

FULL COUNCIL REPORT

Date Written	27 th March 2024
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Service Area	Learning
Exempt/Non Exempt	Non-Exempt
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RARS Strategy: Progress Update on Key Commitments

1.0 SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To provide an update on the progress on the Raising Aspirations, Raising Standards Strategy
- 1.2 Through self-evaluation activities, a review of National Government policy reform and discussions with stakeholders, a review of the language, key commitments and success measures has taken place. **(Appendix 1 Policy changes)**
- 1.3 The two overarching themes and five underlying goals remain appropriate to meet the current educational needs.
- 1.4 The language in both the body of the text and within the key commitments and success measures have been updated to reflect the current context and policy agenda.
- 1.5 timeline of milestones and a dashboard will allow greater levels of monitoring following feedback from the Inspectorate, Estyn.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS that

- 2.1 The progress to date be noted.
- 2.2 The updates to the Raising Aspirations, Raising Standards Strategy, 2021-2026 be approved.
- 2.3 The actions in section 6 be approved.

3.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Raising Aspirations, Raising Standards Strategy was approved by Council in 2020 and implemented in January 2021.
- 3.2 Reports to the Learning and Local Government Education Services (LGES) Scrutiny Committee' identify the links of actions to the Strategy.
- 3.3 A multi-agency Education Partnership Panel (EPP) chaired by Nick Batchelor, Welsh Government Advisor has overseen the progress of the Strategy.
- 3.4 The Strategy is supported by business plans within the Learning Department, which are monitored through internal processes.
- 3.5 Within the Council's own improvement processes, education has a number of key priorities to report on, which are fundamentally linked to the strategy.
- 3.6 Termly performance meetings with CSC take place and the impact of actions to support the Strategy will form part of this meeting.

4.0 REVIEW OF PROGRESS

- 4.1 Through internal self- evaluation processes, Business Improvement Plan mid- term evaluations, cross directorate and partner reports, as well as an evaluation of examination data, a review of the progress of the RARS has taken place.
- 4.2 This review indicates that appropriate progress is being made with the implementation of the Raising Aspirations, Raising Standards Strategy for Education.
- 4.3 The Education Service received a positive report from the Inspectorate Estyn in January 2022, with no follow-up. The report outlined that the RARS provides a clear and shared vision for Education in Merthyr Tydfil.
- 4.4 A range of multi-agency groups have been established to focus on key aspects of the RARS. These include areas such as literacy, business education partnership, whole school approach and community focused schools.
- 4.5 A range of activities/outputs to deliver the commitment to action have been carried out, with demonstrable outcomes visible across all Goals. **Appendix 2** provides a summary of progress for each goal.
- 4.6 Outcomes and standards at Key Stage 4 show an improving trend in a range of indicators. **Appendix 3** offers a progress overview of key indicators available, alongside the progress of the RARS. It should be noted that there is limited comparative data available as a result of new school improvement, evaluation and accountability guidance.
- 4.7 Since 2021, a minority of schools have been inspected, with many receiving positive outcomes. Around half of the schools inspected have been asked to submit effective practice case studies.

- 4.8 Children and young people's literacy and communication, numeracy, Welsh and digital skills are improving areas and continue to receive focused attention and support. Literacy and numeracy are a focus of all School Development Plans.
- 4.9 New approaches to understanding the progress of schools has been introduced in line with the School Improvement Guidance. School Development Plan (SDP) meetings take place with Headteachers and Chairs of governors to talk through their improvement priorities for the coming year and to discuss the self-evaluation evidence base on which the priorities were determined. These meetings have been productive and allowed all involved to have a greater understanding of the schools' self-evaluation and school improvement processes. Any concerns can be highlighted at an earlier opportunity and more timely and helpful support identified and brokered, as necessary. School Development Plans also reflect the priorities in the RARS.
- 4.10 A supportive review process, developed alongside Headteachers, has been introduced and has been positively received. This supports the LA to deepen its understanding of schools, especially where changes in leadership exist.
- 4.11 The CSCRARS support plan is bespoke to Merthyr Tydfil and focuses on the priorities within the RARS and common priorities within the school SDPs. Focused sessions take place with the Principal Improvement Partner to gain an understanding of schools' progress and Team Around the School sessions allow for a shared approach to improvement across all education teams. School Improvement Forums support improvement in schools where enhanced support is needed.
- 4.12 Partnership working, a key theme within the RARS, has been strengthened, with cross directorate working a key feature in its delivery. Examples of this include the Business Education Together Partnership, the Whole School Approach, The College, Merthyr Tydfil, Early Years providers. The results of these partnerships can be found in **Appendix 2/3**.
- 4.13 Relationship with Headteachers has been strengthened, with the establishment of a Strategic Headteacher forum, a review of the Schools' budget forum and a range of networks. This has led to a greater collaborative approach and ownership of continued improvement. The Strategic Headteacher forum have impacted directly on the Education Workplace Wellbeing Charter and the review of the RARS.
- 4.14 Cluster and collaborative working across the education workforce is a developing area, particularly linked to the curriculum. The Secondary Schools Deputy Heads network works effectively to support key areas of provision and standards. The ALN and ELSA forums provide an effective co-constructional professional learning model.
- 4.15 The impact of the pandemic continues to provide a range of challenges, in terms of educational attainment, attendance, wellbeing and attitudes to learning. Attendance figures in 2022/3 were 86.3% for secondary and unvalidated figures for primary were 91.1%. Within the secondary phase, the gap between Merthyr and Wales has narrowed to -1.2 percentage points and the overall positioning of the authority has improved 17/22. The LA attendance action plan has been a useful tool for the Education Welfare Service and the Family Liaison Officer network has effectively

shared practice to support families, with collaborative working with the Early Help Hub and Community Focused Schools team.

- 4.16 Persistent absenteeism has decreased in primary by 2 percentage points to 7.7% and slightly in secondary to 24%. There are now more systems, processes and focused plans in place to support schools in this area.
- 4.17 As the strategy is half-way through its lifespan, further time is still needed to see the impact of a range of commitment and evaluate their overall success in raising aspirations and raising standards.

5.0 REVIEW OF THE STRATEGY

- 5.1 Since the implementation of the RARS, there have been at least 11 national policy changes or updates.
- 5.2 A series of workshops and discussions with directorate teams, Headteachers, Scrutiny Members, EPP and MTBWYF were set up to consider whether the RARS remained fit for purpose.
- 5.3 These workshops identified the need for an update to the language within the strategy to reflect the current context and national policy changes. These updates are identified **Appendix 4** red.
- 5.4 To support the work is focused and timely, an overview timeline, with milestones, has been developed. **(Appendix 5)**
- 5.5 A dashboard, detailing the Commitments and Success Measures has been developed to support the monitoring process. **(Appendix 6a and 6b)**. This will be integrated into the business planning and self-evaluation processes of the directorate.
- 5.6 The EPP, Headteacher and multi-partnership groups have been refocused to ensure the actions drive the vision, goals and commitments within the RARS. **(Appendix 7)**

6.0 NEXT STEPS

- 6.1 On approval of the suggested changes to the strategy, the updated version will be shared with all stakeholders to support the next phase of implementation.
- 6.2 The dashboard will be integrated into the business planning and self-evaluation processes, allowing for more robust monitoring through the EPP and 'Learning and Local Government Education Services (LGES) Scrutiny Committee'.
- 6.3 An annual report to Council will be presented outlining the current position of the Strategy.

7.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 There are no financial implications.

8.0 INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT

	Positive Impacts	Negative Impacts	Neutral
1. Merthyr Tydfil Well-being Objectives	4 of 4	0 of 4	0 of 4
2. Sustainable Development Principles	5 of 5	0 of 5	0 of 5
3. Protected Characteristics (including Welsh Language)	1 of 10	0 of 10	9 of 10
4. Socio-economic Disadvantage	1 of 6	0 of 6	5 of 6
5. Decarbonisation	0 of 6	0 of 6	0 of 6
6. Biodiversity and the resilience of Ecosystems	Maintained	Enhanced	Reduced
	1 of 1	0 of 1	0 of 1
7. Consultation and Engagement	Undertaken	Due to be Undertaken	Not Required
	1 of 1	0 of 1	0 of 1
8. Data and Evidence	Yes	No	
	1 of 1	0 of 1	
Summary			
The main positive impacts are:	Progress within all area; improvement in outcomes for learners		
The main negative impacts are:	There are no negative impacts		

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BACKGROUND PAPERS		
Title of Document(s)	Document(s) Date	Document Location
Raising Aspirations Raising Standards	2021-2026 Original document	Education Department
Does the report contain any issue that may impact the Council's Constitution?		No

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