

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MUNICIPAL YEAR 2016-2017

**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Date: 28th NOVEMBER 2016

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

Agenda Item No. 5

SEREN

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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 first cycle in the academic year 2015/16, 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.

- 3.4 The Rhondda Cynon Taf Hub is 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/More Able and Talented (MAT) Working Group, which was well 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. To ensure a Hub of viable size, it was recommended that Merthyr Tydfil LA join with Rhondda Cynon Taf to form a single Hub.

4. PREPARATORY WORK

- 4.1 A co-ordinator with senior leadership experience in a secondary school was appointed in 2015. In addition, the co-ordinator 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 and accepted by the Welsh Government for the Hub to begin its work in September 2015. Following the publication of GCSE results in August 2015, 130 students who had gained four GCSE A* grades or more were invited to join the Hub. All schools in RCT, Coleg y Cymoedd and Merthyr College provided students.

5. ACTIVITIES 2015-16

- 5.1 Over fifty academic extension classes took place between October 2015 and March 2016. These encompassed Chemistry, English Literature, History, Law, Life Sciences, Medicine, Mathematics, Modern Languages and Physics.
- 5.2 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. Most, however, were provided by lecturers and PhD students from the Universities of Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Oxford, South Wales and Swansea.
- 5.3 Classes took place at Coleg y Cymoedd, identified as the most central location for students to attend between 4.30 and 6.30 p.m. on Wednesday evenings.
- 5.4 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.

- 5.5 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, etc. and encouraged to apply to these for placements. Students were also given guidance as to further reading, academic websites and university podcasts.
- 5.6 Hub students attended the Oxford and Cambridge Student Conference at the Liberty Stadium in Swansea in March 2016 and in June students were taken to Oxford for an intensive tour of colleges.
- 5.7 In December 2015, BBC Wales came to film the Hub's classes in connection with its 'Week In, Week Out' series.
- 5.8 The Co-ordinator was asked by the University of South Wales to deliver a keynote address on Oxbridge applications at its 2016 Sixth Form Advisers' Conference.

6. CURRENT POSITION

- 6.1 The first Hub cohort is in the process of applying for university places in the 2016-17 applications cycle.
- 6.2 Welsh Government has stated that its key performance measure will be the number of students gaining entry to the leading "Sutton 30 Universities." (See *Appendix 1*)
- 6.3 Data for this will be available in September 2017, when A level grades are published and university places confirmed.
- 6.4 However, it is pleasing that some 24 students from both authorities (21 from Rhondda Cynon Taf, and 3 from Merthyr) have applied to Oxford or Cambridge in the current cycle. These include three students from schools that not have fielded Oxbridge applicants in the last three years.
- 6.5 A number of pupils of the requisite ability have chosen different academic pathways, maybe choosing degree courses not offered at Oxford or Cambridge but, pleasingly, they have made these decisions on an informed basis. At least one student is applying to leading American universities.
- 6.6 It was particularly pleasing that the Nuffield Foundation accepted 17 Rhondda Cynon Taf students on its intensive summer programme. This group comprised 21% of the total number on the programme, the largest from any authority in South East Wales.

- 6.7 Two students from the first cohort have been invited to speak at the launch events of the Cardiff and Vale of Glamorgan Hubs.

7. AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

- 7.1 Work with parents and carers, especially on the financial implications of attending a competitive university, needs to be developed; evening sessions run by a university official with the relevant experience are envisaged.
- 7.2 Closer monitoring of registers to maximise attendance is being undertaken, with schools informed immediately of any absentees.
- 7.3 More systematic evaluation of extension classes and other events needs to be developed; at present, student feedback, though often highly complimentary (see Appendix 2 and 3), is qualitative and anecdotal rather than quantitative.
- 7.4 Fuller engagement with the *Futures First* charity, which fosters links between schools and high performing alumni, is underway.
- 7.5 Engagement with the *Brilliant Club* charity has begun.
- 7.6 Information and guidance on applying to leading American universities, which has seen a rise in the UK as a whole, will be offered in conjunction with the Sutton Trust.
- 7.7 Welsh Government has suggested extra funding to promote industrial links; we have yet to receive full details, but engagement with other Central South Consortium Hubs on such a programme is envisaged.

8. CONTINUING SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS 'POST-HUB'

- 8.1 Welsh Government recommended that the Hub dovetail with, rather than replace, the original Rhondda Cynon Taf Oxbridge/ MAT Working Group. The Coordinator remains active in this group, and arranges preparation for university tests and Oxbridge mock interviews.
- 8.2 This programme is now well established and has seen the number of successful Rhondda Cynon Taf applicants to Oxford and Cambridge increase in recent years from three in 2014 to eight in 2016. Many unsuccessful applicants go on to leading universities, such as Bath, Durham, Edinburgh, LSE and UCL, as well as to Cardiff and other Welsh universities.
- 8.3 The current group of applicants will take part in mock interviews in late November.

9. CONCLUSION

- 9.1 The original Rhondda Cynon Taf working party had begun to prove its worth by increasing the number of successful Oxbridge applications prior to the Hub's establishment.
- 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 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 schools, LA officers, 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

Seren Hub – Discussion with Treorchy Pupils – 8th July 2016

Pupils were from three subject steams: Medicine, Life Sciences and Humanities. (Two had been invited to speak at the launch of the Cardiff Hub, where they had commented very enthusiastically about the RCT/ Merthyr programme.)

1) What they felt had gone well

- Skilled speakers (Dr Maguire) involved whole group in confronting difficult issues (Medicine)
- Awareness of possibilities of subject beyond 'A' level became apparent in unexpected ways (Life Sciences, Medicine)
- Excellent preparatory materials produced by Dr Mortimer, Oxford (Life Sciences)
- Confidence enhanced by realization that 'A' level knowledge could be applied to unfamiliar problems, e.g. neuro-science (Dr Hrastelj, Medicine)
- Unfamiliar aspects of the subject – i.e. the super-curricular – aroused interest (Early human Archaeology, Post-war popular culture and politics) – Life Sciences
- Encouraged to think more ambitiously about university choices (all subjects); one (Life Sciences) would not have done so without Hub
- Enjoyment of being with pupils of similar motivation (all subjects)
- Becoming more relaxed about speaking within a group (all subjects)
- Became aware of opportunities for super-curricular activities – Nuffield Foundation, What's Appening etc.
- Lecturers spoke of own educational journey, encouraging students to see highly ambitious goals as achievable.

2) Areas they felt needed developing

- More advance information on relevant website
- Use of Moodle/ Facebook/Twitter to link Hub students
- More extended reading ideas as follow up to sessions
- Guidance on university finance
- Greater awareness of elite universities other than Oxbridge.

I was most grateful to the pupils for their thoughtful, well expressed comments, and also to Mrs Joanna Murray of Treorchy Comprehensive School for facilitating the discussion. In consequence, I am clear as to additional facets of the programme I will need to work on during the next cycle.

Stephen Parry-Jones
July 2016

Appendix 3

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."