



CITY AND COUNTY OF SWANSEA

DINAS A SIR ABERTAWE

To:
Councillor Jennifer Raynor
Cabinet member for Education

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Date 20 September 2016
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This is a letter from the Schools Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member for Education following the meeting of the Panel on the 1 September 2016. It highlights the Panel's discussion along any outcomes arising from the meeting.

Dear Cllr Raynor

Schools Scrutiny Performance Panel

We met with the Hub Head of School Improvement for Swansea and Neath Port Talbot Councils Helen Morgan Rees for our annual review of the School Improvement Service. We were interested to do this not only because this service is vital in driving improvement in our schools but it has also been agreed with ERW as one of the items that each local authority scrutiny body in the region will review annually.

Helen explained that the School Improvement Service falls under the umbrella of ERW but that it is answerable to each local authority area and that it has now been in place in its current format for two years. She explained the benefits of the collaborative advantage of working regionally, particularly the ability to share and exchange experience and knowledge across the region.

We asked for an update about the work being done to improve consistency in teacher assessments and also in developing teaching and learning in schools. We were informed that these are currently priority areas for development across the region. It has been identified that teacher assessment outcomes were not always secure and there was a need for improved systems including whole school approaches to assessment. We also heard how some teachers are now sharing examples of work via Hwb, the virtual learning environment, and this has helped with moderation and common agreement of levels, although this is voluntary at present and only some schools are using it. The Panel was in agreement that work in this area was important and that it will ensure outcomes being more reflective of pupils' ability and achievement, which is particularly needed when transitioning from primary to secondary school.

We were informed that there has been a decline in performance where teacher assessment is present this year due to getting better accuracy in the system through moderation. The impact of more accurate teacher assessments and dips in

performance at foundation phase and KS2 are also believed to be attributable to this. We assume that the trend will return to moving upward again over time. We would recommend particular monitoring of this aspect to ensure this is the case.

We were informed that Swansea now has a 'menu of support' which details what the school improvement service can offer and this covers teaching and learning. It is accessed by all schools and provides the latest information, documentation and research stemming from local, regional and national education priorities. We were pleased to hear that feedback from the Challenge Advisor consultations with schools during spring and summer suggests that the training is having a positive impact on teaching and learning quality.

We discussed the adequacy of staffing levels within the school improvement service. We were pleased to hear that Challenge Advisor support for the primary sector is currently at full capacity and for the Secondary Sector they are reviewing requirements to ensure that the appropriate and best support is in place, which may include recruitment of Challenge Advisors. The service has found it difficult to recruit suitably experienced secondary advisors. We heard that the service did have an underspend in its budget last year which they do recognise was not ideal. We would encourage the support requirements to be such that there is not an underspend in the budget for this year. We also discussed the issue of turnover of Challenge Adviser support, and the fact that some schools which are potentially vulnerable and in need of sustained support would benefit from a longer relationship than one year before being allocated another new adviser. We understand that there is consistency in the quality of the support across the service, but felt that some schools could manage that change of adviser more easily than others.

Challenge Advisor support for education other than at school services was discussed. We were informed that there is a dedicated Challenge Advisor for the Pupil Referral Unit and for Swansea's two special schools. We also understand that there are plans to review the Specialist Teaching Facilities (STF) provision across Swansea and that this will commence in Spring 2017.

The issue of school reserves was also raised. We understand that in Swansea we have schools that have the highest reserves of any school in Wales. We realise that some schools may have a good reason for the size of their reserves if, for example, large building works are planned. However we do feel that those children who are currently in our schools deserved to see the benefits that some of these reserves could potentially bring to their education. We were informed that monitoring this is not the role of the school improvement service. We therefore would like to find out who takes responsibility for raising, discussing and working through this issue with schools.

From our discussions we did find that the school improvement service in Swansea does face a number of challenges presently, including:

- Recruitment of suitably experienced challenge advisors particularly for the secondary sector.
- Having access to lessons in some schools for the purpose of observation by challenge advisors.
- Getting all schools to use and benefit from the Hwb programme.

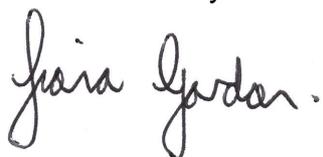
We would like to raise the following issues with you for a written response:

1. We recognise the benefits of a mixed economy of challenge advisors and see the experience and expertise that this brings, however, we would like to see more consistency and less movement of challenge advisors for the most vulnerable schools. We would recommend that a challenge advisor is allocated in these cases for more than one year, where possible.
2. What is being done to address the issue of some schools in Swansea having such high individual reserves? Who is responsible for addressing this with schools?
(Please note: the item regarding school reserves has, subsequent to the panel meeting, been answered after correspondence was had between the Performance and Finance Performance Panel and the Leader on [7 September 2016](#))

We were pleased to hear about the recent A-Levels and record-breaking GCSE results this year and would like to congratulate the Schools and the Education Department alike for this excellent progress.

The Panel would appreciate your response to their recommendations by 12 October 2016.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fiona Gordon". The signature is written in a cursive style and is enclosed within a thin yellow rectangular border.

Fiona Gordon
Convener Schools Performance Scrutiny Panel
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