

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MUNICIPAL YEAR 2017-2018

**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Date: 22nd November 2017

**REPORT OF:
DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND
LIFELONG LEARNING**

Agenda Item No. 3

SEREN

**Author: - Stephen Parry Jones, Co-ordinator of the Seren Hub (RCT and Merthyr)
(Tel No: 01443 744001)**

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- To provide Members with an overview of the Seren Hub as it relates to post-sixteen students in Rhondda Cynon Taf.
- The report contains information on the background to the Hub, its achievements during its second cycle (2016/17), together with lessons learnt that may affect the current and subsequent cycles.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Members:

Scrutinise and comment on the information provided.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Seren Network was established by Welsh Government in response to the report by Lord Murphy of Torfaen (published 2013) on the declining numbers of Welsh students applying to, and gaining places at, the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge.
- 3.2 Lord Murphy's main recommendation was the establishment of a number of regional 'Hubs' that would draw in the most academically gifted Year 12 (Lower Sixth) students.
- 3.3 Students would be provided with extension activities of an academically rigorous nature, as well as receiving guidance in applying to the most competitive universities, principally "Sutton 30" (see Appendix 1).

- 3.4 The Rhondda Cynon Taf Hub was one of three initial pilots funded by Welsh Government, the other two being in Swansea and Wrexham.
- 3.5 Welsh Government selected Rhondda Cynon Taf on account of the work of the Oxbridge/MAT Working Group, established in Rhondda Cynon Taf.
- 3.6 Two Welsh Government officials, on secondment from Cambridge and Oxford Universities, saw activities run by the Working Group, and deemed them 'good practice'. They then made a recommendation to Welsh Government that Rhondda Cynon Taf develop one of the initial 'pilot' Hubs.
- 3.7 To ensure a Hub of viable size, it was recommended that students from Merthyr Tydfil join with Rhondda Cynon Taf to form a single Hub across the two local authorities.

4. PREPARATORY WORK

- 4.1 In 2015, a Coordinator was appointed following retirement from full-time teaching within the authority. The Coordinator has considerable experience over two decades of guiding students to Oxford, Cambridge and other leading universities, and is himself an Oxford graduate who has retained key links with the University.
- 4.2 A Memorandum of Understanding was drawn up, which was accepted by Welsh Government, and arrangements were made for the Hub to begin its work in September 2015.
- 4.3 Following the publication of GCSE results in August 2016, the Coordinator was able to invite some 130 students, who had gained four GCSE A* grades or more, to join the Hub. All RCT schools with sixth forms, Coleg y Cymoedd and Merthyr College fielded some students.

5. ACTIVITIES 2016/17

- 5.1 The Coordinator arranged over fifty academic extension classes between October 2016 and March 2017.
- 5.2 These encompassed Chemistry, English Literature, History, Law, Life Sciences, Medicine, Mathematics, Modern Languages and Physics.
- 5.3 Classes were taken in some instances by serving teachers and lecturers within the two LAs or by professionals with relevant experience, such as GPs and hospital consultants.
- 5.4 Most, however, were provided by lecturers and PhD students from the Universities of Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Oxford, South Wales and Swansea.
- 5.5 Classes took place at Coleg y Cymoedd, identified as the most central location, between 4.30 p.m. and 6.30 p.m. on Wednesday evenings.

- 5.6 Advice, support and guidance for those applying to competitive universities were provided by the Admissions Officer at Churchill College, Cambridge, who ran three separate sessions throughout the Hub's cycle. Teachers and parents also attended these events.
- 5.7 Students were introduced to useful bodies such as the Nuffield Trust, the Further Mathematics Support Programme for Wales, the Lord Edmund Davies Legal Educational trust and so forth, and encouraged to apply to these for placements.
- 5.8 They were also given guidance as to further reading, academic websites and university podcasts.
- 5.9 Hub students attended the Oxford and Cambridge Student Conference at the Liberty Stadium in Swansea in March 2017; in April and June students were taken to Oxford for an intensive tour of colleges, led by the Coordinator.

6. OUTCOMES

- 6.1 The first Hub cohort applied to university during the 2016-17 applications round.
- 6.2 Some 21 students applied to Oxford or Cambridge, fewer than the previous cycle, although a marginally higher percentage (70% as compared with 62%) was called for interview following the preliminary tests. Four applicants received offers, and one pupil made the Cambridge winter pool, i.e. a very near miss. This represents a success rate of just 20%, the average for Oxford being 18%.
- 6.3 One successful student (Law at Oxford) was interviewed for a BBC Wales news bulletin, and attributed her decision to apply to Seren's influence and the encouragement she received.
- 6.4 It was especially pleasing that one student gained a place at Yale University, with a full fees package.
- 6.5 A number of pupils of the requisite ability chose different academic pathways, maybe choosing degree courses not offered at Oxford or Cambridge; pleasingly, they have made these decisions on an informed basis.
- 6.6 The range of universities at which students accepted places appears much broader than in previous years: for example, pupils have begun courses in Medicine at UCL, Biochemistry at Imperial College, the Master of Physics courses at Manchester and Warwick, the Master of Mathematics at Durham, all of which are competitive in the extreme. A full list of university destinations should be available for the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee meeting.

- 6.7 It was pleasing to see a very high number of students take up places at Bristol University, an institution often seen by RCT students as socially exclusive.
- 6.8 This suggests that there are cautious grounds for optimism that the Seren scheme is raising aspirations and student self-belief.
- 6.9 It was particularly pleasing that the Nuffield Foundation accepted a high number of Rhondda Cynon Taf students on its intensive summer programme.
- 6.10 One student also gained an internship in Grays Inn through the Lord Edmund Davies Legal Educational trust.
- 6.11 Two students from the first cohort spoke at the launch events of the Cardiff and Vale of Glamorgan Hubs.

7. AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

- 7.1 Closer monitoring of registers to maximise attendance is being undertaken, with schools informed immediately of any absentees.
- 7.2 Greater involvement of parents/carers, both at launches and subsequent events is also underway.
- 7.3 Implementing a programme of mock interviews for those aspiring to medical, veterinary and dental school. (This is currently being developed in conjunction with Cardiff Medical School.)

8. CONTINUING SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS 'POST-HUB'

- 8.1 The Coordinator has arranged preparation for university tests; this was delivered in October by an Access Fellow from the University of Oxford, and in September (for Medicine) by a retired Headteacher.
- 8.2 Practice interview sessions for aspiring medical and dental students (see above) have been arranged for November in conjunction with Cardiff Medical School.

9. CONCLUSION

- 9.1 The Hub's activities have been evaluated by an independent company appointed by Welsh Government. The coordinator will take careful note of any recommendations when the report is issued in December.
- 9.2 The Seren Hub's role is now to build upon this; there are clear signs that its work is valued by schools, colleges and students, and that all providers of post-sixteen education in Rhondda Cynon Taf are committed to its success.

- 9.3 As noted in the report for Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee last year, the Hub is as yet in its infancy; the effect of its work, principally in 'normalising' high aspirations, is unlikely to be immediate, given the many difficulties identified in Lord Murphy's 2013 report. No-one as yet feels that we have attained the ideal.
- 9.4 However, growth will, as one adviser from Oxford University put it, be 'organic and incremental.' Another adviser, again from Oxford, urged us to build something 'achievable and sustainable' in our first year. There are grounds for thinking that we have done this.
- 9.5 The support of officials within the authority, the Welsh Government and the universities, has been of immense value in helping the Seren Hub attain its vision for our brightest students.

Appendix 1**Definition of Sutton 30 Universities**

In 2000, the Sutton Trust created a list of 13 UK universities which are research-intensive and ranked highest based on the average rankings of surveys by [The Daily Telegraph](#), [The Times](#), [The Financial Times](#) and [The Sunday Times](#). The universities are regarded as the UK's "most prestigious, elite" and "most selective" universities offering around 30,000 places annually. The 13 universities are used as a benchmark for monitoring social mobility by academics, educational organizations and the government. Graduates from the 13 universities are expected to "earn on average £4,300 per year (17%) more than graduates from [post-1992 universities](#), and are 12 percentage points more likely to be in professional employment" 5 years after graduation.

In 2011, the Trust updated its methodology to include the 30 "most highly selective" British universities, which were "also the 30 most selective according to the Times University Guide" for the purpose of illustrating the relative number of students from poor backgrounds enrolled here against the rest of the institutions.^[21] These are, in alphabetical order:

[University of Bath](#), [University of Birmingham](#), [University of Bristol](#), [University of Cambridge](#), [Cardiff University](#), [Durham University](#), [University of Edinburgh](#), [University of Exeter](#), [University of Glasgow](#), [Imperial College](#), [King's College London](#), [University of Lancaster](#), [University of Leeds](#), [University of Leicester](#), [University of Liverpool](#), [London School of Economics](#), [University of Manchester](#), [University of Newcastle](#), [University of Nottingham](#), [University of Oxford](#), [University of Reading](#), [Royal Holloway](#), [University of London](#), [University of Sheffield](#), [University of Southampton](#), [University of St Andrews](#), [University of Strathclyde](#), [University of Surrey](#), [University College London](#), [University of Warwick](#) and [University of York](#).

Appendix 2

From Churchill College, Cambridge's Website:

Cambridge prepares South Wales teenagers for success

Widening Participation Officer — [Dr Jonathan Padley](#), originally from Swansea, has just completed a week-long tour of South Wales to inspire 875 teenagers to enter top universities.

Ceri Richmond, Assistant Headteacher, Y Pant Comprehensive School (Rhondda Cynon Taf) said:

"Locally, we see students who're very bright but sometimes don't have strong aspirations. Having the Seren Network as part of their lives has let some of them come back with a totally renewed attitude. Coming to these sessions and being involved with other students who are of the same calibre, lets them debate and talk through subject areas. Seeing Jonathan as a Welsh boy, having the credibility of coming from Cambridge, reiterating the messages that we give them - I think we're actually breaking down barriers. I've already had students saying "I didn't think it was for me but now I think it is", and being so enthusiastic ever since."

One of Ceri's students, Hannah Mealey, said:

"This programme has been one of the most helpful things I've ever done. It's given me insight into how to write a personal statement and how to behave at interview - I was worried about how it'd be, but it's not as daunting as it seems. Seren has been amazing. If it wasn't for Seren, I wouldn't even be applying for Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic — I wouldn't have known it even existed."

This page intentionally blank