

Chair of Children, Young People and
Education Committee, Senedd Cymru.

Please ask for: Martin Nicholls
Direct Line: 01792 636000
E-Mail: Martin.nicholls@swansea.gov.uk
Our Ref: MN/ajw.CYP3004
Your Ref:
Date: 30th April 2025

Dear Chair of Children, Young People and Education Committee, Senedd Cymru.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a response to important educational matters affecting Wales and Swansea currently.

The future of school improvement arrangements

The national School Improvement Partnership Programme (SIPP) is steadily developing an innovative approach to school improvement. However, the replacement of education consortia is not mandatory or consistent across Wales. Swansea Council's stance is that school improvement is best delivered locally and should include a peer-to-peer support model. The Council continues to commission key workstreams from its delivery partner, Partneriaeth, where reduced costs and bureaucracy have been achieved. The Council is also committed to a new collaboration agreement from 1 April 2025 commissioning 15 FTE regional staff to supplement the local authority's work in improving schools.

The Council welcomes future national coherence on mandatory School Improvement Guidance and Schools Causing Concern Guidance that focusses on learner attainment and achievement as well as specifics about the local authority's statutory role in evaluating school performance. In addition, Swansea welcomes better guidance on how schools, including governors, evaluate the quality of teaching and learning to improve outcomes for learners within appropriate guidance, as a key output of SIPP or the new national body for school improvement.

The diversion of funding to local authorities via the local authority education grant (LAEG) to support school improvement is welcome. However, local authorities are tackling national concerns such as literacy and numeracy, individually. The risks associated with SIPP include lack of clear communication on current policy objectives across Wales, the iterative introduction of a new national body for school improvement and job insecurity for those currently working in consortia as well as instability of LAEG from year to year. For example, a commitment was made to commissioning regional resource but national functions and their funding were then determined at a later date meaning that an ongoing consideration of affordability is now required.

The national School Improvement Partnership Programme (SIPP) is about a way of working (promotion of a collaboration model within each local authority) as opposed to developing policy on key areas of focus, namely, reading, writing, mathematics, attendance and behaviour. Swansea is clear that there are four parts to our collaboration model:

- an enhanced and effective local authority offer to support schools to improve learner outcomes in key areas of focus;
- a commissioned offer to support schools to improve learners' outcomes in key focus areas, predominantly within the secondary sector;
- school to school collaboration focussed on learner outcomes (examples and expectations); and
- an anticipation and curiosity on how the new national body will work with and for above.

Swansea's School Improvement Partnership (SIP), made up of representative headteachers across school sectors and local authority officers, aims to raise standards of achievement with the goal of making Swansea an excellent place to be educated. SIP identifies and shares effective practice, commissions, supports, monitors, and evaluates strategies for school improvement, develops structures and networks to facilitate school improvement, monitor standards, identifies barriers to achievement, and develops professional learning for all involved in schools. Swansea's SIP is not replicated in all local authorities, but it is this partnership that will make a key contribution to the learners in our schools and ultimately elevate school improvement in our Council. Swansea remains unconvinced on how a new national body will add value because it is in incredibly initial stages of development.

Educational outcomes of learners and gaps in attainment between groups of learners

Swansea Council is perpetually concerned about the educational outcomes of our learners, both in terms of absolute attainment figures, the gaps in attainment between distinct groups of learners and the progress made by individual learners. The Council has identified several factors affecting attainment, including term-time holidays, mental health issues, ineffective pedagogy and lower attendance rates among pupils. The Council is committed to addressing these barriers through ongoing grant funding for counselling services, the promotion of effective teaching and learning strategies and a wider strategy around learner inclusion. The Council has not waited for national solutions to emerge and has revised support to schools for literacy, numeracy, attendance and behaviour, while awaiting national clarity.

A true picture of end of compulsory schooling attainment has not been available during the last five academic years due to the nature of how attainment was assessed or how adjustments were made to account for a loss of education during the pandemic, from 2020 onwards. Reporting on whether we are improving, doing as well as we should be doing and whether there is a trend of improvement or not in Swansea has been rightly paused. The Welsh Government has recently consulted on changes to end of Key Stage 4 measures, so it has been difficult to make useful comparisons between years, over time and between similarly benchmarked schools. Overall, attainment at the end of key stage 4 in Swansea exceeds national averages where interim measures are concerned. Our concern is about how well children can read and write before then and whether they are equipped sufficiently to access the new curriculum and new qualifications. Our secondary schools tell us that reading attainment is not as high as previous years for the

year 7 intake. It may help to have better national expectations on reading and writing. We know that outcomes for reading in Wales, by international comparison, show Wales in decline. In Swansea, outcomes for literacy at Key Stage 4 are better than the national scores, including narrower gaps within groups of learners, than seen nationally. However, the gap for eFSM vs non-FSM remains too wide. As far as numeracy is concerned a similar pattern exists.

Education resources

From both a funding and workforce perspective, better targeted resource is required at local authority level whether from a stable revenue support grant (RSG) or LAEG to ensure that there is sufficient education workforce to support vulnerabilities in learners that have emerged during last three years and that local authorities are equipped sufficiently to identify and support schools proportionately. Swansea Council has a strong history of collaboration between schools and acknowledges that there is always room for improvement, but the time, money and energy needs to be learner outcome focussed rather than focussed on structures and ways of working.

Summary

- The future of school improvement arrangements at a national level remains uncertain. Although the functions of a new national body have been stated, the intended aims, reach and desirable outcomes remain opaque.
- Despite the economic and global health crises playing a part in the context of attainment in Swansea and Wales, more needs to be done nationally to set out clear expectations on reading, writing and mathematical standards to ensure no learner is left behind.
- The gap for eFSM learners for their average points score in literacy and numeracy subjects at the end of compulsory schooling stands out as an issue for Swansea and Wales with mitigations compromised by insufficient school attendance and coherent national plan for reading, writing and mathematics.
- Resources should be prioritised towards school workforce, where possible.

Yours faithfully,



Martin Nicholls
Prif Weithredwr
Chief Executive