

WRITTEN EVIDENCE PAPER TO THE CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Introduction

1. The purpose of this paper is to outline my priorities for the Education portfolio. I have agreed with the First Minister the following nine priorities:
 1. Infant class sizes are reduced.
 2. Ensuring every child gets the best start in life through an expanded Pupil Premium.
 3. Prioritising schools access to super-fast broadband within the national programme.
 4. Incentivising, recognising and promoting teaching excellence so that we raise standards across the board.
 5. Promoting and enhancing both academic and vocational routes into and through further and higher education, and the national, international and civic roles of our educational institutions. This includes both full and part-time opportunities that will benefit learners of all ages, employers and communities.
 6. The impact of current policy on surplus school places is reviewed, with emphasis on rural schools, to better take account of future growth trends.
 7. Consulting further on the specific recommendations of the Hazelkorn review.
 8. Exploring a potential expansion of the remit of the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol to include further education.
 9. Prioritising support for enhanced links between education and industry, enabling innovation and entrepreneurship across our public and private sectors in collaboration with our universities and colleges.
2. I have emphasised that a number of these priorities have significant budget implications and this will need to be reflected as the government's forward budget plans take shape.
3. As a Government we will continue to be judged on outcomes, these outcomes must be maintained and improved over this current Assembly term. Last summer saw Wales' best ever performance in a number of key subjects and the highest ever percentage of our learners attaining 5 good GCSEs, including Mathematics and English or Welsh first language. Fundamental to the raising of standards has been a focus on literacy and numeracy and I want to maintain and build on this momentum of improvement through continuing to work with the sector in a collaborative way and to focus on the quality of teaching, reflecting the sustainable development principles within the Well-being of Future Generations Act.
4. Taking each of the priorities in turn, I will provide the Committee with an update on each.

Infant class sizes are reduced

5. Class sizes remain a major concern for parents and teachers. I have asked my officials to scope out options to reduce class sizes, starting with the largest classes first.

We are exploring how best to ensure consistency across Wales. In addition, reducing workload and enabling teachers to spend more time supporting pupils is another significant approach to improve standards.

Ensuring every child gets the best start in life through an expanded Pupil Deprivation Grant

6. In 2014, *'Rewriting the future: raising ambition and attainment in Welsh schools'* set out the Welsh Government's commitment to ensure high expectations and achievements for learners from deprived backgrounds and identified approaches for schools to adopt to mitigate the impact of deprivation. In January 2016, *'Raising the ambitions and educational attainment of children who are looked after'* was published. Both strategies are supported by the Pupil Deprivation Grant (PDG), introduced in 2012 as part of a budget deal between the Welsh Liberal Democrats and the Welsh Government, to provide equitable access to education for disadvantaged learners and help eradicate inequalities in outcomes.
7. In recent years, the PDG has become more inclusive and in addition to supporting looked after learners and those eligible for free school meals (e-FSM) it now supports children adopted from care, eligible learners in pupil referral units (PRUs) and children aged 3 and 4 in pre-school settings through the Early Years Pupil Deprivation Grant (EYPDG). The EYPDG was introduced in 2015-16 and provides for 3-4 year olds in the Foundation Phase. Schools, maintained and non-maintained settings receive £300 for each eligible learner.
8. Over the last five years (including 16/17) a total of over £300 million has been invested to support disadvantaged learners. The main element of the PDG and EYPDG supports eFSM learners and young learners from deprived backgrounds and is 100% delegated to schools and settings.
9. There is increasing evidence that the focus we are placing on disadvantaged learners is having an impact, not just in literacy, numeracy and academic achievement but also in behaviour, confidence and self-esteem - which has a direct impact on school attendance and outcomes.
10. Breaking the cycle of deprivation and poverty is a long term commitment. I intend to ensure a continued focus in supporting disadvantaged learners. I am currently considering a reinvigorated approach to PDG, alongside a refreshed *'Rewriting the future'*, to ensure that we have the greatest impact and deliver sustainable, long term improvements.

Prioritising schools access to super-fast broadband within the national programme

11. In January 2013, the First Minister announced that all eligible primary schools in Wales would be provisioned with at least 10Mbps connectivity and eligible secondary schools with 100Mbps as part of the £40 million Learning in Digital Wales (LiDW) Grant Programme.
12. Although super-fast services delivered utilising Fibre to the Cabinet (FttC) were considered, FttC is limited to a maximum speed of 80Mbps down and 20Mbps upstream. This can be affected by environmental factors such as line quality and length, meaning that speeds are typically lower. Consequently, the decision was made to prioritise delivery of services using direct fibre connections over the Welsh Government's Public Sector Broadband Aggregation (PSBA) network. Direct fibre services provide a simpler path to enable future speed increases and could easily provide speeds of up to 1000Mbps (1Gbps) in both directions. These speeds were already being delivered to some secondary schools in Wales.
13. Officials are currently undertaking a full review of these remaining schools to determine where superfast broadband connections may now be available and to work with local authorities to ensure that the schools are provisioned with these improved services as soon as possible.

Incentivising, recognising and promoting teaching excellence so that we raise standards across the board

14. The focus has been to build a comprehensive workforce development strategy based on evidence about the most effective forms of professional development delivered through Pioneer schools (under the "New Deal" banner) and radical initial teacher education reforms (under the *Furlong Report, Teaching Tomorrow's Teachers*). The main elements of the work are to:
 - Attract and retain talented individuals into teaching and headship in Wales.
 - Ensure initial teacher education in Wales provides the best start for aspiring teachers in their career.
 - Establish standards, qualifications, performance management and opportunities for career long professional development for the serving education workforce.
 - Develop leadership and headship capacity.
 - Facilitate the development and delivery of effective peer to peer professional learning on pedagogy and leadership through a network of leading schools.
 - Maintain standards by establishing registration of practitioners with the Education Workforce Council. Build and harness education research capacity across Wales to support practitioner development and school improvement.

15. I recognise the shortcomings in initial teacher training and continuing professional development and their implications for school standards generally as well as the programme of curriculum reform, on which we have embarked to realise the benefits set out in Professor Graham Donaldson's report, *Successful Futures*. Therefore, I will review the work that has been undertaken to ensure that the good practice that undoubtedly exists within the system in Wales, is shared and adopted by all schools so all of our children, regardless of where they live, have access to the very best education. I also want to raise the status of the teaching profession; the profession needs to feel valued.

Promoting and enhancing both academic and vocational routes into and through further and higher education, and the national, international and civic roles of our educational institutions. This includes both full and part-time opportunities that will benefit learners of all ages, employers and communities.

16. The success of the Welsh economy will be measured by the opportunities it creates for everyone. Education and skills development is needed to equip our workers with the skills they need to help Wales prepare for the future demand of a growing economy. Widening access and tailoring courses to the needs of the Welsh economy will be crucial to us in delivering this priority.

The impact of current policy on surplus school places is reviewed, with emphasis on rural schools, to better take account of future growth trends.

17. The current policy on surplus places is set out in the Statutory School Organisation Code. The Code states that where there are more than 10% surplus places in an area, local authorities should review their provision and should make proposals for school reorganisation if this will improve the effectiveness and efficiency of provision. This is especially important where individual schools have 'significant' levels of surplus places. A significant level of surplus provision is defined as 25% or more of a school's capacity and at least 30 unfilled places.

18. In general, rural areas in Wales are not seeing a trend of increased pupil numbers. Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion and Gwynedd all expect pupil numbers to decline further to 2020. Powys and Anglesey expect modest rises. All these fluctuations have been anticipated and it is expected that schools provision will be planned accordingly.

19. Both England and Scotland have primary legislation setting out a presumption against closure of rural schools. They also have a clear definition of rural schools. There is no definition of a rural school in Wales, which is something I will be looking to amend

20. Small and rural schools face a number of financial and other challenges, including difficulties in recruiting and retaining head teachers, declining

pupil rolls leading to concerns about viability. There can be a lack of capacity for a head to lead; little opportunity for exchange of ideas and mutual support to develop teaching practice in a very small group of teachers; excessive workloads on teachers when they are few in numbers, budgets; challenges around delivering a broad curriculum. One potential option would be looking at federations.

21. Schools currently have the power to federate by choice and local authorities have the power to federate schools. The School Organisation Code provides that where closure is considered promoters must consider federation as an alternative option. A federation allows up to six schools to come together under one governing body. Schools in a federation remain individual schools and continue to receive their own budget but are able to pool these budgets for the benefit of all schools in the federation. They are better able to share a head teacher and staff between sites to maximise expertise within the curriculum, support each other through professional learning and sharing of practice, and shared workload. This would ultimately result in teachers having more time to teach and to teach to their strengths and provide greater development opportunities. Federation can allow rural schools to remain viable and remain open in their own communities.

Consulting further on the specific recommendations of the Hazelkorn review.

22. I have long felt that there is a need for a new strategic vision for education, employment and skills at the heart of Welsh Government's priorities. Professor Hazelkorn's recommendations provide a real opportunity to re-shape oversight of post-compulsory education. With the uncertain future we are facing, there is even more need for our educational institutions to pull their weight in building a strong Welsh economy. This is a challenge we have been wrestling with for years and it will not be an easy nut to crack. I will issue a Welsh Government response once I have had an opportunity to fully consider the findings and recommendations contained in the report.

Exploring a potential expansion of the remit of the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol to include further education.

23. I am committed to exploring a potential expansion of the remit of the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol to include further education. I have asked my officials to present me with options on the benefits of expanding and to consider how any additional responsibilities would work on a practical level.

Prioritising support for enhanced links between education and industry, enabling innovation and entrepreneurship across our public and private sectors in collaboration with our universities and colleges.

24. The new curriculum and assessment arrangements will provide opportunities to integrate experiential learning and increase employer engagement with schools. I will use the Pioneer Schools Network to articulate an enrichment programme through the Enrichment and Experiences Working Group and approaches to learning through the work being done by the Assessment and Progression Working Group. These will inform the development of the areas of learning and experience.
25. The enhanced employer engagement project, 'Business Class' provides a model for sustainable school-business partnerships and includes enterprise and employability support. Welsh Government will support Business Class in 2016/17 to embed and extend the number of partnerships across Wales.
26. I am committed to the Regional Entrepreneurship Acceleration Program (REAP) that will draw on the partnerships and experience of five stakeholder groups including academia, corporate business and entrepreneurs to develop an innovation driven entrepreneurship strategy in Wales. This will build on the good practice under the Youth Entrepreneurship Strategy 2010-15 that has encouraged higher aspiration for entrepreneurship. The Business Wales service will encourage strong links between the network of business role models and our schools, colleges and universities to provide opportunities for young people to develop business ideas and understanding of entrepreneurship.
27. I will also explore how we implement the innovation strategy, Innovation Wales, to encourage entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity by investing in technology transfer from our universities and colleges to create new 'Made in Wales' businesses with the capacity to create jobs for now and future generations. I will work with my Cabinet colleagues to create the right environment to maximise the commercialisation opportunities that arise from academic knowledge.
28. Notwithstanding the outcome of the EU Referendum, I have already emphasised that a number of these priorities have significant budget implications and this will need to be reflected as the government's forward budget plans take shape. Some of the existing activities in these areas are supported by EU structural funds, both ERDF and ESF, for us to maintain and build on existing achievements and improve our collaborations between academia and industry. We will have to take into account the future position and potential loss of structural funds as we go forward.