

## SCRUTINY COMMITTEE REPORT

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| Date Written   | 20 <sup>th</sup> January 2021 |
| Report Author  | Sue Walker                    |
| Service Area   | Learning                      |
| Committee Date | 9 <sup>th</sup> February 2021 |

To: Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen

### Best Start to Life Update

#### 1.0 SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 We have set Wellbeing Objectives for Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council, and how we intend to achieve these objectives is set out in our plan 'Focus on the Future: Wellbeing in our Community'. The focus of this report is on the wellbeing theme **Best Start to Life**.
- 1.2 The Council is committed to ensuring excellent educational achievement by delivering key strategies that will focus robustly on improving standards and the quality of leadership.
- 1.3 Using the most recent and **available** performance information, this report establishes the current position for the wellbeing objective: *Children and young people get the best start to life and are equipped with the skills they need to be successful learners and confident individuals*. **PLEASE NOTE:** Due to the changes imposed by Welsh Government in relation to the publishing of education data, there is no available data for 2019/20. We are in the process of redefining our key performance indicators within the SOAP for Best Start; with this in mind, our SOAP has not been included as an appendix within this report.
- 1.4 An annual review during 2018/19 highlighted the need to further refine and refresh the key outcomes. This ensures that the outcomes clearly describe what the Best Start to Life objective seeks to achieve. Therefore, for 2019/20 it was decided to refocus the outcomes to support a more integrated/ collaborative approach being taken to meet these. The key long-term outcomes for Best Start to Life are:
- Children live in a nurturing and stimulating home environment
  - Children have access to high quality pre-school and school
  - Improve the educational outcomes for all children and young people
  - Children and young people have good health and wellbeing
- 1.5 This report also includes information requested by Committee Members focusing on the impact of the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic on services, and on their ability to deliver against the outcomes laid down in Focus on the Future: wellbeing in our community.

## 2.0 RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 2.1 The content of this report to be discussed and performance information scrutinised.
- 2.2 Committee members review and explore the response activities undertaken in relation to the ongoing pandemic to seek assurance that appropriate support has been delivered for communities/ businesses.
- 2.3 Committee Members offer any appropriate feedback to enable officers to consider when undertaking future service planning and delivery discussions.

## 3.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

### Legislative Context

- 3.1 The [Wellbeing of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015](#) specifies that we must work to improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural wellbeing of Wales by maximising our contribution to the seven Wellbeing Goals.
- 3.2 We must do this in accordance with the sustainable development principle, which means that we act in a manner that seeks to ensure the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. There are five ways of working that we need to do adopt in order to show that we have applied the sustainable development principle. The five ways of working are:
  - Long Term
  - Prevention
  - Integrated
  - Collaboration
  - Involvement
- 3.3 The [Social Services and Wellbeing \(Wales\) Act 2014](#) specifies that we must seek to improve the wellbeing of people who need care and support, carers who need support and for transforming social services in Wales. The focus of this Act is on what matters to the person and how they can use their own strengths and resources to do those things, which is determined by an assessment that involves the person and the professional(s).

### Strategic Context and Service Delivery

The Council is committed to delivering excellent services. It will do this by delivering its key strategies and through joint working with a range of partners. The key plans that focus on delivering excellent services in education are:

- Raising Standards Raising Aspirations (RARS) Strategy;
  - Early Years Plan;
  - Youth Services Plan;
  - Central South Consortium (CSC) Business Plan; and
  - Active Merthyr Plan.
- 3.4 The RARS Strategy was approved at Full Council on the 25<sup>th</sup> November 2020 following a period of robust consultation and engagement with our key stakeholders including:
    - Headteachers;
    - Governors;
    - Youth Members (MTBWYF);
    - Learning Department staff; and
    - Scrutiny/ Cabinet members.

The strategy is laid out under two themes:

- Partnership & Collaboration; and
- Pandemic Recovery

The themes run across five main goals:

- Performance Management and Systems Governance;
- Developing the Education Workforce;
- Supporting Learners Health and Wellbeing;
- Improving Achievement and Progression; and
- Developing the Environment for Learning.

A multi-agency Education Partnership Panel (EPP) has been set up, which is chaired by Nick Batchelor, Welsh Government Advisor to oversee progress of the Strategy.

- 3.5 The Learning Department works collaboratively with other departments both within the Council, and with external partners via the Public Service Board (PSB). School improvement is delivered through a commissioning arrangement with the Central South Consortium (CSC).
- 3.6 The Council's contribution to achieving the seven wellbeing goals is outlined in our plan [[Focus on the Future: Wellbeing in our Community](#)]. On the 4<sup>th</sup> April 2018, Full Council approved a revised version of the Plan, which reduced the number of wellbeing objectives from 9 to 4. The new objectives can be found in Appendix 1.
- 3.7 The Chief Officer (Learning) reports on the wellbeing theme *Best Start to Life*. The purpose of this report is to coordinate the performance information for this wellbeing objective and offer insights in the change of working practice linked to the wellbeing objective: ***Children and young people get the best start to life and are equipped with the skills they need to be successful learners and confident individuals.***

## 4.0 WHERE WE WERE

- 4.1 The [Annual Performance Report](#) for 2019/2020 was published by the Council before the statutory deadline of 31<sup>st</sup> October 2020. This report evaluated performance across all wellbeing objectives laid down within the Corporate Wellbeing Plan: *Focus on the Future*.
- 4.2 It is important to note that for education outcomes, this report covers performance data for 2018/19; this is due to the submission of annual data accounting for the previous year for education measures. It is also important to note that the Annual Performance Report for 2019/20 covers activity between **April 2019** and **March 2020** so does not reflect the activities which the Council was required to undertake to respond to the coronavirus pandemic.
- 4.3 Our evaluation of performance in 2019/20 was **Unsatisfactory**. This judgement was reached as a result of the overall achievement level at key stage 4. The only externally verified data was unsatisfactory.

## 5.0 WHERE WE ARE NOW

- 5.1 **PLEASE NOTE:** Due to the changes imposed by Welsh Government in relation to publishing education data, there is no available data for 2019/20. We are in the process of redefining our key performance indicators within the SOAP for Best Start; with this in mind, our SOAP has not been included as an appendix within this report. For members' information, a report

was presented to Cabinet on the 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020 outlining the changes to reporting education data ([Changes to Reporting of Performance Measures](#)).

5.2 The Annual Performance Report (APR) 2019/2020 provided an overview of the key corporate performance indicators. The judgement allocated for 2019/2020 was **Unsatisfactory**; this judgment relates to the impact of the Council's services/activities (the effect) rather than the effort put in to achieving impact (which we would judge as good).

Table 1 below includes the data as it appears in the Annual Performance Report, along with the reported data from the previous two years for context. As shown in Table 1, 67% (6 out of the 9) indicators reported in 2017/18 could not be reported in 2018/19 due to changes in Welsh Government legislation. Additionally, for 2019/20, attendance data could not be reported due to the impact of the covid-19 pandemic.

Table1

| Type of Indicator | Key Performance Indicator (KPI)   | 2017/18 | 2018/19 | 2019/20 |
|-------------------|---|---------|---------|---------|
| National          | % of pupils who achieve the Foundation Phase Outcome Indicator  | 89.1    | *       | *       |
| Local             | % of Flying Start children achieving Outcome 1 in all 4 areas within the Foundation Phase Compact on exit from childcare settings age | 52.0    | 47.0    | *       |
| National          | % of pupils who achieve the Core Subject Indicator at Key Stage 2   | 90.2    | *       | *       |
| National          | % of overall (half day sessions) pupil attendance in primary school   | 94.3    | 93.9    | **      |
| National          | % of pupils who achieve the Level 1 threshold   | 95.0    | ***     | ***     |
| National          | % of pupils who achieve the Level 2 threshold (English/Welsh & maths)   | 42.0    | ***     | ***     |
| National          | % of FSM eligible pupils who achieve the L2 threshold (English/Welsh & maths)   | 29.4    | ***     | ***     |
| National          | % of overall (half day sessions) pupil attendance in secondary school   | 93.0    | 91.8    | **      |
| National          | % of pupils looked after who achieve the L2 inclusive (English/Welsh & maths)   | 12.5    | ***     | ***     |

\* Due to changes in Welsh Government legislation, this data can no longer be published

\*\* This data is not available due to the impact of Covid-19

\*\*\* This data will no longer be reported by Welsh Government

As members will be aware the Capped 9 and average point scores were being introduced, although not yet in the Annual performance Report, to replace the threshold measures but as with the above these are not accessible.

5.3 The Council was required to develop a Recovery, Transformation and Improvement Plan with education outcomes identified as one of the priority areas for improvement. The plan sets out the steps the Council will take in order to improve standards of education; the key areas for improvement identified are categorised under five key themes:

- Raising Attainment;
- Raising Aspirations;
- Wellbeing of Pupils;
- Condition of Educational Settings; and
- Education Restructure.

A precis of the key activities included within the plans for Best Start has been included below for Committee members' information.

## Best Start: Improvement Priorities



Launch RARS Strategy and deliver on key objectives set out within the strategy



Continue to develop the role of the EPP with a focus on improving standards



Develop a challenge and accountability framework for Central South Consortium (CSC)



Continue to develop and implement programmes to support the wellbeing of our pupils



Restructure Education Services to establish further integrated working opportunities, and review the strategic approach to Education Services



Further develop the Business Education Training Partnership (BETP) to enhance learning and work opportunities for our young people

| Improvement Activities Undertaken  | Next Steps   |
|--|--|
| RARS Strategy has been approved at Full Council following a robust consultation process  | Deliver on the key objectives set out within the strategy; review progress through EPP, Learning Away Days and wider challenge/ focus groups   |
| An Education Partnership Panel has been developed in order to provide effective monitoring and strategic direction of education services with a key focus on improving standards                             | Continue to develop the role of the Education Partnership Panel (EPP) and set long-term plans for improvement  |
| Engagement with CSC in relation to curriculum development and curriculum recovery as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic   | Develop a robust challenge framework and establish accountability measures in relation to the support and contributions of CSC in delivering improved educational outcomes                       |
| Detailed programmes of support for schools, families, children and young people have been agreed and published. A Vulnerable Learners Panel (VLP) has also been developed to support wellbeing of our pupils | Build on existing platforms in support of the wellbeing of our pupils by working collaboratively with our key stakeholders; review the impact of the Education Welfare Service; and continue VLP |
| Additional resources have been secured with the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Service as part of the review and restructure of Education Services  | Review the strategic approach to Education Services in order to identify further opportunities to restructure services and establish further integrated working opportunities                    |
| A Business, Education and Training Partnership (BETP) has been developed to grow the connections between the business sector and Merthyr Tydfil's Education provision  | Develop a workstream to enable children and young people to have the opportunity to experience wider employment opportunities through partnership working  |

## **6.0 RESPONSE TO INFORMATION REQUEST OUTLINED BY THE COMMITTEE**

6.1 The Committee outlined in its Work Programme a requirement for officers to provide specific information in relation to progress made against the Best Start theme within the Corporate Plan. Committee members also required an update on the work undertaken by education services in response to ongoing pandemic; more specifically, how lessons learned will help inform and shape services going forward to ensure identified needs can continue to be met in safe and responsive ways.

### **Summary of Key Progress Activities to Date**

#### **6.2 Approval and publication of RARS Strategy**

Academic achievement across the County Borough has been variable with too many young people not achieving their academic potential. In response to this, and through discussions 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. These goals/ objectives have been captured within the recently approved and published, RARS Strategy.

The strategy sets out the key outcomes, activities and behaviours that the Council will pursue in support of our corporate priorities and a culture of continuous improvement. In support of the Council's, Corporate Wellbeing Plan (Focus on the Future 2017-2022), the RARS strategy will directly influence and impact on one of the Council's priorities of improving attainment. It aims to ensure that children and young people are well placed to move into adult life and employment or further/ higher education. Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council aims for effective learning and teaching throughout each young person's school experience to enable them to maximise their potential.

#### **6.2.1 Monitoring of the Strategy**

- Reports to the 'Learning and Local Government Education Services (LGES) Scrutiny Committee' will identify the links of actions to the Strategy.
- An annual report to Council will be presented outlining the current position of the Strategy.
- The EPP will receive termly update reports against priorities within the Strategy.
- The Strategy is supported by key action plans within the Learning Department, which are monitored through internal processes.
- Within the Council's own improvement processes, education has a number of key priorities to report on which are fundamentally linked to the Strategy.
- Termly performance meetings with CSC take place and the impact of actions to support the Strategy will form part of this meeting.

6.2.2 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.

#### **6.3 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools**

As part of our commitment to provide future generations of children and young people with the best start to life, we are working to promote attractive and stimulating learning environments based on low carbon, energy efficient and sustainable design principles through the delivery of our 21st Century Schools and capital investment programmes.

Working collaboratively with stakeholders including Planning, Property Services and external partners, our ambition is to provide the very best sustainable low maintenance and cost-effective learning environments.

As part of the capital investment proposals, we aim to deliver collocation of Early Year's education and childcare on school sites and to promoting the Welsh language by increasing the provision of school and childcare places through the medium of Welsh.

Condition surveys of priority education stock have begun and have been undertaken by CIPFA. In order to complete surveys across all education stock by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, we have costed a comprehensive programme with Estates and have requested budget growth in the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP). This will be the end of Year 3 of the new 5-year condition survey programme.

### **Summary of Key Activities in Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic**

- 6.4 The Coronavirus pandemic has, and is continuing to have, an unprecedented impact on our community, during which time we have had to endeavour to overcome the significant challenges; more specifically in relation to ensuring the continuation of teaching and learning for our children and young people.
- 6.5 Like most services throughout the Council, many of our Learning staff have had to adapt to new ways of working. We have and continue to engage in agile working, with meetings and committees being conducted via Microsoft Teams.
- 6.6 Throughout the lockdown period, we have provided and continue to provide effective support to our schools in conjunction with CSC to ensure the continuation of good, quality teaching and learning for our children and young people.
- 6.7 In response to the outbreak of Covid-19, school closures were enforced across the U.K. on the 20<sup>th</sup> March 2020 and the Education Minister announced the repurposing of schools as emergency childcare provision for critical workers and facilities for vulnerable learners.

By the 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020, the Learning Department set up six hub schools across the authority to support and facilitate emergency childcare provision.

- The six school hub arrangements stopped on June 22<sup>nd</sup> allowing schools to reopen for 'catch up' and 'check in' arrangements on June 29<sup>th</sup>
- From 22<sup>nd</sup> June – all schools provided their own childcare facility until the end of term (Admissions still managed centrally)
- Those children supported in childcare settings continued to access this provision.
- Additional support was provided through enabling access to community-based childcare settings. These arrangements included setting up a central, online Admissions Process and Panel.

Prior to re-opening in June, all schools were supported by the local authority Health & Safety Officers to revise their risk assessments and ensure they were appropriate in the current Covid 19 situation. These risk assessments were shared with Staff, Unions and Governors and have subsequently been re-adjusted for opening in September 2020 and the Spring Term 2021. Support was provided for schools to ensure that they were able to reopen buildings safely, and advice on managing spaces and movement around buildings was provided upon request.

6.8 For two weeks from 23<sup>rd</sup> March, the local authority facilitated free school meals deliveries across the County Borough. By the end of the two-week period, we had delivered approximately 7,779 meals and Welsh Government data confirmed that MTCBC ranked as the number 1 performing local authority for this particular activity. However, this process was very resource intensive and not all pupils received a packed lunch and so we adopted a new sustainable approach by providing supermarket vouchers to all parents, equivalent of £3.90 per day per child.

Since the 4<sup>th</sup> May we moved to a system of either direct payments or vouchers depending on choice (approximately 12% choosing vouchers). These payments ended on Friday 11<sup>th</sup> September when schools fully reopened but were continued for October half-term. Weekly payments have been ongoing since the pre-Christmas closure of schools w/c 14<sup>th</sup> December and will continue until the current lockdown ends and pupils return to school. Self-isolation payments due to class closures were also made throughout the Autumn Term. Welsh Government have funded the additional costs for all FSM payments over and above the local authority's budgeted costs to provide FSM.

Since lockdown the number of children eligible for FSM has increased by 18.5% as of November.

6.9 A wellbeing curriculum for 'Catch-up' & 'Check-in' - a pack of resources was developed for all primary schools with the Challenge Advisers and a group of Headteachers. CSC supported this and provided ongoing guidance on blended learning for schools.

The local authority has also provided schools with an online directory of support for wellbeing, and this has been shared on the HWB platform.

6.10 The local authority has worked closely with Headteachers and Challenge Advisers to develop a one-page report to parents that was used by all its schools and the PRU. This approach has been shared with other local authorities. Similarly, officers worked closely with pilot primary and secondary schools and the PRU to test 'readiness for opening' strategies looking at space, teaching capacity and the use of community bases and blended learning pedagogy in settings. This has resulted in an online consultation, sharing videos and photographs with other schools and the PRU to help them consider their own return to school arrangements.

6.11 Since the start of the new academic year, the local authority has begun to evaluate its response to the pandemic and consider whether the multi-disciplinary, multiagency arrangements that were successful can be refined to be more sustainable and linked to local need. For example, the Vulnerable Learner's Panel that was established in response to the first lockdown is considering whether their work could be realigned on a cluster basis to address localised challenges in an integrated way. This would be entirely in line with, the ambitions set out within the RARS strategy.

6.12 During the early autumn term, ESTYN were asked by Welsh Government to undertake a review of local authorities work in supporting their learning communities in schools and pupil referral units (PRUs) during the period from March to October 2020. Feedback from the review highlights a number of positive steps taken by the local authority in providing effective support to our schools and PRU's.



- 6.13 Following the initial lockdown and closure of schools in March, schools were once again forced to close for face-to-face delivery from the 15<sup>th</sup> December 2020; and at time of developing this report, a return date is yet to be announced. Reflecting on good practices, as well as lessons learned from the first lockdown, we have worked tirelessly with our schools to ensure that they continue to provide and deliver home learning activities during the school closure period. Pupil engagement in this has varied from school to school, however many schools adapted their approach to the delivery of this and advice and guidance from the CSC to support this work continues.
- 6.14 In this current lockdown, all schools are providing education support for children of critical workers and for identified vulnerable learners. Working with the Headteachers, the local authority and CSC have procured a set of principles for synchronous and asynchronous learning activities which schools are using. **PLEASE NOTE:** Ty Dysgu remains open for all pupils.
- 6.15 There is still too much variety in the delivery amongst our schools and improvement partners have been tasked with monitoring, not just delivery and engagement but also the impact of those of the activities on learning.

## **7.0 WHERE WE WANT TO BE**

- 7.1 It is the ambition of the local authority to be closer to or above the modelled outcomes in all performance measures by 2022, and at or above the modelled outcomes in 2024. However, given the changes in data publication, there is no way of measuring performance against Welsh averages, as Welsh Government is no longer publishing this data. Additionally, the collecting and publication of various measures including attendance data, has been suspended as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

## **8.0 WHAT WE NEED TO DO NEXT**

- 8.1 Ensure the continuation of good, quality teaching and learning through the lockdown period.
- 8.2 Deliver on the key objectives set out within the RARS Strategy by continuing to work collaboratively with schools, CSC and other key stakeholders.
- 8.3 Ensure schools focus on improving outcomes for all children in all age phases. This will be achieved through focussing on improving teaching and learning. The local authority, in partnership with the CSC, has continued to provide effective monitoring, challenge, support and intervention for all schools across the borough, which is bespoke to the needs of each school.
- 8.4 Ensure Flying Start providers continue to strive for excellent outcomes for all children. This will be achieved through clear action planning, training and support for all providers.
- 8.5 Continue to work with schools and Corporate Communications to promote the importance of attendance. Develop closer links with Families First to ensure parents are supported to focus on good attendance at school.
- 8.6 Continue to develop the School Support Service (incorporating Behaviour Support and Greenfield Outreach Service) in order to enhance the strategies used by schools to manage behaviour issues which could lead to exclusion.

## 9.0 CONTRIBUTION TO WELLBEING OBJECTIVES/WELLBEING GOALS

9.1 The improvement activities identified in this report directly contribute to our wellbeing objective:

**Best Start to Life:** Children and young people get the best start to life and are equipped with the skills they need to be successful learners and confident individuals.

9.2 The planned next steps for the Corporate Wellbeing Plan (Focus on the Future 2017-2022) and Tackling Poverty will ensure that the activities of the Learning Department will more robustly impact on the wellbeing objective:

**Working Life:** People feel supported to develop skills required to meet the needs of businesses, with a developing, safe infrastructure that establishes Merthyr Tydfil as an attractive destination.

**Living Well:** People are empowered to live independently within their communities, where they are safe and enjoy good physical and mental health.

9.3 With regards to the Council's contribution to the national wellbeing goals; this has been captured via a series of case studies, which can be found in the Annual Performance Report 2019-20 that was recently published in line with the statutory deadline.

**SUE WALKER**  
**CHIEF OFFICER, LEARNING**

**COUNCILLOR LISA MYTTON**  
**CABINET MEMBER FOR LEARNING**

| <b>BACKGROUND PAPERS</b>   |                             |                          |
|--|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>Title of Document(s)</b>  | <b>Document(s)<br/>Date</b> | <b>Document Location</b> |
|  |                             |                          |
|  |                             |                          |
|  |                             |                          |
| <b>Does the report contain any issue that may impact the Council's Constitution?</b> |                             | <b>No</b>                |

**Corporate Wellbeing Plan Focus on the Future:****Confirmed themes and wellbeing objectives.**

| <b>Theme</b>            | <b>Wellbeing Objective</b>  |
|-------------------------|---|
| Best Start              | Children and young people have the best start to life and are equipped with the skills they need to be successful learners and confident individuals.                       |
| Working Life            | People feel supported to develop the skills required to meet the needs of businesses, with a developing safe infrastructure making Merthyr Tydfil an attractive destination |
| Environmental Wellbeing | Communities protect, enhance and promote our environment and countryside  |
| Living Well             | People are empowered to live independently within their communities, where they are safe and enjoy good physical and mental health.   |