referred to the Performance Panel meeting which took place at the end of October with both Council and Local Health Board representatives. Panel Members were encouraged by the presentation given by the Health Board on improvement to service however there were still concerns about access to CAMHS. You felt that any specific examples of difficulty in accessing CAMHS should be raised directly with the Health Board.

You appreciated the continued focus within scrutiny on CAMHS and stated that CAMHS were working towards a single front door model, which would then provide entry to the appropriate level of service and support. You advised that this was work in progress and welcomed the Panel's monitoring to keep track of progress.

Youth Offending Service

We asked you about progress since the Youth Offending Service was brought back in-house. We heard that you were pleased with the transformation of the Service, acknowledging that improvements were necessary. You referred to recent meeting of the Youth Justice Board and feeling expressed within the Board about a positive change in culture and things moving in the right direction.

We noted that an improvement programme and plan has been sent to Welsh Government Minister, but you stressed that there was still a long way to go. However, improvements in the ability to integrate with other services and development of wrap around / holistic support were in progress.

We asked about reoffending rates and support available for reoffenders. We noted that it was a problematic indicator but involved a very small cohort of young people who were involved in re-offending behaviour, but there was a statutory responsibility to support the most vulnerable young people.

Portfolio Responsibilities

We referred to the list of portfolio responsibilities and asked for some clarity on the scope and meaning of portfolio topic 'Opportunities for Young People'. We were told that this was embedded across the whole portfolio as needs differed for different groups of young people. The Committee considered it perhaps superfluous to the list of responsibilities, given its vagueness.

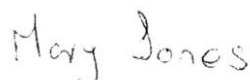
Your Response

In your response we would welcome your comments on any of the issues raised in this letter. We would be grateful, however, if you could specifically refer to the following:

- In relation to Flying Start, provide more information on the framework for parenting support;
- In relation to NEETS Reduction, we were interested to know more about the plans for Looked After Children / Care Leavers and the type of specific support that is likely to be provided, as well as any other measures to reduce NEETS; and
- In relation to Play Opportunities:
 - please share / signpost us to the latest Play Sufficiency Assessment.
 - confirm whether there has been any increase in Play Therapy provision over the last year.

Please provide the response to this and any other comments about our letter by 13 January. A single co-ordinated response letter would be appreciated. We will then include both letters in the agenda of the next available Committee meeting. We will arrange to follow up on portfolio developments and invite you both to a future Committee meeting in due course.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR MARY JONES

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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