



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MUNICIPAL YEAR 2021/2022

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

16TH FEBRUARY 2022

SEREN

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

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(Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil LEAs)**

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 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.
- 1.2 The report contains information on the background to the Hub and its achievements during its sixth cycle (2020/21), 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

- 3.1 To raise Members' awareness on the delivery of the provision of the Seren Network.

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 coordinator 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.
- 4.8 In 2018, the Welsh Government decided to extend Seren activities to younger pupils in Years 8 to 11. Henceforth, the term 'Seren Academy' should be used for the sixth form strand of Seren, while 'Seren Foundation' would denote work with younger students.

5. PREPARATORY WORK

- 5.1 In 2015, the present coordinator was invited to assume this role on his eventual retirement from full-time teaching within the LA.
- 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 coordinator 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 2020, the coordinator was able to invite some 170 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 2020-21 – SEREN ACADEMY

- 6.1 The coordinator arranged over thirty academic extension classes between October 2020 and March 2021.
- 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 Before the pandemic, classes had taken place at Coleg y Cymoedd, identified as the most central location, between 4.30 and 6.30p.m. on Wednesday evenings. Owing to COVID-19, classes had moved online, and were delivered through Microsoft Teams. The coordinator sat in on all classes as a safeguarding measure.
- 6.6 Advice, support and guidance for those applying to competitive universities are traditionally provided by the Admissions Officer at Churchill College, Cambridge, who usually runs three separate sessions throughout the Hub's cycle. Teachers and parents also attend these events. Since the onset of the pandemic, a number of partner universities, including Cardiff, Oxford, Cambridge, Bristol and Exeter, have provided webinars and other online events to ensure that this aspect of Seren provision was maintained as far as possible.
- 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 Social Mobility Foundation, and were encouraged to apply to these for placements. Provision here was online, but students seem to have appreciated the enrichment offered by these organisations.
- 6.8 Some schools invited the coordinator to meet online with year 12 students. He was able to give very specific guidance as to further reading, useful academic websites and university podcasts.
- 6.9 Before the pandemic, almost all schools and colleges had sent students to the Seren National Conference in Newtown, Powys, at which some

twenty leading universities were present, along with organisations such as the Fulbright Commission, Brilliant Club and so forth. Welsh Government, through Cazbah Educational, provided an online version of the conference, which students could access either live or via recordings which were made available on the Seren Network social media sites.

- 6.10 Traditionally, students attend the Oxford and Cambridge Student Conference at the Liberty Stadium in Swansea every March; a version of the conference was provided online.
- 6.11 No visits to other universities were possible, but 'virtual' tours and open days were notified to students and parents.
- 6.12 Immediately before the pandemic, three of our Seren students gained places, along with thirteen youngsters from other parts of Wales, on the Yale Young Scholars programme. Another seven were selected for the Jesus College, Oxford summer school. Other students attended summer schools in the USA, including Boston, Princeton and MIT, and the UK. Again, these summer schools were forced to move online, but students, despite any disappointment at not being able to visit the USA or UK universities, found the experience rewarding.
- 6.13 An internship was secured in Grays Inn through the Lord Edmund Davies Legal Educational Trust and another through the new initiative set up by Legal Wales, which works with solicitors' firms in Cardiff.
- 6.14 Through links established by the coordinator with the Royal College of General Practitioners (Wales), applicants for Medicine and Dentistry were able to access a day of online advice and guidance from practising doctors. This replaced the traditional daylong event held at Coleg y Cymoedd.

7. OUTCOMES

7.1 Oxford and Cambridge applications:

- 7.1.1 Some 30 students applied to Oxford or Cambridge.
- 7.1.2 Seven offers were received – roughly 23% of those who applied, a figure above the UK average of 17-18%.
- 7.1.3 Successful students came from a different group of schools compared with the previous cycle, suggesting that a range of schools have now experienced 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%.

- 7.1.5 Welsh Government has featured a number of successful Rhondda Cynon Taf students now at Oxford in its social media pages.
- 7.1.6 Those who were not successful invariably received offers from other leading universities – Bristol, Durham, London and Warwick Universities 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 Appendix 1 for definitions and details):**
- 7.2.1 In 2020, a high proportion went on to the most competitive universities: Sutton 13 – 27.4% and Sutton 30 – 69%. Information on university destinations in 2021 will be available in the next report.
- 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 University College London and three to Imperial College.
- 7.2.6 Scottish and Northern Irish universities were not prominent (though Veterinary Medicine at Glasgow – Merthyr College – was a pleasing outcome).
- 7.2.7 Students were accepted at a range of medical schools. While Cardiff retained its popularity, students also took up places at Bristol, Exeter and Plymouth.
- 7.2.8 Among non-Sutton 30 universities, Swansea remains the most favoured destination.
- 7.2.9 A fully funded place was also secured at Rochester University in New York State.
- 7.2.10 Students who have enrolled in the most competitive universities appear to have flourished. None has withdrawn from Oxford or Cambridge. Two students have gained 1st class honours degrees at Oxford, two at London University (LSE and QMC) and one at Birmingham.

8. AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

- 8.1 Ensure that the online extension classes, while these remain, are as challenging as those delivered face to face and that pupils are not mere passive recipients.
- 8.2 Ensure that student morale remains high during the Seren cycle so that ambitious applications do not decline. (As at 15th October 2021, some 44 students had made applications through UCAS to Oxford or Cambridge, the highest number so far.)
- 8.3 Further support for students who have to sit the most challenging university tests, in particular those required for medical, law and science degrees.
- 8.4 Support Heads of Sixth, especially those new to the role, through appropriate CPD events, using links with partner universities.
- 8.5 Promote high level academic competitions – Mathematics and Physics Olympiads, university sixth form prizes, etc.

9. CONTINUING SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS 'POST-HUB'

- 9.1 The coordinator arranged preparation for university tests; these were delivered in June by Further Mathematics Support (Wales), recent graduates, and educational consultants. These were supplementary to the online provision offered by Welsh Government.
- 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 traditionally take place in November in conjunction with Cardiff Medical School, and also for Oxbridge candidates. The coordinator was able to ensure that an online webinar event, hosted by Cardiff Medical School, took place and that individual mock interviews were arranged for other applicants.

10. SEREN FOUNDATION

- 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 coordinator duly submitted a work plan, and the Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Hub was awarded £55,500 to March 2020. (This has been increased to £74,500 for the 2021-2022 academic year.)

- 10.3 The coordinator had established links with partner universities, including Oxford, Cardiff and Reading. Before the pandemic, it had been possible to take students to these universities for 'taster' academic sessions, meetings with undergraduate ambassadors, tours of the university and so forth. However, no such visits were possible owing to university restrictions.
- 10.4 Academic challenges were made available online by partner universities, and these flagged up to schools. Events were recorded so that students might view them outside school hours.
- 10.5 The coordinator was keen that university guidance on subject choice at GCSE and A level remain as a key feature of Seren Foundation, as sound advice was crucial to ensure access to the most competitive degree courses. Again, Welsh Government was able to ensure that events were available through its social media pages, and the coordinator ensured that schools were aware of these events.
- 10.6 The coordinator was able to make individual grants (some £1200) to schools for Seren appropriate activities. Before the pandemic, most schools had opted to enrol students in the Brilliant Club Scholars Programme, where students are mentored by PhD students at Cardiff and Swansea Universities and have to submit a lengthy written assignment. Some schools opted to retain this provision. Others used grants to engage Positively Mad, a company which provides sophisticated materials designed to raise morale and aspiration among pupils, and also to advise on effective study and revision technique.
- 10.7 Since that part of the budget allocated to university visits was not spent, the coordinator was able to provide MAT coordinators with a range of published resources on 'A' level choice and access to graduate careers.

11. OUTCOMES

- 11.1 Some 230 students were enrolled into Seren Academy in September 2021 on entry to year 12, the largest number to date, suggesting that GCSE attainment among the most academically able pupils had improved, and momentum not been lost.
- 11.2 There had been some success in national essay prizes, with two pupils gaining awards.

12. AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

- 12.1 Consolidate links with the Brilliant Club, Talkthetalk (Oracy Charity) and Positively Mad.
- 12.2 Promote university websites (e.g. Oxplore, Cambridge HE+, oxfordcymru) so that the most academically able students can experience challenging activities.

- 12.3 Promote the work of Further Mathematics Support (Wales) for students in Key Stages 3 and 4.
- 12.4 Raise the profile of See Science, and STEM ambassadors.
- 12.5 Raise the profile of the joint initiative by Cardiff and Oxford Universities to promote modern foreign languages.
- 12.6 Provide CPD, advice and guidance for MAT coordinators, especially in 11-6 schools, and for those new to the role, to ensure students are prepared for the Seren Academy.
- 12.7 Explore the possibility of reviving the year 8 and 9 academic challenge days at the University of South Wales when COVID restrictions are lifted.

13. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

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

14. CONSULTATIONS

No consultation exercises have been undertaken.

15. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial considerations for the Council.

16. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

There are no legal implications aligned to this report.

17. 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.

18. CONCLUSION

- 18.1 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.
- 18.2 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, and ensure that pupils are aware of opportunities from a younger age.

AS AMENDED BY

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

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APPENDIX 1

RCT/ Merthyr Seren Hub – University Destinations 2021

- Apart from Oxbridge, where we dipped below double figures* for the first time since Seren began, students seem, despite the impact of Covid, to have been very successful in accessing courses at high tariff universities.
- 105 students – 70% of the cohort – went on to *Sutton 30*** universities. Of those who did not, many took a gap year, applied for different pathways (Royal Navy) or sought out ‘niche’ degrees (drama school, Fashion, Automotive Engineering at other universities).
- Two went on to study in America, bringing the number of RCT students currently studying in the USA to seven.
- The leading London universities (UCL, KCL, Imperial, LSE) were far more evident than last year.
- Northern universities – Liverpool, Manchester and Nottingham - were also much more in evidence, although Durham, traditionally very popular, seemed to attract fewer entrants than last cycle.
- The leading West of England universities – Bristol, Exeter – remain very popular, suggesting that Seren students no longer avoid those universities on grounds of their perceived social exclusivity, a pleasing development. Bath also drew a number of students to some of its most competitive courses.
- 12 students gained places to study Medicine, with a wide range of medical schools (York, Sussex, Exeter, Bristol, Manchester) proving popular, in addition to Cardiff. (Curiously, there were only two dentists, though several optometrists, an interesting development, and perhaps the consequence of the excellent extension classes run by Cardiff University.) Allied disciplines (Biomedical Sciences, Nuclear Medicine, Oncology, etc.) also had a large uptake.
- Cardiff remains the most popular of the Welsh universities, although Swansea drew several to its specialist courses, such as Actuarial Sciences and Financial Management.
- There were one or two ‘niche’ degree courses, e.g. Drama at Rose Bruford, Fashion Marketing at Bath Spa, Journalism at Leeds, although perhaps fewer than in previous cycles.
- While some students took up places at Edinburgh, Scottish universities seemed less popular than in previous years – impact of COVID? One student went to Queen’s, Belfast.

*Coordinators of other Hubs also reported a reduction in offers. Both Oxford and Cambridge were concerned about grade inflation/admitting too many entrants, and so were very ‘tight’ with offers, it is felt. An experienced team of mock interviewers said that several unsuccessful applicants were far stronger, in their view, than many who had gained places in previous years.

**i.e. the most competitive and highly ranked of the research led UK universities.

School / College in RCT	University	Country	Course
Taff School	Oxford	England	Biology
	Oxford	England	Medicine
	Warwick	England	History + Politics
	UCL	England	Law
	Loughborough	England	Automotive Engineering
	USW	Wales	Medical Sciences
Cynon Valley School	Cardiff	Wales	Biomedical Sciences
	Swansea	Wales	Nursing
	Bristol	England	Biology
	Cardiff	Wales	Criminology
	Swansea	Wales	Actuarial Science
	Essex	England	History + Politics
	Swansea	Wales	Nursing
	Cardiff	Wales	Financial Management
Taff School	Bristol	England	Physiotherapy
	USW	Wales	Medical sciences
	Sussex	England	Physics
	Exeter	England	Mathematics
	Cardiff	Wales	Accountancy
Rhondda School	KCL	England	Medicine
	Swansea	Wales	Aeronautical Engineering
	Oxford	England	PPE
	York	England	Medicine
	Manchester	England	Medicine
	Gap Year		
	Gap year		
	Swansea	Wales	Pharmacy
	Swansea	Wales	PPE
	UCL	England	Medical Engineering
	Cardiff	Wales	Optometry
	Swansea	Wales	English + Spanish
Taff School	Birmingham	England	Pharmacy
	Cardiff	Wales	Journalism
	Exeter	England	English
	Leeds	England	Computer Science

School / College in RCT	University	Country	Course
	Cardiff	Wales	Psychology
	Imperial College	England	Biochemistry
	Exeter	England	Biology
	Exeter	England	English
	Nottingham	England	Politics+ Internat Relns
	Kent	England	Psychology
	Sheffield	England	Aerospace Engineering
	Manchester	England	Pharmacy
	Cardiff	Wales	Pharmacology
	Bath	England	Computer Sciences
	Cardiff	Wales	Biomedical Sciences
	Cardiff	Wales	History
	Swansea	Wales	Electrical Engineering
	LSE	England	Politics + Internat Relns
	Cardiff	Wales	Biomedical Sciences
	Cardiff	Wales	Mathematics
	Exeter	England	Sports Sciences
	USW	Wales	Aeronautical Engineering
	Nottingham	England	Sociology
	Swansea	Wales	Paramedical Science
	KCL	England	Nursing
	Loughborough	England	Biology
	Oxford Brooks	England	Japanese studies
	Warwick	England	Computer Science
	Not placed		
	Cardiff	Wales	Architecture
	Exeter	England	Marine Biology
	Imperial College	England	Physics
	Exeter	England	Business + Management
	Exter	England	Accountancy + Finance
	Birmingham	England	Chemistry
	Lancaster	England	Management + Spanish
	Cardiff	Wales	Optometry
	Swansea	Wales	Physics
Rhondda School	Imperial College	England	Biology
	Bristol	England	Mathematics
	Rose Bruford	England	Acting
	Cardiff	Wales	dentistry
	Swansea	Wales	Medical Pharmacology
	Birmingham	England	EPS Futures
	Leeds	England	Physics

School / College in RCT	University	Country	Course
Taff School	Aberystwyth	Wales	
	Liverpool	England	
	Cardiff	Wales	
	Swansea	Wales	
	Liverpool	England	
Taff School	Cardiff	Wales	Medicine
	Cardiff	Wales	Medicine
	Cambridge	England	Modern Languages
	Nottingham	England	Modern Languages
	Bangor	Wales	Psychology
	Manchester	England	Mathematics
	Manchester	England	Medicine
	Bristol	England	Politics + Internat Relns
Cynon School	Gap Year (2)		
	Royal Navy	England	
	Davidson, N Carolina	USA	Science Major
	Nottingham	England	Law
	Cardiff	Wales	Optometry
	Aberystwyth	Wales	Cymraeg
	Bath	England	Accountancy + Finance
	Exeter	England	Natural Sciences
	Belfast		Accountancy + Finance
Cynon School	Cambridge	England	Law
	KCL	England	Mathematics
	Exeter	England	Medicine
	Exeter	England	Medicine
	Cardiff	Wales	Optometry
	Cardiff	Wales	Optometry
	Aberystwyth	Wales	Criminology
	Warwick	England	History
	Swansea	Wales	Chemical Eng
	Bath	England	Civil Eng
	Univ of the Arts, London	England	Product Design
	KCL	England	Physics
	Cardiff	Wales	Accountancy + Finance
	Cardiff	Wales	Radiology + Oncology
	Cardiff	Wales	Physiotherapy
	Bath	England	Mathematics
	California	USA	Science Major

School / College in RCT	University	Country	Course
	Manchester	England	English
Taff School	Cardiff	Wales	Astrophysics
	Cardiff Met	Wales	Fashion Marketing
	Cardiff	Wales	Chemistry
	Edinburgh	Scotland	History
	Swansea	Wales	Medical genetics
	Manchester	England	English
	Bristol	England	Economics
	KCL	England	Physics + Philosophy
	Bristol	England	Mathematics
	Warwick	England	Mathematics
	Bristol	England	Dentistry
	Liverpool	England	Law
Coleg y Cymoedd	Brighton + Sussex	England	Medicine
	Birmingham	England	Robotic Eng
	Bristol	England	Biomedical Sciences
	Exeter	England	Medical Sciences
	Cardiff	Wales	History
	Swansea	Wales	Nuclear Medicine
	Bristol	England	Physics + Philosophy
Taff School	gap year		
	gap year		
	Bristol	England	Economics
	Cardiff	Wales	Biomedical Sciences
	Durham	England	Physics
	Plymouth	England	Marine Biology
	Swansea	Wales	Actuarial Sciences
	Bath Spa	England	Fashion Management
	Exeter	England	Medicine
	Exeter	England	Law
	Exeter	England	Law
	Birmingham	England	Master Nursing
	No application		
	Imperial College	England	Chemistry
	Art Foundation	Wales	
	gap year - reapplying		