

LEADER'S REPORT 2016

Colleagues

Local Government in Wales is yet again faced with unprecedented funding reductions, with Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council's funding for 2016/17 reduced by 0.73% or £660,000 in cash terms.

The nearing implementation of the Social Services and Wellbeing Act 2014 and the changing practice, policy and service delivery required is progressing well and is being embraced locally and regionally. The Social Services staff, practitioners and managers continue to deliver quality intervention and services at a time of continued change and expectations.

The ongoing reconfiguration of Social Services and regional working with partners from Health and Other Local authorities and has enabled us to reshape services to enable better focus on short term interventions to maintain independence.

Children's Services continue to focus on supporting children, young people and families to maintain their independence by supporting them to live safely within their families.

Demand for our services remains high and Social Services in Merthyr Tydfil together with our partner agencies continue to work hard to protect the most vulnerable people in our community and support those who need our help.

Like all other Councils in Wales we are facing the need to reduce the amount of money we spend. However, it is important to recognise that the Council remains committed to allocating additional resources where absolutely necessary to respond to the need of the most vulnerable. Over the last year we have worked with our partners and used the Intermediate Care Fund to improve how all agencies working together to support older people within the community. We have also been successful in reducing our Looked After children population and ensuring children are looked after more locally than out of county placements, therefore reducing costs.

We need to ensure that support is offered to the people of Merthyr Tydfil at the earliest opportunity and Early Intervention and Prevention is a primary focus of social services work and is one of the principles of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014. With this in mind Family First, Community First and Team Around the Family are now under the Social Services Directorate and are working more closely together.

Following the Estyn monitoring visit in November 2015 Estyn judged that the authority no longer requires special measures and was removed from follow-up activity'

2013/14 was a landmark year for the children and young people of Merthyr Tydfil. 2014/15 was an even better year and our schools continued to improve at a much faster rate than the rest of Wales. In 2014/15 we celebrate the fact that accelerated improvement has been achieved for three consecutive years in every headline indicator.

At the ages of 7, 11, 14 and 16, our children and young people have attained beyond our expectations and next year we are confident that even more will succeed.

The progress that pupils make from primary school to the end of secondary school is significantly better than expected. The performance of both boys and girls has increased and the impact of disadvantage on attainment has been reduced.

At the most important indicator, the Level 2 Threshold including English/Welsh and mathematics, our 16 year olds have improved by 20% when the rest of Wales has improved by 7%.

Today the young people of Merthyr Tydfil are better prepared, have better skills and more progress to higher education, employment and training than ever before.

This transformation has been supported by a committed community of parents, governors, teachers and leaders who have a clear strategy for improving attendance, and a shared ambition to be the best in Wales.

Strong partnerships exist between our schools and between schools in our region; they are working together more to share best practice and improve the quality of teaching and learning.

Primary and secondary schools in Merthyr Tydfil are leading the way; during the last year many schools have been acknowledged for excellence and best practice in leadership, the teaching of mathematics, the coaching of outstanding teachers, effective transition and innovative use of ICT. Increasingly, our schools are being used to provide support to other schools that have much to learn from our improvement, our expertise and skills.

But of course there is always more to do.

Our ambition for the future is to:-

- Be amongst the best in Wales and beyond Wales
- Ensure that education, training and skills drives our economic growth and prosperity
- Show that with the right leadership and provision, we can continue to reduce the impact of poverty on success
- Engage more with our partners, communities and parents in maintaining the rate of improvement and securing even greater success for our children and young people

“In 2012 I promised that we would improve and that improvement would be rapid. We have achieved that goal and we accept that there is more to do. The difference in 2016 is that we know that whatever we want to do, we can do it”.

- *Over the last three years, outcomes at Foundation Phase, key stage 2 and key stage 3 have improved at a **much faster rate** than in Wales as a whole*
- *At key stage 4, the rate of improvement in all the main headline indicators has been **much faster than the rate** of improvement across Wales*
- *The progress that pupils make from primary school to the end of secondary school has **improved strongly**. In 2015, pupils' **progress is significantly better** than expected compared to similar pupils in Wales **across all headline indicators**.*

- *Since 2012, the performance of pupils eligible for free school meals has **improved considerably***
- *Since 2012, the performance of girls and boys **has increased**.*
- *Standards have improved for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) from the Foundation Phase through to key stage 4. **In most cases, the rate of improvement is faster than Wales***
- *Overall, for the period 2012-2014, the percentage of Year 11 pupils that are NEET **has more than halved**. The authority has very effective tracking systems in place and unverified data indicates that the percentage of Year 11 pupils that are NEET has reduced even further in 2015*
- *Overall attendance in primary and secondary schools **has improved since inspection in 2012***
- *Fixed-term exclusions of 6 days or more have **reduced considerably**.*
- *The rate of exclusions of 5 days or less **is lower than that of the Wales average***

There has been further monitoring by WAO of the HR service and although no formal feedback has been received the initial comments were positive. This comes during a period of significant reorganisation within the HR service as a result of the prospective loss of the current Head of Service. A new HR manager has been appointed on a temporary basis and HR has become integrated into the Legal and Democratic Services with a view to further improvements in efficiency and effectiveness being achieved building on the positive progress that has already been made.'

From an Economic Development perspective, a range of Programmes are successfully being delivered across the County Borough.

Following on from the success of the 2013 Tourism plan, the Economic Development Team is currently working on the 2016 -18 Destination Management Plan. This Destination Management Plan and complementary Action Plan set's-out priorities for delivery and will provide a blueprint for the next three-years.

In April 2014, Welsh Government approved an allocation of £12.873 million for the implementation and delivery of the Vibrant and Viable Places Programme. The Programme, now over halfway through its delivery period, aims to revitalise and promote the sustainability of the town centre, build a vibrant and sustainable community which is more prosperous, tackling poverty by creating jobs and helping people into work and encouraging wider investment in housing and deliver strategic projects of a significant scale within the area. The Programme is split into three key areas namely Housing, Economic Vitality and Encouraging Enterprise and Sustainable and Vibrant Communities. Each of the 24 project approved under the Programme fits into one of these key areas.

There are a number of housing schemes being implemented including the Pontmorlais Promenade and Labour Exchange project, North Merthyr Housing Sites and St. Johns Church which has recently been included as a new development within the Programme.

In relation to the theme of Encouraging Enterprise, a number of projects are being implemented including the creation of an Enterprise Centre in the town centre along with

the meanwhile test trading opportunities which aim to enhance and encourage entrepreneurship in the Town. This has been a resounding success with both Deli of the Valley and Jol's benefitting from this unique provision. The YMCA project is progressing well with Cambrian Heritage Regeneration Trust due to submit their Stage 2 application to HLF shortly for the creation of office provision within the building. Also, a design team has been appointed for the Cyfarthfa Castle project.

In relation to the Sustainable and Vibrant Communities theme, the Penydarren Park project is progressing well and nearing completion of the new community facility earmarked for education, recreational and training purposes. Also, following our final public consultation last summer on the design of the new bus station, work has been ongoing in ensuring that we have a sustainable design that meets the needs of users and potential tenants. A planning application is currently being considered, while a start on site is expected in late 2016.

The transformation of Merthyr Tydfil Town Centre is set to continue with an award from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) to help preserve its 'unique character'.

The Council has received initial support for its HLF Townscape Heritage (TH) bid for the Pontmorlais Townscape Heritage Quarter, Continuing the Renaissance project.

The £1.9m initiative joint-funded by HLF, the local authority and Cadw, will see the ongoing refurbishment of a number of historically important buildings - providing new jobs and training opportunities - as part of a vision to create a Heritage Quarter combining arts and culture facilities with niche retailers.

River Taff Central Link and Penderyn Square regeneration won an award in the category for Excellence in Planning and Design for Public Realm at the 2015 Awards for Planning Excellence. The Awards, run by the Royal Town Planning Institute, were announced at a ceremony in London and enabled national recognition for the scheme.

The Council's Town Planning Division continues to lead the way as the top performing planning authority in Wales. This achievement is as a result of sustained and continuous improvements in service delivery, many of which have been influenced by customer feedback. This in turn has seen the delivery of the following major developments in the County Borough over the last year:-

- The opening of the new M&S store at Cyfarthfa Retail Park, with full occupancy of the other new units expected during 2016.
- Planning Permission was granted to General Dynamics in June bringing 475 full time and 25 part time jobs to the County Borough, the Planning Department continue to support the company with their further expansion plans.
- The County Borough continues to provide new housing for its citizens. Affordable housing is being provided at Walters Terrace, Aberfan and National house builders Redrow and Taylor Wimpey have developments underway at Trelewis and the Mardy Hospital site, with over 100 completions across the County Borough during 2015.

- Planning permission was granted in May for the Gellideg wellbeing centre along with new offices for Merthyr Valley Homes.
- The River Taff Central Link and Penderyn Square were awarded a Royal Town Planning Excellence in Planning for the Public Realm Award at a ceremony in London.
- The County Borough continues to improve its retail offer with the opening of the new Lidl store at Pengarnddu.
- The infrastructure for the Riverside development at Merthyr Vale was completed and opened. The scheme which includes a new highway, bridges and footpaths will unlock land for future housing developments on the former colliery site.
- The extension of the Premier Inn at Pentrebach, which demonstrates the growing desire to visit and stay in Merthyr Tydfil as a result of attractions such as Bike Park Wales.
- Improvements to the towns sporting facilities were secured with both the Rugby and Football club receiving planning permission for development comprising comprehensive redevelopment of the football club and new stands, clubhouse and training facilities at the rugby club.

The Housing Renewal Team continues to attract significant inward investment for the benefit of Merthyr Tydfil citizens. In 2015/16 alone, the Team attracted over £3M of inward investment from a variety of sources to fund free external wall insulation and other energy efficiency measures to over 200 homes located on Keir Hardie Estate, Twynyrodyn and in our last active renewal area – Bedlinog & Trelewis.

The Housing Solutions Team have worked tirelessly to implement the significant changes introduced by the Housing Wales Act 2014, by focussing on the prevention and early intervention of homelessness. Hundreds more citizens are now receiving help and assistance to resolve their housing issues, before they reach crisis point.

Our Community Safety Team have worked with partners such as South Wales Police, Safer Merthyr Tydfil, Registered Social Landlords and many others to address the issues which matter to our communities such as antisocial behaviour, domestic abuse and substance misuse. Council officers have robustly used new powers afforded to us to close three premises in the Borough where antisocial behaviour and drug use were the source of persistent nuisance and misery to neighbours and local communities.

Our Trading Standards Service have received a National award for their continued work in tackling the sale of illicit goods in the shadow economy. This work protects our legitimate businesses from unfair competition and citizens from inferior and sometimes dangerous goods.

The National Trading Standards Service recognised the scams prevention work carried out by our Trading Standards with a case study of one of our interventions highlighted nationally.

The Licensing Service has reviewed and amended where necessary their taxi policy and procedures learning from the Child Sexual Exploitation issues in Rotherham MBC.

The Food Hygiene Rating (Wales) Act 2013 and the Food Hygiene Rating (Wales) Regulations came into force on the 4th March 2013 and established a mandatory food hygiene rating scheme for Wales. In order to drive up food hygiene ratings within Merthyr Environmental Health Officers have worked with and supported new businesses and poor scoring businesses. In addition in September last year the Council chose to lead by example and adopted a corporate wide policy of ensuring that all its food businesses activities whether provided directly, or indirectly by third parties, must meet as a minimum the broadly compliant criteria and be rated 3 or above. In addition independent food businesses attending Council run events, markets or festivals or those who utilise Council facilities must also be rated as 3 or above before being admitted to attend such events or make use of facilities.

The financial position of the Council has been under severe scrutiny over the past few years. This year and for the foreseeable future, the pressure will be even more intense. The whole Council has responded to this challenge but identified that the existing Business Change Team within the Council would work with our Strategic Partners, PriceWaterhouseCoopers to drive forward the efficiency agenda. There will be continued very difficult decisions to be made but as is the normal practice, all Councillors will be kept fully updated on our progress.

The Waste Services Division continues to change the way we collect waste in Merthyr Tydfil. Extensive work has been undertaken to implement some of the changes necessary if we are to achieve the challenging targets set by the Welsh Government.

It is more important than ever that all households in the County Borough present waste for collection in the appropriate manner including separating any waste delivered into the household waste and recycling centres. These measures will help towards mitigating the risk of financial penalties being imposed by the WG in the future.

Project Riverside has progressed significantly. As part of phase 2, a £8.5 million infrastructure scheme has just been completed, funded jointly by the council and the Welsh Government which includes a new link road between Aberfan and Merthyr Vale with a road bridge across the river replacing the old bridge which was in very poor condition.

The development land is now on the market to create over 200 houses and phase 3(the redevelopment of Taff and Crescent streets)is well under way with the council purchasing 43 properties so far as part of a programme to remove 112 properties which are effected from extreme flood risk.

The first stage of decanting residents is to take place at Walters terrace with building works starting shortly.

With regard to the bus station the planning application is shortly to be validated. Progress has been made on a number of fronts including acquisition, business planning, procurement and further grant support. If all goes well the target for opening could be the back end of 2017.