



## **FULL COUNCIL REPORT**

Date Written	8 <sup>th</sup> November 2020
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Service Area	Learning
Exempt/Non Exempt	Non Exempt
Committee Date	25 <sup>th</sup> November 2020

*To: Mayor, Ladies and Gentlemen*

## **Raising Aspirations, Raising Standards (RARS)**

### **1.0 SUMMARY OF THE REPORT**

- 1.1 Academic achievement across the County Borough has, for too long, been variable with too many young people not achieving their academic potential.
- 1.2 The ambition for a Raising Aspirations Raising Standards Strategy began in the academic year 2018/19, following robust self-evaluation activities within the Learning Department.
- 1.3 Through discussion with stakeholder groups a number of goals were identified as being key to accelerating educational achievement in Merthyr Tydfil and ensuring that all children and young people have the opportunity to succeed.
- 1.4 The strategy has been drawn up with two overarching themes and five underlying goals, supported by a number of key commitments to action.

### **2.0 RECOMMENDATION(S) that**

- 2.1 The Raising Aspirations, Raising Standards (RARS) Strategy 2020-2025 be approved.
- 2.2 The actions in Sections 7 and 8 be approved.

### **3.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 Academic achievement across the County Borough has, for too long, been variable with too many young people not achieving their academic potential.

Whilst young people who are eligible for free school meals do as well as other children eligible for free school meals across Wales, the same cannot be said for those young people who do not receive free school meals. The gap between other similar areas in Wales has widened over recent years.

- 3.2 There has not been the acceptance, or the drive from key partners and stakeholders, that fundamental change is required to achieve the highest possible outcomes for each young person and to ensure that this change is sustainable. This fundamental change must be underpinned by the recognition that the success of our young people is everyone's responsibility and that by working in partnership we can achieve far more for our future generations.
- 3.3 The pandemic has, and will, further hit economy hard but ensuring that each young person leaves statutory education with the best possible academic profile is a pre-requisite for sustainable future growth and security.
- 3.4 Over the last ten years education performance across the County Borough has been a cause for concern.
- 3.5 In 2012 the authority was placed in Special Measures following an inspection by Estyn. It was removed from this position in 2016 having been judged to have improved sufficiently during the intervening period. However, since then, standards at the end of Key Stage 4 have declined.
- 3.6 Of the four secondary schools, only one now performs consistently above the expected outcomes for schools within similar contexts. Challenging questions must be asked about the sustainable impact of the changes made during that time.
- 3.7 By 2016, three out of the four secondary schools had received Schools Challenge Cymru money. This, together with significant investment from the local authority, in terms of staff support and time-limited, targeted, basic skills financial support, did impact positively on standards at the time. However, as that support was withdrawn it has become evident that more fundamental changes were needed to make sustainable improvement.
- 3.8 Inspection outcomes since 2017 have been in the main positive with no school placed in a reported category and aspects of wellbeing and care, support and guidance being judged highly. However, of the primary schools inspected, teaching and learning was judged to be the weakest area across the board. This is an area that needs to be addressed if the ambition of this plan is to be realised.
- 3.9 There have been improvements in attendance over the past three years but compared to other local authorities, attendance for both primary and secondary schools is the lowest, or close to the lowest, with persistent absenteeism a significant area of challenge.
- 3.10 Whilst figures for permanent exclusions are the lowest in the region, the number of fixed-term short exclusions is the highest and the percentage of pupils moved in Year 10 to Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) is the highest in Wales.

- 3.11 Since the pandemic started, the number of pupils eligible for free school meals has risen by 18.5% (from 2026 pupils to 2401). As of the end of October 2020 the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals within the total school population now stands at 27% – the long-term impact of this is yet unknown and it may not be known for some years
- 3.12 In the single year 2017/2018, 15.6% of four to five-year olds in Merthyr were classed as obese, the highest percentage in Wales. Over the five-year period up to and including 2017/18, 16.4% of four to five-year olds were classed as obese with 5.1% being classed as severely obese – significantly higher than any other local authority in Wales.
- 3.13 The most recent Sports Wales survey of schools (2018) shows that 46% of the young people surveyed undertook physical exercise three times, two percentage points below the Welsh average. For adults, the figure stands at 22% (2018/19) significantly lower than the Welsh average of 32%.

## 4.0 DEVELOPMENT OF THE STRATEGY

- 4.1 The ambition for a Raising Aspirations Raising Standards Strategy began in the academic year 2018/19, following robust self-evaluation activities within the Learning Department.
- 4.2 The aim was to publish and launch the strategy for September 2020; however, the pandemic has delayed timelines.
- 4.3 A series of workshops were set up with key groups to pull together the main themes.
- 4.3.1 **Headteachers** – initially a small working group, this group then took ideas to the wider Headteacher fora and in January 2020 a workshop was held with all Headteachers with the aim to take the priorities back to their school community to discuss and bring back at the end of the Spring Term 2020.
- 4.3.2 **Governors** – offered as a training session (15 governors attended), discussed priorities and offered input into actions, this group met again in June 2020 and have recognised the need to ensure that emotional wellbeing needs to be integral in the first part of any plan as we move forward.
- The Strategy has also been discussed by the Governors Association.
- 4.3.3 **Youth Cabinet** – initial meeting to discuss priorities, working party identified to ensure the Strategy is child friendly, this again on hold due to Covid-19.
- 4.3.4 **Learning Department** – several sessions with Team Leaders across the department to discuss priorities and how they are reflected in their plans. Team Leaders then discussed the plan with their teams and fed back in a further meeting. Consideration on how priorities can be integrated into work from Early Years through to Adult Community Learning and integrating parenting groups and Families First. These sessions included officers from Sports Development and Children Looked After. Representatives from Merthyr College were involved.

- 4.3.5 **Scrutiny Members** – had site of the draft priorities, but a planned workshop had been postponed due to Covid-19.
- This workshop took place in September 2020.
- 4.3.6 **Cabinet Members** – workshops have been held with Cabinet members and Corporate Management Team to discuss the priorities for Education Improvement. This has led to education being identified as a key priority within the Corporate Improvement Plan.
- 4.3.7 A multi-partner workshop was planned for April 2020 to discuss the Strategy, but this was postponed due to the pandemic and has now been superseded by the development of the Education Partnership Panel (EPP).

## 5.0 THE STRATEGY

- 5.1 Through discussion with stakeholder groups a number of goals were identified as being key to accelerating educational achievement in Merthyr Tydfil and ensuring that all children and young people have the opportunity to succeed. It is recognised that success with our goals will only be achieved through commitment to partnership and collaboration by all stakeholders. At the forefront of the work is the need to fully support the education community through both the pandemic and its aftermath.
- 5.2 The Strategy is laid out under two themes – see Appendix 1.
- Partnership & Collaboration
  - Pandemic Recovery
- 5.3 The themes run across the five goals
- Performance Management and Systems Governance
  - Developing the Education Workforce
  - Supporting Learners Health and Wellbeing
  - Improving Achievement and Progression
  - Developing the Environment for Learning
- 5.4 A multi-agency Education Partnership Panel (EPP) has been set up, chaired by Nick Batchelor, Welsh Government Advisor to oversee progress of the Strategy.

## 6.0 ACTIONS ALREADY IN PLACE

- 6.1 A robust plan from the Central South Consortium (CSC) to support specific school improvement activities – the focus of this current academic year is Literacy and Teaching and Learning.
- 6.2 Focus on wellbeing of both staff and pupils
- a school Staff Wellbeing Charter was drawn up in partnership with stakeholders during the last academic year and published at the start of September 2020.
  - pupil wellbeing is key to re-engagement in learning and work has begun to integrate a wellbeing toolkit into all schools across the County Borough.

- 6.3 A Business and Education Together Partnership (BETP) has been set up – its inaugural meeting is on 25<sup>th</sup> November – this multi-agency panel will seek to engage learners and their families into the opportunities available to them from Key Stage 2 upwards.
- 6.4 Engagement with third sector organisations are in their infancy but a number of activities have taken place to support children’s wellbeing following the success of the We Love Merthyr Tydfil Reading Festival, and these include
- Author visits to schools
  - Science workshops culminating in community sculptures
  - Christmas Reading and Art Festival
- 6.5 The Youth Cabinet have worked on a young people’s version of the Strategy (Appendix 2) and plans are in place for an animation to be presented when the final document is published.

## **7.0 MONITORING OF THE STRATEGY**

- 7.1 Reports to the ‘Learning and Local Government Education Services (LGES) Scrutiny Committee’ will identify the links of actions to the Strategy.
- 7.2 An annual report to Council will be presented outlining the current position of the Strategy.
- 7.3 The EPP will receive termly update reports against priorities within the Strategy.
- 7.4 The Strategy is supported by key action plans within the Learning Department, which are monitored through internal processes.
- 7.5 Within the Council’s own improvement processes, education has a number of key priorities to report on which are fundamentally linked to the Strategy.
- 7.6 Termly performance meetings with CSC take place and the impact of actions to support the Strategy will form part of this meeting.
- 7.7 For the last, and current academic year, there will be little comparative data which can be used to measure academic progress. The Learning Department is working with schools to identify a suitable progress framework which will support both schools and the local authority to capture academic progress of learners.

## **8.0 NEXT STEPS**

- 8.1 On approval of the Strategy, the department will work on a launch, which, due to the current pandemic situation and ongoing effect of this on schools, will take place in January 2021.

## **9.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 There are no direct financial implications associated with this report.

## 10.0 INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT

	Positive Impacts	Negative Impacts	Not Applicable
<b>1. Merthyr Tydfil Well-being Objectives</b>	4 of 4	0 of 4	0 of 4
<b>2. Sustainable Development Principles - How have you considered the five ways of working:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long term</li> <li>• Prevention</li> <li>• Integration</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Involvement</li> </ul>	5 of 5	0 of 5	0 of 5
<b>3. Protected Characteristics</b> <i>(including Welsh Language)</i>	8 of 10	0 of 10	2 of 10
<b>4. Biodiversity</b>	1 of 1	0 of 1	0 of 1
<p><b><u>Summary:</u></b></p> <p>The main positive impacts are improved educational and aspirational outcomes for children and young people.</p>			

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**CABINET MEMBER FOR LEARNING**

<b>BACKGROUND PAPERS</b>		
Title of Document(s)	Document(s) Date	Document Location
Does the report contain any issue that may impact the Council's Constitution?		

***Consultation has been undertaken with the Corporate Management Team in respect of each proposal(s) and recommendation(s) set out in this report.***