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Chair Children and Young People Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
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Dear Ann,

Thank you for your further letter of 29 October which summarises your main conclusions following my appearance at the Children and Young People Committee on 16 October. I have set out below responses to the points you raised and those areas where further assurance has been sought.

Protection for schools

My officials have been in regular dialogue with officials in Local Government to discuss the continued protection for schools and I will be meeting the Minister for Local Government later this month to discuss this issue. Taking this forward, we have recently tasked a small group, led by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), to consider school protection. The group is expecting to revisit the annual monitoring forms to ensure they are appropriate and provide us with reassurance that local authorities continue to deliver against this commitment.

The Welsh in Education Grant (WEG) and Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs) are directly linked, both being aimed at achieving the outcomes of the Welsh-medium Education Strategy. Indicative 2014-15 allocations for the Grant have been maintained at 2013-14 levels (£5.63 million within the 'Welsh in Education' Action) and monitoring procedures for both the WEG and WESPs will ensure that expenditure continues to support the implementation of each local authority's WESP.

Pupil Deprivation Grant

I am pleased to note that the Committee intends to return to consideration of the effectiveness of the Pupil Deprivation Grant (PDG) in due course. I am determined that schools make the best use of this funding. The independent evaluation of PDG, that is underway, will focus on how the PDG is being implemented and the impact it is having on the performance of pupils from deprived backgrounds.

Modelling work has been undertaken on how the introduction of the Universal Credit will impact upon free school meal eligibility, and the intention is to maintain a cost-neutral basis for eligibility. Since the PDG is allocated on the basis of the number of pupils eligible for free school meals, modelling the impact of the Universal Credit on the PDG could be seen as a duplication of effort at this time.

Literacy and Numeracy

I welcome the Committee's comments in relation to financial literacy and we have made a clear commitment to improving standards of numeracy, as well as literacy, across the board. Our National Numeracy Programme is putting in place a five year programme of activities designed to raising levels of numeracy in school age pupils across Wales. In this draft budget we have set aside funding for the new Numeracy Employer Engagement Programme which is designed to help pupils in secondary school recognise the importance of good numeracy skills in the working world, improving their employability while making them more confident with numbers.

Qualifications Wales and the revised Welsh Baccalaureate

In designing the new organisation of Qualifications Wales, we felt that establishing it in the first instance as an independent statutory body, responsible for the quality assurance of qualifications in Wales, was in the best interests of Wales' learners. The precise timescales for the implementation of an awarding function are yet to be determined, but we will aim to minimise disruption to centres and learners. Planning and discussions are taking place as to the manner in which this additional function will operate in practice and the consequent funding implications. I see the establishment of Qualifications Wales as a key priority for my portfolio, and as such, intend to identify necessary resources during 2015-16 budget round if required once the costs of proposals are finalised.

As the Committee rightly points out, the model for Qualifications Wales, as currently envisaged, does not rely on income from qualifications entries; but neither does it incur the substantial variable costs of the provision of examination services as these services will still be provided by existing awarding bodies. Every effort is being made to minimise the costs of establishing Qualifications Wales, whilst ensuring that it delivers the range of services necessary to achieve its objectives.

In relation to training and development, we are working with the WJEC, teaching unions and other key stakeholders to plan the delivery of the new qualifications and to ensure that teachers and lecturers have the information, resources and CPD/training they need to deliver the new qualification effectively. A stakeholder group has been established to advise on our approach and road shows explaining the changes to qualifications to senior managers in schools and colleges are planned for the first half of 2014. Specifications will be available for the new qualifications from autumn 2014, at which point further road shows will run for teachers and lecturers.

Awarding bodies have traditionally offered support to centres to help ensure that new specifications are understood by those who deliver them. We expect and will require that such support will continue to be provided for the latest suite of GCSEs and A levels, which will be introduced in Wales from September 2015. The introduction of two new maths GCSEs and significantly revised language GCSEs are likely to require additional targeted support and we will work with Awarding bodies and others to ensure that this is provided.

Welsh language budget allocations

As the Committee confirms, funding for the 'Welsh Language' Action has increased by £0.050m in 2014-15. This increase relates to a recurrent transfer in of the same value from the 'Welsh in Education' Action, to integrate the annual grant to the National Eisteddfod for the learners' officer post with the core grant provided to the National Eisteddfod, as part of continued focus on grants rationalisation.

I can confirm that the budget for Welsh Language Commissioner's Office is included within the 'Welsh Language' Action. My officials are in the process of separating out funding from the 'Welsh Language' Budget Expenditure Line (BEL) within this Action, so that the Commissioner's Office has its own BEL from 2014-15 and beyond in order to aid transparency.

While we remain committed to the Welsh language we cannot shield all services from the effect of the UK Government cuts and the implications of prioritising spend. The 'Welsh Language' Action was over committed against its budget for 2014-15 and 2015-16, based on existing budgetary commitments (for Welsh Language Commissioner, Welsh Language Grants and Projects) and additional funding recently agreed for the Technology Fund and set up costs for the Welsh Language Tribunal. As a result, an assessment of the overall budget had to be undertaken to establish where reductions could be found, where the least impact from any cuts would be felt.

As part of the review, it was decided that a 10% cut to the Welsh Language Commissioner's budget, which equated to £0.4 million, could be made and the Commissioner was made aware of this intention. This reduction has been possible since the Commissioner's budget requirements are now clearer following the first year of existence and the production of accounts for the 2012-13 financial year. The Welsh Language Commissioner received funding from the Welsh Government in 2012-13 of £4.1 million with a resulting underspend of £0.5 million. The Commissioner has been able to build reserves from her underspend in order to fund any legal proceedings resulting from her investigations. However, given that the Welsh language Standards and Welsh Language Tribunal will not be in place until well in to 2014-2015, this initial underspend and an expected underspend in 2013-2014 should provide the Commissioner with a sufficient budget to carry out her duties.

I accept that the reduction to the Commissioner's Office was not drawn to the attention of the Committee in our written evidence paper. The request received from the Committee focused this year around Programme for Government commitments, Legislative priorities and preventative spending. The reduction in funding was not considered to impact on our ability to meet Programme for Government commitments in this area, and we remain committed to ensuring the Welsh Language is a 'living' language. As the Welsh Language portfolio now rests with the First Minister, the evidence paper did not reference 'Welsh Language' Action budgets specifically, but did draw the Committee's attention to the reductions in 'Welsh in Education' Action budgets.

Capital Funding

I recognise the Committee's concerns surrounding local authorities' ability to provide match funding for projects under the 21st Century Schools Programme. My officials will continue to work with local authorities throughout the delivery phase to ensure the successful outcome of the first wave of the programme.

We are continuing to explore options for alternative ways of financing the Programme. In her written statement on the Wales Infrastructure Investment Plan on 9 October, the Finance Minister confirmed that she will be making further announcements on the funding to accelerate the 21st Century Schools Programme at Final Budget stage.

Post 16 Education

The first call on the Further Education Provision Budget Expenditure Line (BEL), which decreases in 2014-15 by £38 million compared to 2013-14 levels, is funding of school sixth forms. All learners are protected in this age group. The funding methodology is applied to ensure that the volume of learning funded reflects the full number of anticipated learners. The balance of the budget is then applied to the other sectors.

In Further Education Institutions, the protection is afforded to full time learners who are aged 16-19, thus taking account of those who may start a course of learning at 17, and then switch to a different two year course at 18. The dataset used to calculate individual institutional allocations is split into two categories.

Category one looks at full time learners aged 16-19 and funds them, in full, in accordance with the new Post-16 Planning and Funding Methodology. The remaining budget is then allocated to part time learners, irrespective of setting, the vast majority of whom will be aged 19 or over. Furthermore, when determining their provision plans, institutions are asked to ensure that provision for the younger cohort is regarded as the main priority, with adult learning being the secondary priority. This approach is in line with the requirements of the Learning and Skills Act 2000.

My letter of 22 October provided additional information on the arrangements made to convene a small group which will consider how best to minimise the impact of these reductions on both learners and staffing. Discussions with the Further Education sub group will first explore the impact on the provision of learning that the institutions are able to provide. Once that is understood, institutions will need to evaluate the impact on their staffing; which may take some time. In the event that an institution determines that there will be an impact on staffing numbers, discussions with staff will commence to ensure that the process employed is fair to all concerned. Institutions will of course be mindful of their obligations under employment law and my officials will continue to work with institutions to minimise any impact.

I hope this response is sufficient to provide clarification on your points raised.

Yours,



Huw Lewis AC / AM

Y Gweinidog Addysg a Sgiliau
Minister for Education and Skills