



CITY AND COUNTY OF SWANSEA

DINAS A SIR ABERTAWE

**To/
Councillor Jennifer Raynor,
Cabinet Member for Education**

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**CC. Alan Thomas, Chair of the Audit
Committee**

*Our Ref
Ein Cyf:*

SG/2016-1/1

*Your Ref
Eich Cyf:*

*Date
Dyddiad:*

8 September 2016

Summary: This is a letter from the Convener of the School Governance Scrutiny Inquiry Panel to the Cabinet Member for Education following the Cabinet Member's response to the Panel's report.

Dear Councillor Raynor,

Re: Your Response to the School Governance Scrutiny Inquiry

The School Governance scrutiny inquiry panel would like to thank you for your response to their Report, "A Very Challenging Role", which was presented to Cabinet on 16th June 2016. However, they were disappointed that only six of their recommendations were agreed, out of sixteen. Given the amount of work which was carried out by panel members, officers and stakeholders who contributed to the inquiry, and our findings, this was disheartening; given the importance of school governors in the context of school improvement and the authority's role in supporting them, this level of commitment to facilitate governors in their role is concerning.

The topic was selected for several reasons: pupil attainment is one of the Council's five priorities, attainment is a measure of schools' performance and schools' performance is the responsibility of governing bodies, increasingly so. On many occasions during Schools Performance scrutiny meetings, the issue of governors, their role and concerns about effectiveness arose, and it was decided, following the Annual Scrutiny Work Planning Conference in May 2014, that this topic would be pursued as it was recognised by many as important. More detail about the context can be found in section 1 of the report. You yourself agreed with this when we met at the start of the inquiry.

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Our work included site visits to schools and schools coming to talk to us, as well as contributions by Estyn, ERW and a recognised expert on school governance from University of South Wales' co-option on to the committee. After nine months of work, from February to November 2015, it was a shame that we were not able to meet to discuss why you found so many objections to our recommendations, and that we were only able to see your response a week prior to it going to Cabinet, by which time the agreement or otherwise had been decided anyway.

Following submission to Cabinet, some members of the inquiry panel met with Kathryn Thomas to discuss the report, to seek to maximise the beneficial outputs from it. At this point it became clear that several points were agreed upon though not now formally part of the follow-up process, and others had been somewhat misunderstood, confirming the fact that a meeting would have been sensible at an earlier point. However, it was positive that we could become clearer about improvements to how the authority supports governors to improve, which was the point of the work.

As such, I would like to note some points discussed.

- Kathryn confirmed that her team now meets with Challenge Advisers so that governor training can be linked with the training offered to schools as part of the regional support, challenge and intervention menu. We were pleased to hear that if Estyn raised a concern about governors in their Leadership question in a particular school's inspection, that this would automatically trigger an offer by the governor support unit to support the school via training.
- The potential of local authority governors to bring something specific to their governing bodies was a point raised by many contributors, including yourself. Whilst our recommendation to hold a seminar for this group was not agreed on the basis that all governors should be treated equally, in our discussion we found out that if the council wanted to hold a session for elected members who were governors, this was possible. We think this would be an excellent idea, and would encourage the Cabinet Member for Education to pursue this.
- Being conscious of diminishing human resources to support governors in their role, many of our suggestions were based on making better use of online resources as sources of information, signposting and guidance for governors. Some of these merely required better organisation of the department's area of the website, flagging up links in a better way, and it was recognised that the website was not sufficiently helpful. We were pleased, therefore, to hear that Kathryn's team was now carrying out a monthly update of the website, and believe that if this continues and links are checked, this will streamline the provision of information for governors seeking it. In particular, the ERW booklet mentioned in your response to recommendation 2, indeed the ERW website, will be linked to our website and flagged up, as well as www.mylocalschool link being highlighted as a valuable source of independent information and advice to governors that

they can ask their schools for a snapshot of data in the format of "school-on-a-page".

- We understand that some of our suggestions around training are not being implemented as they are on hold as a result of Welsh Government's review of the stakeholder model. Some would seem straightforward enough to implement without waiting for this; however, we would hope that once the outcomes of this review are clarified, that the department reviews its training in light of new structures and guidance.
- Kathryn indicated that the School Governor Unit and Challenge Advisers already recommend that governing bodies use a skills audit to help identify what skills are missing from a governing body as a result of completing the self-evaluation form, and following on from this, the Panel recommends strongly encouraging schools to seek out ways of filling these gaps via community and parent governors.
- We found in our inquiry from governors, including headteachers and chairs of 'successful' governing bodies (judged to be so by Estyn inspections and/or challenge advisers) that training was often described as being at the wrong time or place. We also heard from the governor support unit that bespoke training could be put on request. This seemed a clear case of simply ensuring that schools knew this, which is why in our recommendation 15 we say, "remind schools..." As such, Kathryn confirmed that on the training section of the website for governors, there would soon be a statement that if schools required specific training such as complaint, capability etc., this could be offered on site, or on a cluster arrangement to incorporate a comprehensive and partner primary schools.
- Training was a point raised by many governors as an issue. Kathryn reported that it has proven difficult to sufficiently evaluate governor training and that she will look to improve this via a questionnaire with follow-up, asking of the training has helped governors to feel more informed and able to challenge better. It would make sense if this simultaneously linked with some sort of reporting to full governing body, to help to ensure that training is cascaded, for efficiency.

Ultimately, we do not think it is helpful or progressive to respond to our findings by saying that governing bodies *should be doing this already*, which was your response to me and in cabinet when I presented our report, nor that *'it is for the governing body to satisfy themselves that this is happening'*. Indeed, answering our recommendations with "action already in place" is negated by the fact that we found these concerns from governors who told us they were an issue: they may be in place but if governors are not aware of them then we are not getting the message across clearly.

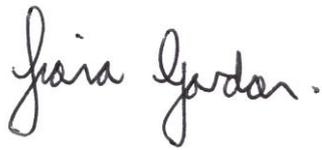
The point of the report was to see how we could better support governors to be independent and improve themselves. We make the point several times that many schools *are* doing this, but we heard concerns and questions from many - and not just 'weak' schools - that things could be better. Our recommendations were attempting to make things better. I do hope that as a

result of the inquiry and subsequent discussions, governors feel better informed and more able to challenge schools to improve, so that provision for children will be of a higher quality.

I would welcome any further comments you may have on the content of this letter however **a formal response is not required.**

Please also note that this letter and any response will be considered as part of the follow up to the inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fiona Gordon". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small flourish at the end.

COUNCILLOR FIONA GORDON

Convenor, School Governance Pre Inquiry Scrutiny Working Group

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