A report on

Merthyr Tydfil ACL Partnership

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council
Civic Centre
Castle Street
Merthyr Tydfil
CF47 8AN

Date of inspection: November 2024

by

Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education

and Training in Wales

This report is also available in Welsh.

About Merthyr Tydfil ACL Partnership

Name of provider	Merthyr Tydfil Adult Community Learning Partnership
Local authorities involved with the provider and key delivery partners	Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council is the main provider and leads the partnership. Its two main delivery partners are The College Merthyr Tydfil and Adult Learning Wales.
Any significant changes since the last inspection	The main providers contributing to the partnership have not changed since the last inspection, although the partnership describes its own position as one of 'reset' following changes to staff and management responsibilities.
Number of learners at time of inspection	At the time of the inspection, each provider had the following numbers of unique learners enrolled on its adult learning in the community provision.

Partner	November 24
Adult Learning Wales	119
Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council ACL	45
The College Merthyr Tydfil	73
Total	237

During 2023-2024 (as of December 2024), 281 learners had participated in Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council's Multiply provision. Multiply is a UK Government-funded initiative to develop numeracy skills.

Number of learners in the previous full academic year	Unique learners enrolled			
	Partner	**2021-22**	**2022-23**	**2023-24**
	Adult Learning Wales	422	404	388
	Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council ACL	166	43	68
	The College Merthyr Tydfil	45	60	68
	Total	633	507	524

Details of the partnership's programmes, in terms of Welsh Government funded courses (ESOL) and basic skills and range of other (leisure/cost-recovery) courses	The three main partners offer different elements of provision. The lead partner, Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council, offers provision in adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills funded by the Welsh Government's Adult Community Learning Grant. It also offers provision aimed at developing participants' numeracy skills, funded by the UK Government's Multiply initiative. During the inspection, we also observed a few sessions of provision intended to support parents and develop parenting skills.
	Adult Learning Wales offers a range of provision at community venues in the area, including accredited one-day courses such as manual handling training or short courses designed to support parents of children with autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Adult Learning Wales also offers one part-time course for English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) learners at entry level, in the community.
	The College Merthyr Tydfil offers full-time provision for ESOL learners at the college's campus in Merthyr Tydfil.
About the learners on the partnership's courses	More female learners are enrolled at each provider than males, with the proportion varying from about two thirds female at Merthyr Tydfil Borough Council's provision to

about three quarters female at Adult Learning Wales and The College Merthyr Tydfil.

The age profile of learners varies at each provider (note that the total may not equal 100% because of rounding):

Age	MTCBC	ALW	TCMT
16-19	1%	8%	3%
20-24	1%	9%	3%
25-39	15%	29%	41%
40-49	16%	17%	36%
59-59	12%	21%	11%
60-64	6%	6%	4%
65 and over	21%	10%	3%
Not declared	28%	0	0

Fewer than 5% of learners at any provider declared themselves as Welsh speakers.

At The College Merthyr Tydfil, which delivers the partnership's English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) provision, nearly all learners are from ethnic minority backgrounds. At Merthyr Tydfil Council Borough Council and Adult Learning Wales, fewer than 5% of learners come from ethnic minority backgrounds.

About the population of the partnership's area

According to the 2021 census, Merthyr Tydfil County Borough has a population of 58,800, about 1.9% of the total population of Wales.

The borough has a similar proportion of economically active population to the Wales average (75.9% vs 75.6%) but a slightly higher proportion of workless households (18.9% vs 16.0%).

	The borough has <u>fewer residents qualified to higher levels</u> (Level 3 or 4) than the Welsh average (49.0% vs 64.6%) and higher than average proportion who have no qualifications (13.7% vs 8.6%) . The <u>proportion of the population aged 65 or over</u> is lower than the average for local authorities in Wales (19.4% vs 21.6%). In 2024, 20% of adults in Merthyr Tydfil said <u>they could speak Welsh</u>, against the average for local authorities of 27.8%. Merthyr Tydfil is the <u>5th most deprived local authority area</u> on the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (using most deprived 20% LSOAs from WIMD 2019).
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	01/02/2020

Summary

Over the last couple of years, there has been very limited collaboration or effective partnership working between the main providers in the partnership. Partly as a result of this, the number of learners enrolled on the partnership's provision is low and has not recovered to pre-pandemic levels. In addition, the partnership's provision lacks clear progression routes for learners. The most recent published data indicates that learners successfully complete their activities at rates below the national average.

The partnership is now in a phase of 'reset' and is at the beginning of a process to reestablish partnership working, develop a new strategic plan and review its provision offer.

Most learners across the partnership make suitable progress from their starting points, with many effectively recalling and applying prior knowledge. Many learners apply their skills in their sessions effectively, and report improvements in their use of these skills in real-life tasks, such as household budgeting.

Most learners demonstrate enthusiasm and motivation, often driven by personal or career goals. Many express a strong interest in continuing their learning journey.

Tutors have strong working relationships with learners. They know their learners well and care about their well-being. Most plan their sessions well and employ a sound range of teaching strategies. Most provide worthwhile verbal feedback, although only a few use individual learning plans to full effect. Where tutors do use written feedback, it does not always identify spelling mistakes and writing errors well enough to help learners improve these skills and learners are not always aware of their progress or achievement of milestones within a course.

Tutors are adaptable and flexible and work with learners to meet their needs, including additional learning needs such as dyslexia or a visual impairment. However, the systems and processes for recording learners' individual needs and the agreed support are not effective and are too reliant on tutors' ability to remember information. As a result, in a few cases, tutors are unclear about the additional learning needs for learners in their group.

The partnership's processes for helping learners progress from one course to the next are underdeveloped. Many learners express a willingness to keep engaged in learning after their course finishes, however, very few of them are aware of what is available. There is currently no overall partnership approach to promoting the breadth of provision in the area, or any single source where learners or potential learners can access information on all available courses.

Recommendations

We have made five recommendations to help the service continue to improve:

R1   Consolidate the partnership's commitment to joint working and a develop a clear strategic plan to shape the future of the partnership and processes to measure progress against the plan

R2   Review the partnership's provision offer to ensure that it meet the needs of learners and potential learners and offers clear pathways for progression

R3   Ensure that potential and existing learners can easily access an overview of the full partnership's course offer and progression pathways

R4   Increase the number of learners who enrol and benefit from the partnership's core adult learning in the community provision

R5   Implement effective systems and processes across the partnership for recording and communicating learners' additional learning needs (ALN) and individual support requirements and for ensuring that these are supported

What happens next

HMCI is of the opinion that the provider has an aspect of education and training which is not adequate to meet the reasonable needs of those receiving the education. The partnership will draw up an action plan to show how it is going to address the recommendations. Estyn will monitor the partnership's progress after publication of this report.

Main findings

Teaching and learning

Most learners across the partnership make suitable progress from their starting points, with many effectively recalling and applying prior knowledge. For instance, learners in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) higher-level classes confidently use modal verbs introduced in previous lessons and produce extended pieces of complex writing, demonstrating both retention and application of skills and knowledge in new contexts.

Many learners apply their skills in their sessions effectively, such as in numeracy, where they adeptly calculate perimeters. Learners in these sessions report improvements in their use of numbers and express enjoyment in their ability to apply mathematics to real-life tasks, such as household budgeting.

In ESOL classes, almost all learners use the target language structures accurately. These learners show sound language development over time, advancing from basic vocabulary to more complex structures in speaking and writing.

Many learners display a strong grasp of subject-specific terminology and concepts. For example, learners on an attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) awareness course articulate the characteristics of children with ADHD with confidence, showing a sound understanding of the subject.

Across courses, many learners demonstrate reflective and independent learning practices. For example, ESOL learners on an entry level programme make use of digital translation tools to support their acquisition of new vocabulary.

On parenting programmes, learners have opportunities to practise Welsh phrases, helping them to support their children and grandchildren in Welsh-medium schools. However, across the partnership as a whole, tutors' use and provision of examples in Welsh are very limited.

Most learners demonstrate enthusiasm and motivation, often driven by personal or career goals. Many express a strong interest in continuing their learning journey. This participation builds a strong sense of community, creating a safe and inclusive learning environment. Many learners show initiative by asking questions, seeking clarification, and accessing tutor support as needed. However, in a very few sessions, tutors do not plan enough opportunities for learners to work collaboratively, limiting learners' opportunities for peer learning and social learning experiences.

Spotlight on: ADHD awareness programmes

Learners on ADHD awareness programmes describe the hugely positive impact the learning and social opportunities have had on their personal and professional lives.

Parents describe how they felt isolated prior to joining these sessions, adding that they had felt desperate and misunderstood. They go on to describe how being able to talk and share with others who have similar experiences has not only enabled them to better support their children but has also had a profound impact on their own personal well-being.

Learners joining these programmes for professional reasons outline how their learning has enabled them to improve their own practice and raise awareness of ADHD among colleagues.

Tutors plan courses effectively to provide learners with content, knowledge and skills relevant to the level of their learning. They take good account of adult learners' situations. They adapt sessions appropriately, for example by providing online access for those who cannot attend sessions in person or ensuring that learners can access any work they might miss due to other commitments periodically clashing with classes.

Tutors work effectively to develop good working relationships with learners. They set out clear expectations for learners' behaviour, be it in face-to-face, hybrid, or fully online sessions. Where the session allows, learners work collaboratively and respectfully of each other. For example, ESOL learners support each other with peer corrections and suggestions for improvements. During discussions on sensitive topics, such as weight loss, learners express their suggestions and opinions with sensitivity, respecting the feelings of their peers.

Most tutors plan sessions well to meet learners' learning needs. Sessions are generally of a good pace and maintain learners' concentration, motivation, and participation. Most tutors employ a useful range of teaching strategies and use questioning techniques effectively to draw out learners' knowledge, to help them develop problem-solving skills and to ensure the inclusion of all learners. In the most effective sessions, tutors support the development of learners' literacy, numeracy and digital skills, even when these are not the main focus of the course.

Nearly all tutors use verbal feedback and praise well to motivate learners. However, only a few use individual learning plans effectively to help learners plan their learning and record their progress. Where written feedback is used, it does not always identify spelling mistakes and errors well enough to help learners know how to improve these skills. As a result, learners are not always aware of their specific progress or milestones within a course.

Overall, for the last two years of published data since the pandemic (2022-2023 and 2021-2022), learners at the partnership successfully completed accredited learning activities at rates below the national averages.

Well-being, care, support and guidance

Each provider within the partnership advertises their own courses, predominantly through social media channels and via posters and leaflets in community venues. However, there is currently no overall partnership approach to promoting the breadth of provision in the

area, or any single source where learners or potential learners can access information on all available courses.

Most learners find the information, advice and guidance they receive prior to starting their course, and during their induction, to be accurate and helpful. Nearly all learners receive a useful learner handbook, which outlines the key information about the course, the expectations of them and what they can expect from their provider.

Most learners talk positively about the impact their course has on their everyday lives. ESOL learners share the value of increased independence and being able to read school correspondence. Learners on a Welsh language taster course value the social interaction which they say breaks up what could otherwise be long periods of isolation. Learners on a family learning numeracy course discuss the life-changing impact learning together with their child has had, helping take the stress out of attending school for their children.

Most tutors create safe learning environments, they encourage honest sharing and discussion amongst learners, which establishes a culture of mutual respect and security. Learners on a parenting programme experience a strong sense of emotional support, finding a safe space to discuss personal challenges and successes, which helps them feel connected and in turn fosters their personal growth.

Nearly all learners feel that the partnership listens to their views and makes adjustments based on their feedback. For example, a basic skills learner explains how the provider has altered course times to allow learners to attend class in line with their shift patterns.

Each provider within the partnership gathers the views of learners mainly through post-course evaluations for which response rates are reasonable. However, partners do not currently work together to analyse learner voice feedback across their whole provision to identify trends or opportunities for joint areas of intervention.

Nearly all tutors know their learners well and care about their well-being. They adapt their sessions and delivery styles to suit the needs of the group. Most tutors communicate well with learners during their classes and keep in touch appropriately outside of sessions to help keep learners motivated and engaged. On occasions where learners do not attend sessions, tutors maintain contact with them and, where necessary, send them work to complete in their own time that will keep them on track. All providers in the partnership engage with a range of external partners where learners can access well-being support such as counselling sessions.

Each partner makes use of the learner enrolment and induction process to identify any additional learning needs (ALN). ALN support, in most cases, is offered by course tutors, who make reasonable adjustments and adaptations for learners' needs such as dyslexia, visual impairment or mobility issues. However, the systems and processes for recording

learners' individual needs and the agreed support are not effective and too reliant on tutors' ability to remember information. As a result, in a few cases, tutors are unclear about the identified additional learning needs for learners in their group or how they could be supporting them.

The providers' processes for helping learners progress from one course to the next are underdeveloped. Many learners express a willingness to keep engaged in learning after their course finishes. However, very few of them are sufficiently aware what is available.

Nearly all staff undertake appropriate regular mandatory online training on subjects such as safeguarding (including Prevent) and each provider has a designated safeguarding lead (DSL). In one partner, at the time of inspection, the DSL was relatively new-to-post and still needed to undertake safeguarding training at an appropriately higher level.

Providers within the partnership ensure that risk assessments are undertaken at all venues where courses are running and these include information on health and safety protocols and learner specific requirements. However, not all tutors are aware of how to access the risk assessments or the information contained within them.

Overall, the partnership's arrangements for the safeguarding of learners meet requirements and give no cause for concern.

Leading and improving

Over the last couple of years, there has been very limited collaboration or effective partnership working between the main providers in the partnership. Partly as a result of this, the number of learners enrolled on the partnership's provision is low and has not recovered to pre-pandemic levels, and the partnership's provision lacks clear progression routes for learners.

The partnership has a realistic and candid appraisal of its current position and is now in a period of 'reset'. Leaders at the three main providers – Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council, Adult Learning Wales and The College Merthyr Tydfil – have very recently signed a new partnership agreement. This sets out the high-level principles for renewed partnership working and shared responsibility for the partnership's work. For example, the council will take an overall strategic lead, Adult Learning Wales will lead on self-evaluation and quality improvement and the college will lead on provision planning and workforce development.

The partnership agreement demonstrates the commitment from leaders at the main providers to partnership working and to the future of the partnership. A recent report to the council's scrutiny committee usefully sets out the current state of the partnership and a high-level vision of where the partnership wants to be. However, the work to bring this

vision into reality is at an early stage and the partnership has yet to create a strategic plan, high level targets or outcome measures to guide the partnership's development. At present, the detailed actions that the partnership needs to take to move forward with its reset are not clear.

In planning its provision, the partnership intends that adult community learning provision should work in mutual support of the broader strategic goal of an 'Aspirational Merthyr' – improving skills, employment prospects and the well-being of children and families.

The overall package of provision across the three providers offers a suitable variety of courses. However, the lack of co-ordinated provision planning has resulted in unclear progression routes for learners. Learners themselves are frequently not aware of the options available to them or how they might use these opportunities to develop their aspirations, employment prospects or personal development.

The three main partners offer different elements of provision. The lead partner offers provision in adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills funded by the Welsh Government's Adult Community Learning Grant. This provision has low numbers of learners, and while the numbers of learners enrolled on programmes showed an encouraging increase this academic year, enrolments have not recovered to pre-pandemic levels. During the inspection, class sizes for the provision funded by the Adult Community Learning Grant were small, on average around three learners.

The lead provider has worked creatively to use funding from the UK Government's Multiply initiative to develop new programmes, such as family learning or numeracy in Welsh; and to enhance existing community activities, such as keep fit sessions; to engage learners and develop numeracy skills in everyday contexts. Learners value these opportunities to experience numeracy in a new way and to support their children's learning in school. Leaders are currently planning how to sustain provision started using funding from Multiply when the dedicated funding ceases in 2025.

Each provider currently markets and promotes its provision independently, and there is no straightforward way for residents to find the full range of provision available to adults within the borough. The lead provider is currently refreshing and rebranding its marketing and promotion materials, including plans for a new website. It is too early to evaluate the impact of this on learners' enrolments.

Spotlight on: Multiply numeracy in Welsh

Learners said that they would like a course that helped them to learn and use simple Welsh language terms related to numeracy – both to develop their personal Welsh language skills and also to help them use Welsh in conversations and number tasks with their children.

In collaboration with Learn Welsh Glamorgan the partnership's Multiply team ran a ten-week course in a community venue. Content included:

*   Numbers from 1 – 100, playing bingo, describing everyday numbers (bus numbers, door numbers, phone numbers, business cards), telling the time

*   Likes and dislikes – how many sugars in tea/coffee, how many biscuits with a cuppa, board games, dice, cards

Learning takes place in suitable and convenient community settings, such as social clubs, schools and learning centres. These venues are appropriate and fit for purpose. The partnership offers an appropriate balance of in-person and online or hybrid learning opportunities that tutors and managers deploy flexibly to meet the needs of learners. Other than the numeracy in Welsh provision offered through Multiply, the partnership offers no Welsh-medium provision.

The partnership's processes for self-evaluation are underdeveloped. Despite this, the partnership's self-evaluation report accurately reflects the partnership's overall reset position, although it has not identified a few areas for improvement noted in this inspection report, for example the limited effectiveness of individual learning plans. Current quality improvement processes have had limited impact on areas for improvement, for example the declining trend in learner enrolments and success rates, or in addressing the recommendations from the previous inspection report.

Operational managers at each provider have a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities and have suitable arrangements for managing their staff. Individual providers have effective processes for identifying the professional learning needs of their staff, including team meetings, appraisals, observations, and learning walks. Examples of useful professional learning include sessions on safeguarding, Prevent and autism awareness. At present, opportunities for staff to collaborate and learn from each other across the partnership are limited.

Additional information

Safeguarding arrangements

The provider's arrangements for safeguarding young people and vulnerable adults do not give any cause for concern.

Evidence base of the report

Before the inspection, inspectors:

- analysed the outcomes from the learner and staff questionnaires
- reviewed the partnership's published performance data

During the inspection, inspectors:

- met the chair of the partnership, officials of the local authorities, senior and middle leaders and individual teachers to evaluate the impact of the partnership's work
- meet learners to discuss their work, to listen to their views about various aspects of their provider
- observed a broad sample of sessions
- observed and spoke with learners outside of sessions
- looked closely at the partnership's self-evaluation processes
- considered the partnership's quality improvement planning and looked at evidence to show how well the partnership had taken forward planned improvements
- scrutinised a wide range of partnership documents, including information on learner assessment and progress, records of meetings of staff and, information on learners' well-being, including the safeguarding of learners, and records of staff training and professional learning

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

- reviewed 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

Appendix 1: Numbers – quantities and proportions

The report makes references to different quantities and proportions e.g. *'most learners…'* or *'very few learners…'*. We use these terms to describe quantities and proportions as outlined in the table below:

nearly all =	with very few exceptions
most =	90% or more
many =	70% or more
a majority =	over 60%
half =	50%
around half =	close to 50%
a minority =	below 40%
few =	below 20%
very few =	less than 10%

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the school and from the Estyn website (http://www.estyn.gov.wales/)

The report was produced in accordance with 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 publication. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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