



CABINET – INFORMATION REPORT

Date Written	11 th June 2021
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Exempt/Non Exempt	Non-Exempt
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To: Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen

Merthyr Tydfil Adult Community Learning (ACL) Partnership

1.0 SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The report provides an update for members on the progress against the Estyn Post Inspection Action Plan and the impact of the pandemic on this progress identifying both benefits and drawbacks identified over the past 18 months across the partnership.
- 1.2 To update Members on the impact of the Welsh Government restructuring of Adult Community Learning Funding and the progress toward developing options for any future approach to an Adult Community Learning Regional Partnership which would be presented as a future report to Cabinet.

2.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Estyn inspection report on Merthyr Tydfil's Adult Community Learning (ACL) Partnership was formally published on 22nd May 2020 and detailed the inspection findings and recommendations, including the grading of each of the five key areas of the Common Inspection Framework (CIF);
- Standards - **GOOD***
 - Wellbeing and attitudes to learning - **GOOD**
 - Teaching and learning experiences - **GOOD**
 - Care, support and guidance. - **GOOD**
 - Leadership and Management - **ADEQUATE****

* **GOOD** – Strong features, although minor aspects may require improvement

** **ADEQUATE** – Strengths outweigh weaknesses, but important aspects require improvement.

2.2 Where an ACL Partnership has a judgment of **ADEQUATE**, Estyn make a follow up visit to monitor progress a year to eighteen months later; for the Merthyr Tydfil ACL Partnership this would have been scheduled for February or August 2021.

2.3 Following the Partnership review of the inspection report and the Estyn recommendations (below), a Post Inspection Action Plan (PIAP) was agreed.

1. *Strengthen partnership arrangements to ensure that all partners contribute coherently to informing and driving quality improvement across the partnership;*
2. *Improve the quality of teaching in ESOL lessons and the standards that learners achieve;*
3. *Increase the bilingual and Welsh medium provision and the use of Welsh across all learning areas;*
4. *Identify and share good practice in provision effectively across the partnership;*

2.4 Proposed Regional Partnership

The outcome of the Welsh Government (WG) consultation on the proposed changes to ACL was announced in late 2019 by the Minister for Education. In brief, the WG decision was to adopt a two-stage approach to the implementation of change, first to restructure the funding and bring planning of provision in line with further education and secondly to create a national strategic body for Adult Community Learning.

3.0 PROGRESS ON ACL POST INSPECTION ACTION PLAN (PIAP)

3.1 Due to, and throughout the pandemic, all Estyn inspections and follow up visits have been put on hold, and this decision remains in place with indications that inspection visits are not likely to re-commence until the Spring/Summer 2022. With core Estyn inspections on hold, and to maintain contact with the sector during the pandemic, Estyn inspectors have been conducting regular online engagement visits with ACL Partnerships across Wales. This has focused on key areas such as the challenges of the pandemic, learner mental health and wellbeing, teaching learning and assessment. These visits have provided an insight to the challenges faced by the sector and Partnerships, not only here in Merthyr Tydfil, but across Wales throughout the pandemic. The feedback and information collated has further evidenced the levels of stress and anxiety for both staff and learners, the poor access to IT for some learners, the training needs of staff to move to online approaches, the challenges of developing online delivery.

3.2 MTCBC continue to drive the ACL partnership agenda however like many other services, partners have had unique challenges to come to terms with and therefore this has impacted upon the progress of the PIAP. Early into the pandemic the ACL Partnership Steering Group meetings were moved, and remain online, with this format having a positive result in regard to attendance and engagement in general. Through a combination of the online meeting format, the Estyn engagement visits and a series of online Task and Finish groups the Partnership have been able to look at pandemic issues and renew their focus on the inspection recommendations and key actions set out in the PIAP. The following is a summary of progress toward inspection recommendations;

3.2.1 Strengthen partnership arrangements to ensure that all partners contribute coherently to informing and driving quality improvement across the partnership;

- Named strategic lead for each key recommendation from the following organisations, MTCBC, The College Merthyr Tydfil, Adult Learning Wales and Canolfa Soar.
- The principles of a Partnership annual quality assurance cycle which sets out the framework of key activities to support self-assessment, data collection and analysis, curriculum planning and learner voice and consultation agreed and being developed.
- Agreement on developing a system to collate and analyse safeguarding and learner complaints
- A review of the classroom observation process, in particular the online approach, and agreement to develop a cross peer observation format across the Partnership
- Agreement to develop baseline data across the Partnership on engagement and outcomes for purposes other than just Estyn inspections.

3.2.2 Improve the quality of teaching in ESOL lessons and the standards that learners achieve;

- Partnership agreement implemented to reduce the number of providers of ESOL from 3 to 2
- ESOL provision has been reviewed by the two Partnership providers, Adult Learning Wales and The College Merthyr Tydfil.
- A plan has been agreed which includes addressing the gaps in part time provision, and with the commitment to review and monitor.

3.2.3 Increase the bilingual and Welsh medium provision and the use of Welsh across all learning areas

- Links have been strengthened to the MTCBC Welsh Language Officer, which has benefited the Partnership in the development of resources and inclusion and promotion of Welsh Cultural events.
- Agreement has been made across the Partnership to audit the Welsh Language skills of staff and learners.
- Strategically, work ongoing to strengthen links to the Partnership, with support and contribution to the Welsh Language Strategy and the Welsh Education Forum.

3.2.4 Identify and share good practice in provision effectively across the partnership;

- An agreement in principle to develop a MT ACL Professional Practice Forum where staff and managers can learn from each other and Continue Professional Development (CPD) needs can be identified and a collaborative approach to training,
- Agreement to review and roll out the annual learner voice survey focussing on COVID recovery, and areas such as learners mental health and wellbeing, IT needs, preferred learning environment

- 3.3 The impact of the pandemic has undoubtedly influenced the Partnership outcomes and curriculum offer as providers struggled with the challenges of meeting the needs of delivery, staff and learners needs. The majority of providers efforts have rightly endeavoured to focus on maintaining engagement with learners and offer as much of their programme as possible. They have achieved this by developing keeping in touch strategies and a blended delivery offer where learners are able to access courses online, and where guidance has allowed attend face to face classroom learning.
- 3.4 Partnership feedback has indicated that learner enrolment levels for the majority of providers has decreased by over 50% during the pandemic and consequently has had a major impact on outcomes. However, this is not the case for all providers, there has been an increase in enrolments for online Welsh courses with learners enrolling from across Wales, the UK and World due to the increased accessibility. However, further analysis of this engagement is planned to establish the percentage of learners from Merthyr Tydfil.
- 3.5 With the recent lifting of the COVID restrictions and the opening up of community venues the move back to face-to-face learning in the community has started in small numbers. Early indications are that some learners want to continue their learning online and others are eager to get back into the classroom. This is particularly evident in the most vulnerable learners who enjoy, and benefit from the social interaction and peer support face to face delivery provides. Going forward Partners have indicated this blended approach of online and face to face learning will continue to be offered and, in some instances, further developed. However, this shift in delivery is a challenge as enrolment numbers are low and therefore will continue to be monitored across the partnership to identify the ongoing impacts.
- 3.6 Throughout the pandemic and as we emerge and work toward recovery, the curriculum offer has and continues to remain 'fluid' as Partners meet the needs of learners and the challenges of delivery. Some providers focussing on engagement type programmes targeting mental health and wellbeing, with one Partner (MTCBC) piloting an approach called 'Wellbeing Friday' where learners can access a six-week programme to develop strategies to deal with stress and anxiety. An exercise to evaluate and audit the curriculum offer across the Partnership is currently being undertaken.
- 3.7 Digital poverty has been an area of concern for the Partnership, as some learners struggle with online learning due to a lack of IT skills and access to IT equipment. Many Partners have focused on the delivery of IT skills and a small number have offered IT loan schemes. Monitoring of this area continues, with the recent rollout of a Digital Learner survey to gather data on learner and staff experiences and access to IT. This data is currently being collated for analysis.
- 3.8 To support the ACL sector, Welsh Government provided small revenue grants to each local authority to support staff training needs and mental health and wellbeing. In collaboration with Rhondda Cynon Taff and Bridgend, Merthyr Tydfil developed a regional Mental Health and Wellbeing project that focused on staff training needs, in particular blended and online learning approaches, and health and wellbeing for both learners and staff.

The training was offered across the Partnerships via a 'train the trainer' model and planning has taken place to cascade the learning. This regional approach was highlighted as a good practice model in one of Estyn Thematic Report was published in March 2021, https://www.estyn.gov.wales/system/files/2021-03/Learner_Mental_Health_and_Emotional_Wellbeing_in_the_Post-16_sectors_.pdf.

4.0 ADULT LEARNING – PROPOSED REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP UPDATE

- 4.1 WG have introduced the revised funding formula which benefitted Merthyr Tydfil. However due to the conditions of the grant (only 3% management and coordination) Merthyr Tydfil had to increase its investment into Adult Community Learning. In effect this increase in grant and the need for it to be used on delivery will see more learning opportunities for the residents of Merthyr Tydfil. It will however still need to be focused on the WG priorities of essential skills, IT and ESOL.
- 4.2 The proposed regionalisation of ACL partnerships to align with the Regional Skills Partnerships has been delayed due to the pandemic and understandably this has not been a high priority for a number of the organisations which need to be involved. A number of meetings have taken place between the three local authorities, Further Education Colleges and other stakeholders. However, to date attendance at the meetings has also impacted on the ability of partners to develop any detailed options or outline agreements on ways forward.
- 4.3 Partners have reviewed differing models across Wales and a questionnaire has been rolled out across the regional partners to gather views. This has led to two options being considered both of which would need detailed papers to be developed in order to decide any future direction of travel. These options are an In-kind partnership model where each partner leads on a key function for the partnership, or alternatively a funded centrally coordinated approach financially contributed to by all partners. Neither paper is currently developed and therefore the implications of any regional approach are not yet mapped out or known and due to the need to increase the involvement of the three colleges involved (Bridgend College/The College Merthyr Tydfil/ Coleg Y Cymoed) each local authority is now trying to initiate local discussions with the Colleges about their preferences.
- 4.4 As with the regional partnerships WG has not made any significant further progress on the national approach due to the pandemic, that we are currently aware of.

5.0 NEXT STEPS

- 5.1 Whilst in general good progress has been made in regard to developing and agreeing process and systems related to quality assurance during a very challenging period, there is a need now to instigate and embed the quality assurance cycle across the partnership and centralise the approach to the collection and analysis of data. A work stream has been agreed to gather and establish the curriculum offer, enrolment and outcomes data across the partnership.

- 5.2 With the onset of more classroom delivery, instigate peer observation format to support quality systems for teaching and learning and continuous professional development of staff, developing joint collaborative training opportunities, with a key focus on the needs of ESOL tutors.
- 5.3 Roll out of the Merthyr Tydfil ACL Professional Practice Forum, with an agreed terms of reference and annual events creating an arena for the sharing of good practice and shared partnership approach to staff CPD and training.
- 5.4 A developed centralised approach to the roll out and analysis of Learner Voice data, to establish needs and inform plans. Review of the Partnership Learner Voice Survey, focusing on the learner experience during the pandemic, mental health and wellbeing, IT needs and preferred learning style ie online/ face to face.
- 5.5 Implement the ESOL review findings, address the gaps in PT provision and establish performance data and training needs of staff.
- 5.6 Establish the Welsh language skills of staff and learners with the roll out of an audit across the Partnership. Contribute to and support the roll out of the Welsh language strategic development plans locally and improve links with all Welsh language providers to better understand the offer to Learners. Analyse the enrolment data for online Welsh courses.
- 5.7 Adult Learning – Proposed Regional Partnership in Merthyr Tydfil; Regional group to produce options papers which can be shared with Scrutiny and Cabinet that will allow an informed decision to be made regarding the impacts of any regional approach on the community of Merthyr Tydfil.

6.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

- 6.1 It has been identified that there are currently no financial implications associated with this report, but that there could be future financial risk associated with any future regional structures given the grant terms and conditions, however these will be detailed in future options proposals.

7.0 INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT

	Positive Impacts	Negative Impacts	Neutral/Not Applicable
1. Merthyr Tydfil Well-being Objectives	4 of 4	0 of 4	0 of 4
2. Sustainable Development Principles - How have you considered the five ways of working? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long term • Prevention • Integration • Collaboration • Involvement 	5 of 5	0 of 5	0 of 5

3. Protected Characteristics (including Welsh Language)	10 of 10	0 of 10	0 of 10
4. Socio-economic Disadvantage	6 of 6	0 of 6	0 of 6
5. Consultation and Engagement	Undertaken	Due to be Undertaken	Not Required
	1 of 1	0 of 1	0 of 1
6. Data and Evidence to inform the proposal	Yes		No
	1 of 1		0 of 1
7. Biodiversity and the resilience of Ecosystems	Maintained	Enhanced	Reduced
	1 of 1	0 of 1	0 of 1
Summary			
The main positive impacts are:	<p>No negative impacts have been identified against the Well-being Objectives, the Sustainable Development Principles and Biodiversity. The main positive impacts are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Well-being objectives- the proposal outlines and provides evidence that learners well-being is important and supported, there are good learning and training opportunities for citizen aged 16yrs plus. The skills and accredited learning provide the citizens of Merthyr Tydfil to gain employment and reach further educational goals such as further and higher education- increasing aspirations. Sustainable Development Principles the proposal outlines and provides evidence that safeguard the long-term educational needs of children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives. ACL has been developed within community groups and delivered working in partnership with key stakeholders in the County Borough. Protected Characteristics and Welsh language are that the proposal will provide access to arts and culture and will promote the use of the Welsh language and encourage people to use their Welsh skills when using Council services. Biodiversity the provision encourages awareness raising and understanding about the global world, impact of not recycling and diversity of plants and animals as part of its educational provision. 		
The main negative impacts are:	<p>No negative impacts have been identified against the Well-being Objectives, the Sustainable Development Principles and Biodiversity.</p>		

SUE WALKER
CHIEF OFFICER LEARNING

LISA MYTTON
LEADER OF THE COUNCIL
CABINET MEMBER FOR EDUCATION

BACKGROUND PAPERS		
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.