



Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru
Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales

A report on

**Merthyr Tydfil Adult Community Learning Partnership
Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council
Civic Centre
Castle Street
Merthyr Tydfil
CF47 8AN**

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by

**Estyn, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education
and Training in Wales**

About Merthyr Tydfil Adult Community Learning Partnership

The Merthyr Tydfil Adult Community Learning Partnership is a longstanding community partnership that serves the county of Merthyr Tydfil. The current acting chair of the partnership is the community zone and learning manager for Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council.

In 2018-2019 the partnership had 922 learners, which represents a decline in learner numbers over the last three years. The three main delivery partners are Merthyr County Borough Council, The College Merthyr Tydfil and Adult Learning Wales. Adult Learning Wales provides just over half of the delivery.

In addition to the three main providers, the Merthyr Tydfil Adult Community Learning Partnership has a wide membership base with representation from Welsh for Adults, Canolfan Soar, Department for Work and Pensions, the voluntary sector, housing associations, and providers of support for health and mental health. These partners deliver a range of accredited and non-accredited qualifications, informal learning, personal and peer support, as well as advice and guidance.

The Office for National Statistics mid-year population estimates for 2018 shows the population of Merthyr Tydfil is 60,183 and has increased steadily since the 2011 census. Merthyr Tydfil has a slightly lower proportion of residents aged 65 or over at 18.6%, compared with the Welsh average of 20.6%.

The Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation data for 2019 indicates that Merthyr Tydfil is an area of high deprivation with nearly all its wards within the 10-30% most deprived in Wales. Across the partnership, 62% of learners live in 40% of the most deprived areas in Wales.

The qualifications profile of adults across Merthyr Tydfil indicates high levels of adults with no qualifications, at 14.8%, compared with the Welsh average of 8.4%. In 2018, approximately one in five adults were qualified below level 2, compared with the Welsh average of approximately one in eight. This disparity is also evident in higher level qualifications.

Only 9% of the population of Merthyr Tydfil are Welsh speakers. This is significantly lower than the Welsh average of 19%.

Most of the Merthyr Tydfil population identify their ethnic group as White British, with 5.4% of residents from black and minority ethnic groups, compared with 6.4% for Wales. Residents from Polish, Portuguese, and Filipino backgrounds account for 57% of the non-UK born residents living in Merthyr Tydfil.

The Welsh Government community learning grant for 2018-2019 was £45,327. The partnership uses a wide range of venues such as college campuses, community centres and facilities, and premises of partnership organisations, as well as community based hubs.

Summary

Many learners make strong progress in their learning. They learn, develop and apply their newly acquired knowledge suitably in their everyday lives and work. The local authority's Community Wellbeing Service, in which adult learning is located, has developed an ethos of 'acting today for a better tomorrow', which permeates through the partnership's work. As a result, the levels of learner wellbeing are high.

Most tutors demonstrate comprehensive subject knowledge. They communicate well with their learners and form strong working relationships that lead to mutual trust and foster learning.

The partnership focuses clearly on providing courses in the key priority areas identified by the Welsh Government, such as Essential Skills and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). The partnership has been successful in ensuring that provision is sufficiently broad following funding reductions. As a result, the partnership promotes wellbeing and wider participation within the communities of Merthyr Tydfil. For example, through additional external funding, the partnership has succeeded in offering valuable access to learning for those looking for work and improving the skills and prospects for those already in work. The community hubs offer valuable and easily accessible provision to communities that are in need of such support. The partnership's family and parenting programmes have a significant impact on improving the skills of learners and supporting their families.

Across the partnership, individual partners operate their own quality assurance processes appropriately. However, the partnership's self-evaluation and improvement planning processes, at an overarching partnership level, are underdeveloped. As a result, there is a lack of consistency and clarity regarding the quality of standards and teaching across the partnership as a whole.

Inspection area	Judgement
Standards	Good
Wellbeing and attitudes to learning	Good
Teaching and learning experiences	Good
Care, support and guidance	Good
Leadership and management	Adequate and needs improvement

Recommendations

- R1 Strengthen partnership arrangements to ensure that all partners contribute coherently to informing and driving quality improvement across the partnership
- R2 Improve the quality of teaching in ESOL lessons and the standards that learners achieve
- R3 Increase the bilingual and Welshmedium provision and the use of Welsh across all learning areas
- R4 Identify and share good practice in provision effectively across the partnership

What happens next

The provider will draw up an action plan to show how it is going to address the recommendations. Estyn will review the provider's progress.

Estyn will invite the provider to prepare a case study on its work in relation to the impact of family and parenting programmes on the skills and personal development of the learners and their families, for dissemination on Estyn's website.

Main findings

Standards: Good

Overall, across the partnership, many learners make strong progress in their learning and produce work of a sound standard. They learn, develop and apply new skills well. On a few programmes, learners make slower progress than they are capable of achieving.

In parenting classes, including a specific group for young fathers, nearly all learners acquire new knowledge about how to improve their parenting. They try out parenting techniques with their families, reflect carefully on the results and make very strong progress in developing their critical thinking skills. Showing strong respect confidentiality, they share their own experiences, support one another well and identify how the techniques they have learnt can benefit them and their children.

In family learning classes, parents and grandparents develop literacy and numeracy skills alongside their children. For example, in one session all learners worked well on activities designed to teach their children about money through everyday experiences. Through these activities, adults gain a useful understanding of current methods of carrying out calculations. They make steady progress in improving their own literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills and become more confident in tasks such as writing a curriculum vitae, making job applications or using computer software to learn with their children.

In adult literacy and numeracy classes, most learners make steady progress and work towards accredited literacy and numeracy qualifications. In a majority of cases, learners continue their studies over a period of years and build on their prior learning and attainment appropriately. Most learners have suitable individual learning plans which identify their short-term targets. As a result, most learners know what they need to do to improve. Most learners make useful connections between the skills they learn in their classes and how to apply them in their own lives, for example in reading letters, budgeting, decorating their house and in increasing their independence.

In English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes, which make up about a tenth of the partnership's provision, around half of learners engage well in their learning and develop their English language suitably. A minority of learners become disengaged during lessons as the pace of teaching is not appropriate for them. In a minority of classes, a few learners dominate class discussions so that other learners are unable to contribute or to use their spoken English enough. In general, ESOL learners do not learn enough about Wales and its culture through their studies. A few learners in one ESOL provision develop their basic Welsh skills through a weekly Welsh class, and this enables them to integrate better into Welsh society and support their children in school.

Across the provision, learners on a few courses, such as family learning and skills clubs, practise basic Welsh words and phrases. For example, they use Welsh greetings and days and dates, and a 'Welsh word of the week', or receive feedback from their teachers using basic Welsh terms. On a very few bilingual programmes for

business receptionists and nursery nurses, learners use and develop their Welsh skills to help them in their job roles. However, learners on a majority of courses have little exposure to the Welsh language through their programmes. Only a very few Welsh-speaking learners actively develop their skills or apply the language through their programmes.

Learner performance data from the last three years indicate that, overall, learners in the partnership successfully complete their courses and achieve qualifications at rates around the national averages. A few learning areas show trends in learner success rates that are below the national averages.

Wellbeing and attitudes to learning: Good

Most learners are enthusiastic about their learning and participate beneficially in sessions. As a result, they enjoy their learning and demonstrate this clearly in their contributions to activities during sessions. Most learners are welcoming and willing to discuss their learning thoughtfully and interact well with staff, other learners and visitors. Overall, learners attend their classes regularly and show commitment despite personal and family issues that can be barriers to attendance in adult learning. In a few classes, tutors deal sympathetically with sporadic attendance for learners dealing with drug or alcohol dependence, homelessness and other chaotic lifestyle issues to ensure that learners continue to engage with their programmes beneficially.

Most learners engage suitably with their learning and sustain concentration well. Most work well in a range of ways, such as when working in pairs and small groups. Most learners feel that they are making sound progress in their learning and are comfortable discussing their achievement and personal goals. Nearly all learners feel that taking part in courses has helped them improve their employability skills. In nearly all classes, peer support is a strong feature of the partnership and many learners progress as a group onto further learning.

The high level of peer support and trust learners have with their tutors ensures that nearly all learners feel safe and know whom to go to should they be concerned about issues around bullying and harassment. Nearly all learners say staff show them respect and listen to their views.

Many learners are referred to courses through specialist support agencies, partner organisations and schools. Often these learners come to their programmes with multiple needs and health issues including low self-esteem, anxiety or depression. Nearly all of these learners receive beneficial support from these agencies during their learning journey. A few learners with physical and mental health issues find that attending classes to prepare for work or improve reading skills helps to reduce stress, for example in dealing with written correspondence such as medical records and letters. This means that learners improve their resilience and become less dependent on support from the local health team.

Many learners feel that they have seen improvements to their wellbeing through following courses. For example, on the working skills programme, healthy lifestyle choices are encouraged alongside household budgeting training. The use of engagement officers to make initial contact with potential learners and gradually progress them into the first steps of mainstream learning is a strong feature of several of the learning programmes. This approach is effective in ensuring that vulnerable learners bond well with their peers and tutors. As a result, learners persevere with their learning despite their many barriers. For example, in a few instances around half of the learners progressed from a course for parents of younger children to parenting for teenagers. Most learners in nearly all parenting classes are able to recount how they have used the techniques learnt in class to make positive changes that improved their quality of life, such as reading stories to their children and preparing for shopping trips. Many learners on adult basic education programmes are able to apply newly acquired numeracy skills to household budgeting usefully and this has a positive impact on their lives and wellbeing.

Teaching and learning experiences: Good

The partnership works effectively to maintain a clear focus on provision for those who are furthest away from employment. It has developed a useful holistic approach of working with a broad range of agencies to support families with the specific aim of developing well-skilled and resilient communities for the future.

The partnership analyses the local population's needs well and it uses individual partners' expertise effectively to provide a well-focused range of literacy, numeracy, digital skills and ESOL programmes that meet learners' needs. The family learning programme, delivered in partnership with local schools and the college, is a particularly strong feature.

The partnership places a strong emphasis on providing a range of engagement courses of suitable length and timings to help learners develop useful strategies to support their wellbeing, their own and families' literacy, numeracy and digital skills and their parenting skills. The partners work well together to signpost learners from engagement programmes into other programmes that extend their learning or help them develop additional life or work skills. For example, 'Bridges into Work' programmes focus on information and communication technology and construction skills and the 'Inspire 2 Work' programme provides young people between the ages of 16 and 24 with confidence building support, pre-employment training, personal development qualifications, preparing for work and work placement. The partnership provides clear progression routes into further and higher education.

The provision of skills clubs, where learners can join at any time at any one of nine community venues in the area to improve their skills in literacy and numeracy, is a very good feature of the provision. In a few cases, partners have begun to work beneficially with national and local businesses to upskill workers' literacy, numeracy and digital skills in the workplace.

Although the area of Merthyr Tydfil Borough Council is geographically compact, the partnership strives to make use of community-based venues that are easily accessible to learners. Additionally, the local authority has developed a 'Community Zone' on the Gurnos estate, which is part of the local authority's strategy to engage residents in their community and to offer, under one roof, access to a wide range of agencies and community services, including access to education programmes.

The partnership provides a limited range of full-cost recovery language courses, including ballet, yoga and Welsh conversation classes. However, overall, tutors do not give learners sufficient opportunities to develop and use their bilingual skills. The partnership has supported a few classes to become clubs so that participants can still benefit from meeting together socially, for example a 'craft and natter' group supported by a mental health charity.

Most tutors have comprehensive subject knowledge. They are effective communicators who form a strong rapport with their learners. Most tutors plan worthwhile lessons that take account of learners' individual styles and needs while providing a suitable level of challenge. They refer well to learners' previous knowledge and experiences to plan new learning. However, in ESOL classes, tutors do not always plan lessons that help learners to develop their linguistic skills effectively from their individual starting points. Too often, lessons focus too much on grammar and sentence structures at the expense of developing learners' speaking and listening skills. In a minority of these lessons, the pace of learning is not successful in maintaining learners' interest fully.

Most tutors use effective questioning techniques to help learners develop their problem-solving, thinking and evaluative skills. They use a wide range of activities that challenge learners and help them to build new knowledge and skills. Most tutors manage classes and activities well.

Most tutors encourage learners to develop their skills further by studying outside of the class. This gives learners more confidence to use what they learn in leisure and work activities.

Many tutors give constructive and encouraging verbal feedback to help learners understand what they need to do next to improve their work. Most tutors teaching family and parenting classes are highly skilled practitioners who demonstrate the ability to support and nurture learners appropriately to help them build resilience. They create comfortable learning environments in which learners feel safe.

Care, support and guidance: Good

The management of adult learning is located within the local authority's Community Wellbeing Service. The high deprivation levels in the county have led the authority to develop detailed policies and strategies to tackle poverty and wellbeing that clearly identify the key role of adult learning in meeting these aims. This approach has led to high levels of learner wellbeing.

Nearly all partners have effective systems to identify, check and monitor learning support, wellbeing and attendance patterns. However, the partnership does not use information from individual partners to monitor patterns in attendance or wellbeing across the whole provision.

Many tutors promote the importance of regular attendance well. For example, in employability workshops, tutors stress how this relates to being successful in the world of work. In most lessons, learners attend well.

Across the partnership, there are effective referral processes to enable learners to access appropriate provision. For example, nearly all partners receive referrals from services and organisations such as Communities for Work, Job Centre Plus and social services.

The majority of partners work well together on a range of programmes across the partnership to provide beneficial support for learners. For example, their officers work closely with tutors to identify learners' support needs, such as reasons for not attending sessions, and source appropriate support agencies.

The partnership's annual learner survey indicates that many learners receive strong levels of support to help them overcome any barriers they may have to learning. Where appropriate, learners have an initial assessment at the start of their programme. However, across the partnership there are inconsistencies in the use of initial assessment to identify accurately learners' appropriate starting points upon which they can build.

Nearly all tutors across the partnership are aware of, and take good account of, learners' individual needs and commitments. They have a clear focus on developing learners' skills, confidence, health and wellbeing. They are very committed to ensuring their learners have the best possible life chances. Most learning programmes have a flexible approach to accommodate learners' commitments and ensure they have a healthy work life balance, for example when managing childcare arrangements, medical appointments and work shift patterns.

Nearly all tutors promote healthy eating and the importance of keeping fit. Often tutors provide refreshments for learners during taught lessons. In one lesson the tutor incorporated a short mindfulness session at the end of class to enable learners to reflect on their learning.

Many learners receive impartial advice and guidance at the start of the programme. Nearly all learners receive a comprehensive learner handbook with a wide range of information about funding, learner support and health and safety.

The partnership recognises the achievements and successes of their learners. Many learners across the partnership participate in a number of local and national celebration events.

In taught lessons, learners on ESOL courses have a wide range of opportunities to share experiences of their different cultures to develop their understanding of the local community and the wider world. In early years and family programmes, tutors assist parents to build strong peer support networks which impact positively on learner engagement.

The partnership's arrangements for safeguarding learners meet requirements and give no cause for concern. Nearly all staff receive worthwhile training on safeguarding and Prevent. A few tutors raise learners' awareness of keeping safe, including radicalisation and extremism, appropriately.

Leadership and management: Adequate and needs improvement

Leaders and managers of Merthyr Tydfil Adult Community Learning Partnership have a clear vision with appropriate aims and objectives that focus appropriately on key national and local priorities. They concentrate well on the key priority areas such as essential skills and ESOL courses while succeeding in offering a broad range of provision that promotes learner wellbeing and wider participation within the community. The partnership is beginning to establish collective working between the partners that reflects the shared mission and genuine commitment to the ethos of 'acting today for a better tomorrow'.

Since 2017, the current acting chair has worked with energy and determination to drive the partnership forward with a focus on improving partners' participation through a wider membership, the efficiency of the partnership and the quality of its provision. For example, the partnership's service delivery plan plays a central role in ensuring that all partners, including those providing courses outside of the national priority areas, have a clear focus on targets, quality improvement and collaborative curriculum planning. In addition, the partnership works well strategically to develop approaches that tackle poverty-related issues and increase learners' wellbeing.

The partnership has a clear quality assurance and self-evaluation cycle with regular meetings of the providers to discuss relevant issues. The partnership's terms of reference outline the role of partnership members and the expectations of them usefully.

Individual partners operate their own quality assurance processes appropriately. These include useful activities such as lesson observations, performance management and professional learning opportunities. However, the methodology and quality of lesson observations vary too much across partners. For example, lesson observation evaluations focus more on teaching rather than reviewing learner progress and engagement. As a result, the partnership has a limited understanding of learner progress across the range of providers. In addition, while many partners have a reasonable understanding of the training needs of their own staff, this does not translate into action or discussion of common themes across the partnership. Consequently, there is a lack of consistency and clarity at partnership level and the partnership does not identify and share good practice well enough.

Overall, self-evaluation at partnership level is not sufficiently evaluative and there is an over-reliance on data to determine standards of teaching and learning. Quality development plans do not align consistently enough or include relevant and clear actions for improvement. The partnership is realistic and honest in acknowledging these shortcomings, and the impact that losing key personnel and other resources has had on its ability to operate as it has done in the past. It has made a strategic decision to concentrate its resources on maintaining standards of provision and ensuring that the provision offer meets prescribed Welsh Government priorities as well as continuing to serve the needs and wellbeing of the wider community. Overall, the partnership has been successful in maintaining a good standard of provision.

The partnership has a sound understanding of its income and expenditure, manages its budget for adult learning provision efficiently, and has appropriate levels of

suitably qualified staff and resources. In addition, the partnership works proactively to source extra funding, for example from the European Social Fund, and uses this well to widen and add value to its core provision offer. Such courses successfully provide valuable access to learning and self-development opportunities for those seeking work, or improving skills and prospects for those in work.

Generally, the partnership has responded satisfactorily to the recommendations from their last inspection report. For example, it has audited teaching locations and taken positive steps to ensure that accommodation is suitable to support teaching and learning. This includes obtaining a digital development grant from the Welsh Government to ensure that provision and teaching locations are fit for purpose and suitable for learners in the digital age. Leaders and managers have established community hubs to ensure that provision and facilities are located in the areas of greatest social and economic need and are easily accessible to learners. In addition, the partnership has reviewed its ESOL provision usefully. Community and further education providers collaborate beneficially to offer a suitable range of full-time and part-time courses that commence at different times throughout the year.

Partners co-operate efficiently to develop a few programmes to promote the Welsh language and culture. These include a few leisure and cultural activities through the medium of Welsh or bilingually in Canolfan Soar with activities such as pilates, yoga and ballet for children. However, overall, Welsh speakers have limited opportunities to follow courses through the medium of Welsh or bilingually.

Evidence base of the report

Before the inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from the learner and employer questionnaires and consider the views of teachers, trainers and assessors and the governing body where appropriate through their questionnaire responses

During the inspection, inspectors normally:

- meet the principal/chief executive, governors (where appropriate), senior and middle managers and individual teachers, trainers and assessors to evaluate the impact of the provider's work
- meet learners to discuss their work, to listen to them and to gain their views about various aspects of their provider
- visit a broad sample of sessions, including on and off-the-job sessions where appropriate
- observe and speak to learners at lunch and break times
- look closely at the provider's self-evaluation processes
- consider the provider's quality improvement plan and looked at evidence to show how well the provider had taken forward planned improvements
- scrutinise a range of provider documents, including information on learner assessment and progress, records of meetings of staff and the governing body (where appropriate), information on learners' wellbeing, including the safeguarding of learners, and records of staff training and professional development

After the on-site inspection and before the publication of the report, Estyn:

- review the findings of the inspection alongside the supporting evidence from the inspection team in order to validate, moderate and ensure the quality of the inspection

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the partnership and from the Estyn website (www.estyn.gov.wales)

Estyn evaluates a partnership's effectiveness using a four-point judgement scale:

Excellent	Very strong, sustained performance and practice
Good	Strong features, although minor aspects may require improvement
Adequate and needs improvement	Strengths outweigh weaknesses, but important aspects require improvement
Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement	Important weaknesses outweigh strengths

The report was produced in accordance with Section 77 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000.

Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of going to press. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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