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

A report on the adult learning in the community provision of

Rhondda Cynon Taf Adult Learning in the Community Partnership

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by

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

About Rhondda Cynon Taf Adult Learning in the Community Partnership

The Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT) adult community learning (ACL) Partnership was established in 2010, however over the last twelve months it has undergone significant changes. The lead partner, RCT County Borough Council, works alongside Adult Learning Wales (ALW) to deliver most of the adult community learning provision across the county. The partnership has strong links with Menter Iaith Rhondda Cynon Taf who deliver a range of adult learning programmes through the medium of Welsh. Multiply provision also forms part of the partnership offer.

Provision includes the following programmes: essential skills, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), digital skills, employability, independent living skills (ILS), British sign language (BSL), numeracy courses through Multiply, well-being courses, and engagement taster programmes. Provision is largely funded through Welsh Government and UK Government funding streams with a few privately funded courses.

According to the Office for national statistics Rhondda Cynon Taf's resident population is 237,700 (Census 2021). In 2021, Rhondda Cynon Taf ranked third for total population out of 22 local authority areas in Wales, maintaining the same position it held a decade ago. There has been an increase of 16.3% in people aged 65 years and over, a decrease of 1.9% in people aged 15 to 64 years, and a decrease of 1.1% in children aged under 15 years.

The Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) shows that the partnership, which covers a wide geographical area, serves a range of learners including those living in two areas that fall within the top 15 most deprived areas of Wales.

Stats Wales shows that 86.68% of 18 to 64 year-olds in Wales have qualifications at level 2 or above. In Rhondda Cynon Taf this figure sits at 82.4%. The percentage of residents who have no qualifications at all is 9.1%.

Across the county 3.7% of the residents are non-UK born according to the Office for national statistics. This is a 0.6% percentage point increase since 2011. The ONS Census data 2021 indicates that 98.5% of residents speak English or Welsh. The percentage of people who say they can speak Welsh across Wales averages 29.2%. Within Rhondda Cynon Taf the proportion of people who say than can speak Welsh is lower than the Welsh average at 18.8%. (Stats Wales, 2022).

In 2022-2023 there were 3,180 enrolments across the partnership. Of these enrolments 2,177 were unique learners. At the time of our visit attendance averaged seven learners per session.

Summary

The Rhondda Cynon Taf adult learning partnership reconfigured in 2023, revitalising its post-COVID provision. The new strategic plan aligns with national and regional priorities, emphasising employability, lifelong learning, and well-being, with ambitious targets to raise residents' skills to national averages. While offering diverse provision, including literacy, numeracy, digital skills, Welsh-medium programmes, and valuable self-funded clubs and classes, the partnership lacks a clear strategy for learner progression.

Integrating the council's Work and Skills team into the partnership supports in addressing the employability requirements of the local community. Additionally, the partnership's effective links with the Multiply team demonstrate an innovative and efficient approach to integrating provision and sharing resources. The partnership has also built robust relationships with multiple primary schools, creating an inclusive space for community learners beyond just parents with school-aged children.

The partnership provides a sound Welsh-medium offer through collaboration with Menter Iaith Rhondda Cynon Taf. This initiative includes numeracy programmes Welsh for parents of children enrolled in Welsh-medium schools, well-being programmes like parent and baby yoga, and 'digital drop-ins'. A few of these programmes are delivered online, enabling learners to attend remotely.

Providers within the partnership employ various methods to advertise their courses, including participation in community events, offering taster sessions, and distributing printed brochures and leaflets to venues where existing programmes are delivered. Each organisation has its own social media channels and website detailing course information, but these platforms are not interconnected meaning there is no central hub for learners to access information on new programmes or progression pathways. Most learners find out about courses through word-of-mouth recommendations.

Teaching across the partnership is effective, with tutors demonstrating a strong understanding of their learners' challenges and barriers. They plan and deliver engaging sessions, resulting in many learners making notable progress. Tutors foster trusting learning communities, facilitating discussions that involve all learners and creating safe spaces for sincere and constructive conversations, even on short courses. Tutors adeptly manage the pace of learning, adapting their delivery to meet the diverse needs and goals of their learners.

Many learners demonstrate sound progress in subject specialisms as well as in literacy, numeracy, and digital skills. Most learners actively engage in sessions, demonstrating confidence in interacting with peers, tutors, and support staff. Additionally, learners effectively develop and maintain their Welsh language skills.

Nearly all learners acknowledge the positive impact of their courses in terms of their well-being. Many learners apply their new skills beyond the classroom, contributing to personal growth and community involvement. Acquiring new skills not only enhances learners' abilities, but also fosters a sense of accomplishment and pride.

Recommendations

R1   Ensure representation and meaningful participation from all key partners at strategic and operational level

R2   Ensure that potential and existing learners can easily access an overview of all of the partnership's courses and progression pathways

R3   Develop approaches to evaluate learners' progression into, within, and beyond the provision

What happens next

The provider will draw up an action plan to address the recommendations from the inspection.

Estyn will invite the provider to prepare case studies on its work in relation to:

- Welsh language opportunities for fluent Welsh speakers, learners, and the local community
- Digital Fridays, an initiative that refers learners into provision, supports existing learners, promotes independence, supports tutors, and allows ongoing learning and the development of skills

For dissemination on Estyn's website.

Main findings

Learning

Many learners make sound progress in their learning, both in sessions and over the duration of their programmes. In an ILS session, all learners produce the correct sign language to mirror verbal communication. Learners in a basic IT session develop skills that are necessary for their workplaces including navigating Microsoft Word, producing documents, and carrying out simple formatting tasks. These new skills support one learner to create newsletters at work, and another to use selling websites and search for jobs online. In a 'guitar for improvers' session, learners develop skills that enable them to play whole songs and, in a sugar craft class, learners apply their knowledge and skills to produce fully decorated cakes.

Learners' written work demonstrates good progress in relation to specific subject knowledge as well as literacy and numeracy skills. Examples include a learner producing a detailed description of the skills involved in preparing aromatherapy oils, learners understanding the 24-hour clock, and learners on a slow cooker course correctly matching imperial and metric weights and measures. A learner in an ILS class develops his writing skills both in terms of creativity and style, as well as the

mechanics of handwriting. Similarly, a learner on a customer service course progresses from writing using only capital letters to writing using lower case, and capital letters where appropriate.

There are a few examples of learners progressing between courses across the partnership such as learners progressing from a pre-employability customer care course to a two-day accredited nail art programme that includes a unit on setting up your own business. However, the partnership does not have a clear picture of progression in terms of the numbers of learners progressing, or suitable progression pathways.

In classes designed to help parents support their children, learners gain useful insights in relation to supporting their children in their own learning. Parents in a Lego therapy class confidently discuss strategies and approaches to helping their children with numeracy focussed activities, highlighting specific considerations given many of the children have additional learning needs. One parent identifies how newly learnt strategies will support her child. Another parent recognises that the task they are working on will support her son in developing resilience.

On essential skills and digital literacy programmes, many learners recall previous learning well and retain useful skills which they apply in new contexts. For example, learners on a family learning programme recap on what they learnt the previous week and specifically the information they gleaned from a video about how using Lego can meaningfully support their children's numeracy development. This prompts the group to discuss the ideas in greater detail with individuals adding their own views and suggestions in relation to supporting children with autistic spectrum condition. Learners in a digital literacy session recall how to duplicate, rename and delete files, which allows them to effectively engage with a new task. In a photoshop session, learners further develop existing skills to recreate photos of their family to include relatives who are missing from the original photograph.

Learners on well-being programmes develop confidence and skills. For example, as a result of a guitar for improvers course, learners have put on concerts, taken part in open mic nights, and written songs. Using newly honed skills, leaners on an upcycling clothes course confidently tackle new projects. For example, one learner has made pencil cases for her children and curtains and cushions for her home.

Most learners show high levels of engagement and readily contribute in sessions. They confidently interact with one another, their tutor and other support staff. In an ILS class, learners respond enthusiastically when the tutor shares the plan for the session adding their own suggestions about other tasks and activities that they want to include. For example, a learner suggests that they produce 'feelings' cards having previously used these and having found them helpful. Peers respond positively to this suggestion and develop ideas further by suggesting activities that may lead on from this, such as extended writing.

Learners develop and maintain their Welsh language skills well. In a Welsh-medium numeracy class, learners make good progress in improving their Welsh language oracy skills. In an ILS session, nearly all learners recall previous learning which includes Welsh words such as cariad, adref, and cwtch, and all learners in the group respond positively to being asked questions, proudly contributing answers in English,

Welsh, and sign language. Learners in a parent and baby yoga session readily sing Welsh songs and communicate with their babies in Welsh.

Well-being and attitudes to learning

Nearly all learners recognise that their courses have a positive impact on their well-being. For examples, a learner on an image creation course has reported feeling more self-assured in social settings, effectively managing social anxiety with support from both tutors and peers. Learners on an awareness course about attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) develop effective strategies for navigating challenges associated with their children's condition, supporting stronger relationships and enhancing the overall well-being of the family. Through interaction with peers, learners on a clothes upcycling course use it as an opportunity to socialise and engage in a hobby which supports their physical and mental health. The supportive environment helps combat isolation and loneliness, which enables learners to form meaningful connections and regain a sense of belonging. This is exemplified by learners in a self-funded art group who state that the course helps them to navigate mental health challenges and the transition to retirement.

Many learners actively apply their new skills beyond the classroom, contributing to their communities and personal growth. For instance, learners engage in various extracurricular activities including musical performances at local churches and volunteering at hospitals using sign language acquired in BSL classes. Skills acquired through courses such as sugar craft enabled one learner to start a successful cake-making business. Nearly all learners on digital courses embrace technology and its benefits. Learners confidently navigate technology, with positive impacts on their social interactions and overall well-being.

Most learners find that acquiring new skills not only enhances their abilities but also gives them a sense of accomplishment and pride. For instance, parents and children on a Lego therapy course receive certificates on completion of the programme, which gives them a sense of achievement. Similarly, a learner with additional learning needs (ALN) studying sugar craft is on track to successfully complete the course and achieve their first formal qualification, which gives the learner and their family an enormous sense of pride.

A minority of learners report that courses improve their physical health and cognitive function. For example, a learner on a 'guitar for improvers' course shares that the course helps to alleviate arthritic discomfort in their hands but also enhances their memory and recall.

Most learners display positive attitudes and behaviours, evident through their enthusiastic engagement and collaborative spirit. For example, learners on a digital tablets course demonstrate strong concentration levels, enabling them to complete complex tasks and engage effectively with course content. Learners on a one-day customer care course engage well with tasks, work productively in groups, and readily make contributions in class with confidence, which supports their progression onto a two-day accredited programme.

Many learners develop perseverance and problem-solving skills. For example, in a clothes upcycling class, learners diagnose problems with sewing machines and

explore new techniques. In a 'guitar for improvers' class, learners conduct performance reviews after each song, troubleshooting any issues and setting high standards for themselves and each other. In nearly all instances, learners work well together in a co-operative and supportive way. Learners share their knowledge and skills to support each other and facilitate collective progress.

A minority of learners do not have a clear idea of what they want to progress to. Learners on an ADHD awareness course would like to complete more short courses but are not aware of longer-term progression opportunities. Many learners are keen to engage in further learning but find it difficult to source information on the full range of opportunities available to them within the partnership.

Teaching and learning experiences

The partnership offers a useful range of provision, with an appropriate balance of engagement and well-being programmes, alongside provision to develop literacy, numeracy and digital skills. There is a suitable range of accredited and non-accredited programmes. In their provision planning, the main delivery partners collaborate effectively to avoid unhelpful duplication of provision. ESOL provision is limited, and there has not been a systematic analysis of the demand for it in the partnership's area.

The partnership has recently prepared a useful progression map which identifies pathways that learners can take to move through the provision. The partnership is beginning to use this to reflect on its provision and plan how it promotes and targets its courses. However, the partnership does not have clear enough progression pathways to take learners from short engagement programmes to further and higher levels of learning. Learners are often not aware of the potential routes and opportunities available to them and, as a result, their aspirations are limited. The partnership does not routinely analyse or evaluate the extent to which learners progress into, within, or beyond its provision.

The partnership responds well to information from its partners and referral agencies within the county to put on provision in response to local need. For example, the council's work and skills team, who work closely with family engagement officers in primary schools, identified a need for parents and carers of children with ADHD to learn more about how to support their children. As a result, the partnership delivers a short, accredited school-based course for parents and carers that is aimed at addressing this need.

Provision is offered in a range of useful venues across the county, including well-appointed learning centres such as Garth Olwg, local libraries, schools, and other community venues. Learners are usually able to access provision at a venue convenient to them. The partnership also delivers a small amount of provision online, which opens up opportunities for those who are not easily able to attend face-to-face classes.

The partnership has recently begun to pilot the offer of a small amount of Welsh-medium provision, with Menter Iaith Rhondda Cynon Taf as the delivery partner. This provision focuses on developing numeracy for parents of children at Welsh-medium schools, well-being programmes such as yoga for parents and babies, and 'digital

drop-ins'. The partnership offers a few of these programmes online, enabling learners to attend remotely.

The partnership supports a small number of self-funded clubs, by renting workshop, exhibition, or performance spaces. These clubs, such as the felting and ukelele groups, have often evolved from provision that was previously funded and provide valuable opportunities for learners to socialise, develop, and practise their craft or music skills. In a very few cases, the partnership offers funded provision to learners on courses where a self-funded club would be more appropriate.

Teaching across the partnership is strong. Tutors know their learners well and have a good understanding of the challenges and barriers they face. They plan and deliver well-structured and impactful sessions to motivate and engage learners. As a result, learners make sound progress in their sessions.

Tutors create trusting communities of learning in their classes, even on short courses. They manage discussions very well, ensuring that they engage all learners in the group and draw out their experiences to help move learning forward. They create safe spaces for learners to contribute, and as a result, learning conversations are sincere, constructive, and frequently punctuated with humour. For example, in a short course on ADHD awareness, learners were able to share experiences during discussions to motivate and support each other in the challenges they face in every-day life with their children.

Tutors manage the pace of learning in their sessions well. They adapt their delivery skilfully, both in a planned way, and in a responsive way, so that the full range of learners in their class make progress in that session at a suitable rate. For example, in a digital literacy class for older learners, the tutor matches their delivery well to the individual needs and learning goals of learners of a wide age spectrum. In a Welsh-medium class where learners' Welsh language proficiency levels range from beginners to fluent speakers, the tutor adeptly tailors the vocabulary used to suit the individual abilities of each learner.

Most tutors give useful feedback to learners that helps them to improve. This is frequently through a constructive conversation with the learner, which helps the learner take ownership of their learning and make progress in the lesson. Tutors also access useful assessment information, enabling them to adapt their lesson plans and delivery as a result.

While tutors are effective at helping learners achieve their short-term learning goals, partly due to a lack of clarity about the progression routes available to learners, they do not always guide learners to aspire to long-term goals that are sufficiently challenging.

Care, support and guidance

Individual providers in the partnership use a variety of methods to advertise their courses. This includes a presence at community events and taster sessions along with printed brochures and leaflets which are delivered to venues that offer existing provision. A few learners feel that information should be made available in more diverse community venues such as post offices. Individual organisations all have

social media platforms and websites detailing course information. However, these are not currently linked and there is no central place where learners and prospective learners can access information on new programmes or progression pathways. Most learners find out about courses via word of mouth.

The partnership plans and delivers relevant programmes to meet the needs of the diverse population of Rhondda Cynon Taf including programmes for older learners, part-time courses for those with additional learning needs, and confidence building drop-ins for staff in local workplaces. The partnership collates and shares information about support services for learners, and all tutors have a list of referral agencies that learners can access and benefit from which include Age Cymru, Mencap, C.A.L.L. Helpline and Scope. Tutors know their learners well and support their well-being needs as they arise through their interactions in classroom and other learning environments. Tutors effectively create opportunities for learners to support each other with well-being concerns. For example, one learner in an ILS session shares a personal concern during class. This leads to a wider discussion with peers sharing that they recognise these concerns, and they suggest sensible ways in which they can address these issues as part of a class activity. Senior officers, curriculum co-ordinators and tutors follow up on non-attendance and well-being issues with pastoral calls to help keep learners engaged.

Support for learners with additional learning needs is strong. The partnership offer includes pre-course screening to identify learner needs prior to starting a course, and where this takes place, it is helpful. For example, access to a scribe can be put in place ready for a learner if a need is identified. Where appropriate, tutors carry out individual assessments of additional learning needs before courses start and use this information to refer learners to the most suitable provision. One provider in the partnership delivers a four-week induction period for certain programmes, which tutors use effectively to identify support needs and put support in place. The partnership shares support resources where possible. For example, when one organisation needs to provide childcare to enable learners to take part on a course, they work with a wider partner organisation to put this in place.

The partnership promotes well-being, healthy lifestyles, and confidence building and tutors design course content to support learners with this. In a Welsh language numeracy session, one learner finds that learning through the medium of Welsh is easier and has increased his well-being and cognitive ability. He is now starting a new job through the medium of Welsh.

Learners on a digital literacy course value 'Digital Fridays', an initiative that supports learners with resolving issues with their digital devices. For example, one learner has accessed support with changing settings on their tablet which allows them to complete tasks more easily and continue their learning. The service, which is available in all libraries across the partnership, offers appointments to learners needing additional digital support. It also provides a referral service for prospective learners exploring adult learning opportunities.

There is an emphasis on learner voice across the partnership and tutors effectively incorporate opportunities for learners to feed into class planning. In a digital skills class, the tutor develops progression courses for learners based on learner input. A few learners develop their own learner-led self-funded groups, and learners in one art

group discuss the positive impact the session has on their well-being, particularly when it comes to relieving loneliness and building confidence. There are examples of positive partnership working in relation to learner voice such as the cross-partnership learner survey, which feeds into strategic planning.

Partners work to identify vulnerable learners or those in danger of radicalisation in ways that are appropriate to the contexts of their own organisations. Through a variety of training opportunities, providers ensure that tutors are equipped to recognise the signs of extremism and radicalisation and know how to respond appropriately to potential concerns or risks if necessary. The partnership's arrangements for safeguarding learners meet requirements.

Leadership and management

The partnership undertook an appropriate reconfiguration in 2023 which has revitalised the service following the Covid period. Managers took the opportunity to look at historic provision and reconsider priorities, and delivery partners. The new structure has a strategic and operational group and a series of newly formed subgroups to deal with specific issues such as developing the use of the Welsh language. The partnership has introduced the role of a systems and communications officer to support its work, but it is too early to measure the impact on learners. The council scrutiny committee receives regular reports about ACL and the partnership has strong support from local councillors.

The new strategic plan is based on national and regional priorities. There is a strong focus on supporting employability, lifelong learning, and well-being. The plan has ambitious and challenging targets including raising the percentage of residents' skills and qualifications in line with the national average for Wales. The partnership considers and uses funding allocations well to deliver priorities and manages its budget appropriately.

Operational partners work well together to deliver strategic priorities. The inclusion of the council's Work and Skills team in the work of the partnership supports the employability needs of the local population. The productive relationship with the Multiply team is an imaginative and effective way to integrate provision and share resources.

The partnership has strong relationships with many primary schools across the county. These schools are welcoming to community learners and not just those who have children in the school. The partnership has also forged useful links with the regional skills partnership and is beginning to share information and expertise with two neighbouring local authorities. These relationships are at an early stage, but staff are beginning to work together to help to raise skills and aspirations in the region.

The partnership has robust quality mechanisms in place including a detailed self-assessment process which captures key information and data about the partnership. The quality development plan is aspirational and includes targets relating to new areas of work such as providing safe environments for learners to use their Welsh and social prescribing.

The social prescribing element is being addressed effectively. Many established classes and groups meet the mental health and well-being needs of citizens, including older learners. The partnership is beginning to work with wider partners including social services and the local health board to increase understanding of the positive impact of adult learning on individuals and communities, especially in a county with an increasing proportion of older citizens.

The partnership has prepared a very useful, detailed paper on progression routes for learners, listing key providers including local university and college courses. However, it does not include a strategy for making learners aware of their next steps or the progression routes they can follow. The college's role in the partnership is not strong enough to create a clear pathway from adult community learning courses into college provision.

Staff across the providers take part in joint learning walks. However, these do not identify tutors' areas for improvement and training needs. Individual providers carry out teaching observations but there are no joint observations across partnership staff. A minority of observations include identified professional learning needs but there is no record of further actions to address these needs.

Tutors work collaboratively to develop materials for course delivery within their subject area and organisation but not across the partnership. A few tutors share good practice and expertise. For example, an IT tutor supports other tutors in the development of their IT skills. The essential skills awareness course delivered by local authority basic skills tutors to colleagues, work and skills and Citizens Advice is a good example of shared professional learning and how this led to improved staff practice and a positive impact on learners.

Evidence base of the report

Before the inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from the learner and staff questionnaires

During the inspection, inspectors normally:

- meet the chair of the partnership, governors (where appropriate), 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
- visit a broad sample of sessions
- observe and speak to learners outside of sessions
- look closely at the partnership's self-evaluation processes
- consider the partnership's quality improvement planning and looked at evidence to show how well the partnership had taken forward planned improvements
- scrutinise a wide range of partnership documents, including information on learner assessment and progress, records of meetings of staff and the governing body (where appropriate), 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:

- 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)

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 publication. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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