

**RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**MUNICIPAL YEAR 2018-2019**

**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE  
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**Date: 23<sup>RD</sup> JANUARY 2019**

**REPORT OF:  
DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND  
INCLUSION SERVICES**

**Agenda Item No. 2**

**SEREN**

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**1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an overview of the Seren Hub as it relates to students in Rhondda Cynon Taf.

The report contains information on the background to the Hub, its achievements during its second cycle (2017/18), together with lessons learnt that may affect the current and subsequent cycles.

**2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that Members:

- 2.1 Scrutinise and comment on the information contained within this report.
- 2.2 Consider if any further information is required.

**3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

To raise Members' awareness of the Seren Hub in Rhondda Cynon Taf and its impact on learner outcomes.

**4. BACKGROUND**

- 4.1 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.
- 4.2 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.

- 4.3 Students would be provided with extension activities of an academically rigorous nature, as well as receiving guidance in applying to the most competitive universities.
- 4.4 The Rhondda Cynon Taf Hub was one of three initial pilots funded by Welsh Government, the other two being in Swansea and Wrexham.
- 4.5 Welsh Government selected Rhondda Cynon Taf on account of the work of the Oxbridge/More Able and Talented (MAT) Working Group, established in Rhondda Cynon Taf under the chairmanship of Mr Stuart Tucker, then Headteacher of Y Pant Comprehensive School. The present Hub co-ordinator assumed role of Chair on Mr Tucker's retirement.
- 4.6 Two Welsh Government officials, on secondment from Cambridge and Oxford Universities, had seen 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.
- 4.7 To ensure a Hub of viable size, it was recommended that Merthyr Tydfil LA join with Rhondda Cynon Taf to form a single Hub.

## **5. PREPARATORY WORK**

- 5.1 In 2015, the present co-ordinator was invited to assume this role on his eventual retirement from fulltime teaching within the authority.
- 5.2 He had had 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.
- 5.3 The co-ordinator drew up a Memorandum of Understanding, which was accepted by Welsh Government, and made arrangements for the Hub to begin its work in September 2015.
- 5.4 Following the publication of GCSE results in August 2017, the co-ordinator 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, and Coleg y Cymoedd and Merthyr College, fielded some students.

## **6. ACTIVITIES 2016-17**

- 6.1 The co-ordinator arranged over fifty academic extension classes between October 2017 and March 2018.

- 6.2 These encompassed Chemistry, English Literature, History, Law, Life Sciences, Medicine, Mathematics, Modern Languages and Physics.
- 6.3 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.
- 6.4 Most, however, were provided by lecturers and PhD students from the Universities of Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Oxford, South Wales and Swansea.
- 6.5 Classes took place at Coleg y Cymoedd, identified as the most central location, between 4.30 and 6.30p.m. on Wednesday evenings.
- 6.6 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.
- 6.7 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 were encouraged to apply to these for placements.
- 6.8 They were also given guidance as to further reading, academic websites and university podcasts.
- 6.9 Almost all schools sent students to the Seren National Conference in Newtown, Powys, at which some twenty leading universities were present, along with organizations such as the Fulbright Commission, Brilliant Club and so forth.
- 6.10 Hub students attended the Oxford and Cambridge Student Conference at the Liberty Stadium in Swansea in March 2018; in June students were taken to Oxford for an intensive tour of colleges, led by the co-ordinator, and many also attended a residential Open day at St Catherine's College, Cambridge. Other students attended an event at Bristol University that was specifically arranged for Seren students.
- 6.11 Three of our Seren students gained places, along with thirteen youngsters from other parts of Wales, on the Yale Young Scholars programme. Another three were selected for the Jesus College, Oxford summer school. Other students attended summer schools in the USA, including Princeton and MIT, and the UK.
- 6.12 It was particularly pleasing that the Nuffield Foundation accepted a high number of Rhondda Cynon Taf students on its intensive summer programme.

6.13 One student also gained an internship in Grays Inn through the Lord Edmund Davies Legal Educational trust.

## **7. OUTCOMES**

### **7.1 Oxford and Cambridge applications:**

7.1.1 Some 29 students applied to Oxford or Cambridge, nine more than in the previous cycle.

7.1.2 Five offers were received – roughly 18% of those who applied, a figure very much in line with the UK picture as a whole. One student was also pooled for Cambridge: had he succeeded, the success rate would have been 21%.

7.1.3 Successful students came from a different group of schools compared with the previous cycle, suggesting a range of schools are experiencing success.

7.1.4 Another positive feature is the high proportion of students progressing to the interview stage following university tests: some 71% in the Humanities, as compared with a national picture of 56%, were interviewed. Both applicants for Medicine received interviews – only some 450 were selected from 1660 applicants – for a mere 150 places.

7.1.5 One successful student (Philosophy at Oxford) was interviewed for the BBC Wales programme 'The Hour', and attributed her decision to apply to Seren's encouragement. Another student (PPE at Oxford) was featured on S4C.

7.1.6 Those who were not successful invariably received offers from other leading universities – Durham and Imperial College proving particularly popular.

7.1.7 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.

### **7.2 Other university destinations (please see Appendices 1 and 2 for definitions and details)**

7.2.1 A high proportion went on to the most competitive universities: Sutton 13 – 27.4% and Sutton 30 – 69%.

7.2.2 While Cardiff attracts a good proportion of Seren students, leading West Country Universities – Bath, Bristol and Exeter – remain especially popular.

7.2.3 Southampton and Birmingham were more prominent this cycle.

- 7.2.4 North of England universities were also more in evidence, including Newcastle, Sheffield and York, in addition to Manchester and Liverpool.
- 7.2.5 For London, the numbers were not high, but two went to King's College London and three to Imperial College.
- 7.2.6 Scottish + Northern Irish universities were not prominent (though Vet Med at Glasgow – Merthyr College – a pleasing outcome).
- 7.2.7 Among non-Sutton 30 universities, Swansea remains the most favoured destination.

## **8. AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT**

- 8.1 Closer monitoring of registers to maximise attendance is being undertaken, with schools informed immediately of any absentees.
- 8.2 Greater involvement of parents/carers, both at launches and subsequent events is also underway.
- 8.3 Co-operation with other Hubs was one of the independent evaluator's recommendations, and the Rhondda Cynon Taff Hub has taken a lead here, being awarded an additional £3,500 for work undertaken in this respect.

## **9. CONTINUING SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS 'POST-HUB'**

- 9.1 The Co-ordinator arranged preparation for university tests; this was delivered in October by an Access Fellow and students from the University of Oxford.
- 9.2 He was also asked by Welsh Government to take the lead in guiding students in other parts of Wales through the Law Aptitude Test (LNAT).
- 9.3 Practice interview sessions for aspiring medical and dental students took place in November in conjunction with Cardiff Medical School, and also for Oxbridge candidates.

## **10. SEREN – PRE-16**

- 10.1 Welsh Government announced plans in September 2018 to extend Seren to pupils in Key Stages 3 and 4, and Hubs were invited to submit proposals.
- 10.2 The co-ordinator duly submitted a work plan, and the Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Hub was awarded £55,500 to March 2020. A report on activities will be made to the next Scrutiny Committee meeting.

## **11. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS**

An Equality Impact Assessment is not required as the contents of this report are for information purposes only.

**12. CONSULTATIONS**

No consultation exercises have been undertaken.

**13. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no financial considerations for the Council.

**14. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED**

There are no legal implications aligned to this report.

**15. LINKS TO THE COUNCILS CORPORATE PLAN/CORPORATE PRIORITIES/SIP**

Educational performance has a clear link to the Council's priority of Building a Strong Economy. Improved educational performance will have a positive impact on this priority.

**16. CONCLUSION**

- 16.1 The Seren Hub's role is now to build upon its initial success; many students, now at leading universities, are generous in attributing their progression to Seren's encouragement and support, there are clear signs that Seren is valued by schools, colleges and parents.
- 16.2 All schools in Rhondda Cynon Taf, no matter how challenging their intake, have seen their pupils gain places on the most competitive of degree courses; the challenge will be to maintain this momentum.

**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.<sup>[21]</sup> 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

<b>RCT/Merthyr school or college</b>	<b>Number of Seren students</b>	<b>Sutton 30</b>	<b>Sutton 30 other than Cardiff</b>	<b>Other relevant information</b>
Aberdare Community	6	6	2 Bristol; 1 Warwick	
Bryncelynnog	6	5	Exeter; Imperial; York	1 unwell; deferred A levels
Cardinal Newman/ Cymoedd/	12	8	Imperial; Leicester; Manchester; Oxford; Surrey	2 non-Sutton 30; 1 no info
Hawthorn	3	3	Oxford	
Merthyr College	11	6	Durham; Glasgow (Vet Med); 2 Southampton (inc 1 Medicine)	2 non-Sutton 30; 1 Art Fnd; 2 no info
Mountain Ash	3	2		(1 Medicine-Cardiff); 1 non-Sutton 30
Pontypridd HS	6	4	Birmingham; Bristol; Southampton	2 non-Sutton 30
St Johns	8	4 (+2 previous cycle)	Bristol; Imperial; Oxford; York	3 non-Sutton 30; 1 gap year
Tonyrefail	7	4	2 Bath Warwick	3 non-Sutton 30
Treorchy	7	5		2 non-Sutton 30
Y Pant	25	24	6 Bath; 2 Birmingham; Durham; KCL; Leeds; Sheffield; Reading; Southampton	1 gap year
YG Cwm Rhondda	3	3	Exeter; KCL; Newcastle	
Y G Garth Olwg	6	4	2 Bath; Durham; Oxford	1 gap year; 1 non-Sutton

<b>RCT/Merthyr school or college</b>	<b>Number of Seren students</b>	<b>Sutton 30</b>	<b>Sutton 30 other than Cardiff</b>	<b>Other relevant information</b>
Y G Rhydywaun	9	7	Bath; Bristol; LSE; Nottingham	2 non-Sutton 30
Y G Llanhari	6	5	Birmingham; Bristol (inc 1 Medicine); Exeter; Liverpool	1 gap year
Porth County	2	2	Cambridge*	*reapplying 2019
<b>Total (excl. missing data)</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>59</b>	