



RHONDDA CYNON TAF

EDUCATION AND INCLUSION SERVICES DIRECTORATE

Strategic Plan for 2022-2025

Mae'r ddogfen yma ar gael yn y Gymraeg
This document is available in Welsh

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Section 1: Foreword

Now more than ever, a clear and renewed mission and vision is required for the Education and Inclusion Service and schools in Rhondda Cynon Taf as we 'renew' and 'reform' and tackle the impact of the pandemic on our communities.

The pandemic has shone a light on the critical and invaluable role that our schools play in supporting our learners, their families, and wider communities. Our workforce has worked tirelessly and creatively throughout the pandemic to keep our learners and staff safe, maintaining continuity in learning and supporting the most vulnerable during a period of unprecedented challenge. The highly effective partnership working displayed across our schools and Council departments has demonstrated that together we can make a real difference to the lives of the learners and the communities that we serve. Learners and their families have also shown resilience and perseverance in adapting to the impact of the pandemic, acquiring new ways of accessing education and well-being support, with learners gaining qualifications through new centre assessed and determined grade processes. These changes have not been without their challenges, but the invaluable support provided by the educational workforce has ensured that barriers to learning have been proactively addressed and tackled, and learner progression sustained. Nevertheless, we know that some learners and families have been more adversely affected than others, and it is imperative that these learners are well supported to ensure their progression and engagement during this next phase of recovery.

A new and exciting era is now upon us as schools prepare and implement transformational plans for the delivery of the new Curriculum for Wales and Additional Learning Needs and Educational Tribunal Act (2018). Good well-being for all, ensuring progression for all learners and closing the gap in outcomes between our most and least disadvantaged and vulnerable learners remains a high priority for improvement as we work together to ensure that our learners access the best possible opportunities in the early years, throughout their formal education and beyond. Our ambitions for our learners remain very high and this strategy outlines our shared vision for improvement and the key actions that we will take together to ensure that this is realised.

	Councillor Jill Bonetto Cabinet Member for Education and Inclusion Services
	Gaynor Davies Director of Education and Inclusion Services
	Simon Roberts Chair of the Federation of Primary Headteachers
	Justin O'Sullivan Chair of the Association of Secondary Headteachers
	David Jenkins Chair of the Association of Special School/PRU Headteachers

Section 2: Introduction

As an Education Directorate, ensuring that every learner in Rhondda Cynon Taf has access to excellent schools and positive and enriching educational experiences that enable them to achieve the very best possible outcomes that they are capable of is our core purpose. This Strategic Plan for 2022-2025 sets out the direction for the Education and Inclusion Services Directorate for the next 3 years, describing its mission, vision and ambition for our schools in Rhondda Cynon Taf.

Our mission quite simply is: **‘To deliver equity and excellence in Education and enhanced well-being for all’**. The robust partnerships that have been forged between the local authority and non-maintained settings, schools and PRUs throughout the pandemic have strengthened our collective drive and purpose to ensure that all learners access the highest quality teaching and learning experiences, so that they are able to progress and grow as lifelong learners. Our aspirations for our learners have remained steadfastly high despite the challenges faced, as our children have the right to access a first-class education that enables them to realise their ambitions.

It is recognised that the pandemic has placed the education system under immense pressure and impacted on the health and well-being of our learners, workforce and communities. The economic, social and emotional impact of COVID-19 on our communities has been considerable and we have seen a significant growth in families living in poverty. We know that deprivation can cause inequalities and some families have faced multiple adverse experiences, including financial hardship, bereavement, loss, trauma, poor mental and physical ill-health. Among the learners who have been the most significantly impacted by school closures and other restrictions, basic skills, learning, well-being and attendance have regressed, and it is imperative that we now focus on improving learner progress, mental health and well-being. Ensuring that we secure improved attendance rates is an absolutely priority against a backdrop of ongoing anxiety about the transmission of COVID-19 in our communities.

Our schools’ unwavering commitment to achieving continuity in learning and meeting the well-being needs of our school communities throughout the pandemic has made a real difference to the lives of children, young people and their families. This has been achieved through sheer hard work and excellent partnership working within and across schools, local authority departments and the regional school improvement service. The sense of ‘one team’ pulling together to achieve our shared priorities has remained strong and these solid foundations and robust partnerships will stand us all in good stead as we now progress towards the next phase of renewal and reform, and a brighter and more optimistic future for our learners and our communities.

Our mission will be achieved by us realising our vision: **‘To inspire and support excellent leadership and professional practice so that all learners in Rhondda Cynon Taf make good progress and become ambitious, capable, creative and ethically informed’**. Excellent leadership and professional practice are critical to ensuring that we create an effective culture of equity and excellence in education and

high expectations, so that we can ensure the success of all schools and learners across the County Borough.

The financial environment for the Council, the wider public sector and residents continues to be challenging and we need to ensure that we invest in our priorities and draw on research so that we make informed decisions about the most appropriate high impact strategies and approaches that need to be adopted. Our policies must impact positively on those who experience socio-economic disadvantage and vulnerable groups.

We need to collectively address the educational impact of the inequalities that have been compounded by the pandemic and ensure that funding and pedagogical policies support the progression and development of all learners, including the most vulnerable groups. Ensuring that all learners attend school regularly is of critical importance.

Disruptions to learning and to social interactions and experiences have affected some learners' physical and mental health and well-being, as well as the staff that support them. This plan reaffirms our commitment to learner and staff well-being and mental health, and the vital importance of ensuring that everyone's emotional needs are well supported.

A smooth transition across all phases of education is important if learners are to thrive and achieve the best outcomes possible. Early years is a key area for development as it provides the platform on which future development and learning is built upon. It is important that learners start school with the necessary pre-requisite skills to make expected progress, as this will impact on their future educational experiences. Providing effective intervention in the early years and ensuring high quality provision and intervention for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged learners will remain key priorities so that educational standards are raised, attendance is improved, and the attainment gap narrowed. Learners in examination years require specific support to ensure that they achieve their goals and progress to further education, employment, apprenticeships or training.

As a Council we will continue to invest in our schools as part of our ambitious 21st Century Schools and Capital Investment Programme so that our learners have access to stimulating learning environments that will adequately prepare them for life in a digitally connected and rapidly evolving society. Our learners need a transformational curriculum that will develop their attributes, skills and knowledge so that they become ambitious, capable, confident and ethically informed individuals.

We will undoubtedly rise to the new challenges that we will face as we 'renew' and 'reform', and together we will ensure that we deliver on our co-constructed priorities for 2022-2025.

Section 3: Our Local Context

The Council's Corporate Plan for 2020-2024 is guided by the vision of making Rhondda Cynon Taf **“the best place in Wales to live, work and play, where people and businesses are independent, healthy and prosperous”**.

Its main purpose is: **“To provide strong community leadership and create the environment for people and businesses to be independent, healthy and prosperous”**.

The current Corporate Plan focuses on three key priorities:

1. Ensuring People: are independent, healthy and successful;
2. Creating Places: where people are proud to live, work and play;
3. Enabling Prosperity: creating the opportunity for people and businesses to be innovative; be entrepreneurial; and fulfil their potential and prosper.

The Corporate Plan sets out a vision, priorities and principles that continue to maximise the Council's contribution to the seven national well-being goals outlined in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. The Act requires all public bodies in Wales to think about the long-term impact of their decisions, to work better with people, communities and each other, and to prevent persistent problems such as poverty, health inequalities and climate change. These national goals, together with the five Ways of Working, will continue to be incorporated into the detailed action plans that will deliver the Council's three priorities. The Education Directorate's Strategic Plan will reflect these overarching priorities and a golden thread will run through the Corporate, Directorate and Service Plans to ensure that there is alignment in strategic developments.

The Corporate Plan places an important emphasis on the climate change agenda and highlights the Council's ambition to being a 'A net-zero Green House Gas Council by 2050', to meet the recommendation of the UK Committee on Climate Change. Modernisation of our school buildings and ensuring that they are energy efficient remains a priority, and there is excellent support for our ambitious 21st Century Schools Programme and the effective delivery of our Welsh in Education Strategic Plan. The Band B funding envelope provisionally approved by Welsh Government equates to £252M and this investment will build on the excellent work achieved as part of Band A developments.

Effective early intervention and preventative approaches are central to the Corporate Plan so that we overcome the barriers commonly associated with disadvantage and avoid the need for the involvement of statutory services. A clear focus on providing the right support at the right time is imperative if we are to give our children the best start and chances in life. There is a corporate recognition that learning occurs both within the home and educational context, and effective parental engagement and high-quality early years support is essential for getting our learners ready for statutory schooling. This need

has been heightened by the pandemic as countless learners have missed out on invaluable early learning, play and social interaction opportunities during this challenging period. Ensuring and facilitating the engagement of parents/carers in their children's learning and mainstream services is imperative if children are to achieve their potential.

Our schools and the Education Directorate have a critical role in ensuring that the needs of learners are considered in everything that we do and that their voices are heard. A clear focus on school and service improvement is essential to ensure that our learners have access to the highest quality teaching and learning, and the specialist services to meet their needs. Continuous school and service improvement is critically important and our commissioned school improvement service, Central South Consortium (CSC), is instrumental in ensuring that we have a self-improving system across the five local authorities which it represents regionally.

Stakeholder feedback will be routinely sought to ensure that we provide services that are fit for purpose and meet the needs of our learners, schools and the wider community. The importance of social partnerships in securing partner feedback will continue to underpin and shape strategic developments so that we can ensure continued service and school improvement, and effective collaborative working. Narrowing the attainment gap that exists between vulnerable groups so that all learners, including those with the most complex additional learning needs and disabilities, achieve their potential is an important corporate strategic priority. The delivery of a transformational curriculum in excellent schools and PRUs will provide our learners with the best possible chance of achieving their potential and progressing on to further education, employment, training or apprenticeships when they leave school. Providing first-class educational opportunities will be critical in breaking the poverty cycle that exists in some of our communities.

Rhondda Cynon Taf's population continues to grow and at the time of writing has a population of 241,873. It is the third largest local authority in Wales by population and has lower levels of employment than the Welsh average, with 67.3% of the population (aged 16+) in employment compared with 72.8% across Wales. A total of 18.6% of the population is aged 0-15 (17.8% in Wales). The growth in the number of learners across the County Borough that are eligible for free school meals has been significant and approximately one in four (25.72%, April 2021) learners are now eligible which reflects the significant economic impact of the pandemic on our communities.

Prior to the pandemic, improving attendance and reducing exclusions were priorities for improvement and this remains to be the case. It is imperative that significant improvements in engagement and attendance are secured particularly at a time when anxiety relating to the COVID-19 virus remains high. Schools require strategies to secure good attendance and to improve patterns of behaviour through the development of highly effective whole school, group and targeted approaches. To enhance the capacity of secondary and all through schools to meet need of learners with significant social, emotional and behavioural needs, an additional investment of £1.1M has been made to strengthen the continuum of provision and bespoke learning opportunities for the most disengaged young people. This investment has been instrumental in supporting mainstream inclusion for some of our most disadvantaged learners, reducing incidents of fixed term exclusion and the demand for more costly specialist PRU placements.

In addition to this enhanced investment, Cabinet has supported the funding of family engagement officers within some of our most disadvantaged communities. These family engagement roles strengthen the capacity of schools to engage with families beyond the school gate, promoting multi-agency working and access to timely family support to overcome hardship and any barriers to learning and engagement. There is well documented research evidence which highlights that family involvement is one of the strongest predictors of children's school success, and that families play pivotal roles in their children's cognitive, social and emotional development from birth through adolescence. Nevertheless, many families require support to develop resilience and to overcome the multiple stress factors commonly associated with financial hardship, so they are better placed to support their child's learning and engagement in education. Strong partnership working across Council departments, school and families will be essential if we are to achieve sustainable improvements in learner outcomes.

Economic prosperity, social cohesion and well-being are built on the foundations of excellent schools and education and delivering on our Corporate and Education Strategic Plans will be critical in improving the life chances and prosperity of current and future generations of children and young people in Rhondda Cynon Taf.

Section 4: The Changing Educational Landscape

The educational landscape is significantly changing and there will be a new curriculum for schools and funded non-maintained settings in Wales from September 2022. The Curriculum for Wales has been shaped by international research and evidence from across the world. A defining feature of the new curriculum framework is the emphasis on learner progression, which will be supported by new assessment arrangements that enable each individual learner to make progress at an appropriate pace, taking into account their diverse needs. To support these developments there are new approaches to professional learning and to supporting schools which will collectively complement and enhance the new 3-16 curriculum. The need for a new curriculum is self-evident, as the current national curriculum was introduced in the late 1980s, when life bore little resemblance to the fast paced, digitally connected and technologically advancing age that we now find ourselves in. Life now is very different, and society is changing. As educators we need to equip our learners with the skills, knowledge and experiences that will ensure that they play a full and active role in their communities and in wider society.

The four core purposes of the new curriculum will form the basis for all future decisions about national and local educational priorities and should underpin all teaching and learning in Rhondda Cynon Taf so that we develop:

- ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives;
- enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work;
- ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world; and
- healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.

The new curriculum will be an important vehicle for embedding the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in the experience of learning and teaching and for giving our learners an understanding of their rights. Six areas of learning and experience (AOLEs) have been developed as a central element of the new curriculum.

These are:

- Languages, Literacy and Communication;
- Mathematics and Numeracy;
- Science and Technology;
- Health and Well-being;
- Humanities; and
- Expressive Arts.

Literacy, numeracy and digital competence are mandatory skills that have to be taught across all AOLEs and will need to be considered within all curriculum design. It will be the responsibility of all teachers to ensure progression in these skills across and within all the AOLEs.

In addition to these areas, the school's curriculum will also cover:

- human rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- diversity and respecting differences;
- experiences and skills for careers and the workplace;
- local, national and international aspects of all learning; and
- relationships and sexuality education.

The new curriculum should be considered as a journey that builds on knowledge, skills and experiences. There may be times when learners move forward quickly, slow down to make sure they understand a topic, or even take a detour because they discover something that interests them. Progression will not always be linked to a learner's age as learning does not happen in the same way and at the same time for everyone. Learners will progress as their knowledge increases, understanding deepens, communication skills grow, and skills improve. Assessment will be built into a school's curriculum and will be part of children's everyday learning experiences, planned in a way that fosters the teachers' and learners' understanding of individual progression. As a result, it is vital that the curriculum that is taught and experienced by learners prepares them to thrive in a future where digital skills, adaptability and creativity, alongside knowledge, are crucial. In essence, we are preparing our current generation of learners for jobs that do not yet exist.

There is a recognition that leadership development will be a prime driver in delivering these transformational reforms. The National Academy of Education Leadership (NAEL) has been put in place alongside new developmental teaching and leadership standards for Wales. The main purpose of NAEL is to contribute to the development of the professional capabilities of current and aspiring leaders across the education system by providing coherence and quality assurance for the range of educational leadership development opportunities available in Wales. Strong leadership is essential if schools

are to evolve into creative learning organisations and to promote the ‘readiness’ of staff to deliver the new curriculum. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (the OECD) report in 2020, ‘Achieving the New Curriculum for Wales’, emphasised the importance of all aspects of the school system aligning with the new curriculum and its underlying principles. To support this, the ‘School Improvement Guidance - Framework for Evaluation, Improvement and Accountability’ was published by the Welsh Government in January 2021. This draft guidance provides a new point of reference for schools, local authorities, diocesan authorities, regional consortia and Estyn and outlines the expectations of them in contributing to school improvement. Welsh Government plan to make this draft guidance statutory in September 2022.

The introduction of the new curriculum contributes to our national goals as set out in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. The underlying importance of promoting well-being is a theme that runs through the new curriculum and in particular the Health and Well-being Area of Learning and Experience. This is further strengthened by Welsh Government’s recently published Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental well-being (2021). This provides a basis for schools, PRUs and education settings to review their own well-being landscape and to develop strategic approaches for securing improvements. The framework recognises that schools alone cannot meet all the needs of a population of children and young people and sets out the role of regional bodies and partner agencies in supporting schools. Strengthening partnership working for those with the most complex mental health needs is vitally important if we are to upskill the workforce and ensure that learners access the vital services that they require.

The new curriculum also supports another of the Act’s overarching goals, namely ‘A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language’. Welsh Government’s strategy ‘Cymraeg 2050: A Million Welsh Speakers’, has been devised to achieve this goal. The Council’s Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) has recently been updated and sets out the priorities for improvement over the forthcoming ten years, up to and including 2032, to make progress towards the achievement of a growth of between 8-12% in the percentage of year one learners in Welsh medium education. This equates to an increase from 506 learners to between 720 and 825 year one learners in Welsh medium education.

Our strategic decisions will be informed by the need to safeguard children’s rights and to ensure that the needs of children and young people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage are effectively met. Children’s rights are enshrined in Welsh law under the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 - underlining Wales’ commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In 2004, the Welsh Government formally adopted the UNCRC as the basis of policy making relating to children and young people. In Rhondda Cynon Taf we will ensure that children’s rights are given appropriate consideration so that we support children and young people’s right to be safe, to play, to have an education, to be healthy and be happy. There are four key articles which form the basis of the rights set out in the UNCRC which includes:

- Right to non-discrimination (article 2)

- Commitment to the best interests of the child (article 3)
- Right to life, survival and development (article 6)
- Right to be heard (article 12).

Article 12 of the UNCRC is about the rights of children and young people to express their views, feelings and wishes, and to have their views considered and taken seriously. This right will be an important focus as part of the three-year strategic plan.

The current educational landscape has been significantly complicated by the pandemic. Jeremy Miles, the Minister for Education and Welsh Language, issued a statement in June 2021 outlining Welsh Government's priorities for renewal and reform and the need to place learners' progression and well-being at the heart of everything as we recover from the pandemic. To support schools to progress with recovery and the implementation of key reforms the Minister has implemented a number of key changes to reduce unnecessary burdens on school. These include:

- The suspension of end of key stage assessment and moderation requirements;
- The suspension of key stage 4 and legacy sixth form performance measures has been extended to the 2021/22 academic year. Qualification awards data will not be used to report on attainment outcomes at a school, local authority or regional consortium level and will not be used to hold schools to account for their learners' outcomes;
- School categorisation will not take place in the academic year 2021/22 and schools will not be assigned a published category as part of this support process;
- All schools will be required to undertake effective self-evaluation to support continuous improvement. Evaluation, improvement, and accountability arrangements will require consideration of a broad range of information, relevant to a school's own context. This should include support from local authorities and regional consortia, using the learner level information to reflect on and improve their existing arrangements. A national evaluation and improvement resource is also being produced which will support schools in undertaking robust self-evaluation.

Alongside these key reforms is a national commitment to equity. Significant emphasis has been placed on well-being and the support for learners with additional learning needs (ALN) with significant policy development. The implementation of the Additional Learning Needs and Educational Tribunal Act (2018) (ALNET Act) has commenced and a phased approach to its implementation will be adopted over the next three years. Strong strategic leadership of these transformational ALN reforms will be essential to ensure that schools are compliant with our new statutory responsibilities and effectively meet the needs of our most vulnerable learners and their families.

Estyn extended the suspension of their core inspection programme for schools and pupil referral units to include the autumn term 2021, although monitoring visits to schools in a statutory category have continued. During 2021–2022, Estyn will support the education system in renewing and reforming, with a particular focus on supporting the preparation

for Curriculum for Wales and additional learning needs reform. From spring 2022, Estyn will pilot the new inspection arrangements in a small number of schools and PRUs.

New socio-economic duties came into force in Wales 2021 under Section 1 of the Equality Act (2010). This places a clear duty on public bodies to consider the impact of strategic decisions on improving the outcomes for those who suffer economic adversity. This legislation aims to improve the lives of those who are most vulnerable by addressing the inequalities most commonly associated with poverty and all policy decisions will be informed by this important duty.

The pandemic has undoubtedly created additional pressures on the education system in Wales at a time of significant reform and change. Our local authority strategy will work in synergy with this changing national landscape whilst recognising and addressing the particular needs of Rhondda Cynon Taf and its communities. It reflects both national and local priorities and sets out a road map of activity for the Education and Inclusion Services Directorate and schools for the next three years so that we deliver sustainable school and service improvements and improved outcomes for our learners.

Section 5: Our Key Achievements from March 2020 - July 2021

Since March 2020, school leaders and Education officers have radically adapted traditional delivery models to focus on maintaining continuity in learning through blended learning approaches and ensuring that the well-being needs of all learners, and in particular the most vulnerable, have been supported. Emergency childcare hubs for vulnerable learners and the children of key workers were quickly established at the start of the pandemic and strategic plans swiftly refocussed to ensure that these were reflective of new and emerging priorities. It is impossible to capture all of the strategic achievements of the Education and Inclusion Services Directorate and schools during this period and to capture the sterling efforts of our workforce, but key achievements are summarised as follows:

Keeping learners and staff safe

- The local authority routinely published robust, well-informed and regularly updated guidance and protocols to support schools to keep learners and staff safe;
- Schools developed and regularly updated complex risk assessments and business continuity plans to reflect changes in national and local guidance and presenting risks;
- Parents and carers were regularly provided with information and guidance to keep their children and communities safe;
- Effective and wide-ranging communication strategies were established with stakeholders to ensure swift and consistent messaging;
- Highly effective systems, support networks and processes for managing high numbers of COVID-19 cases were established for stakeholders 7 days a week,

which minimised disruption to learning and maintained continuity in learning. Excellent partnerships and team working both within schools and across Council departments ensured that high numbers of cases and close contacts were efficiently and effectively identified, and swift action taken to mitigate risks;

- The Directorate and schools worked in partnership to establish 25 emergency childcare hubs, ensuring that the children of key workers and vulnerable learners were effectively identified and supported in safe environments;
- Data information systems were aligned across Directorates to produce management information for schools on vulnerable learners as defined by Welsh Government thus ensuring timely targeted support and attendance information was shared to ensure professional oversight and targeted support for our most vulnerable learners and families;
- Schools were swiftly supplied with PPE, signage, sanitiser, thermal devices and face coverings to minimise transmission risks in schools;
- School and classroom layouts were remodelled, and standard operational procedures significantly changed to minimise transmission risk to staff and learners;
- The Education Directorate developed guidance, processes and procedures to deliver a mass lateral flow testing (LFT) pilot on a secondary school site;
- Schools and families were provided with detailed advice, guidance and supplies to undertake lateral flow testing for school staff and secondary school learners; and
- The vaccination programme for eligible school staff was made available to mitigate risks for the most vulnerable learners.

Continuity in Learning

- In partnership with Central South Consortium (CSC), schools had access to advice, guidance and professional learning on blended and remote learning;
- Education and CSC shared best practice on blended and remote learning, which facilitated school to school support;
- Working collaboratively with schools and ICT colleagues, the Education Directorate ensured that all learners had access to digital learning and that digitally excluded learners were identified and provided with appropriate devices (in excess of 5,400 devices were provided across RCT);
- We ensured that learners and staff were safeguarded on-line through the provision of appropriate advice and written guidance for schools;
- In partnership with CSC and schools, the remote learning offer across schools was quality assured and strategic support provided where required;
- We collated and analysed stakeholder feedback (including parent/carers surveys) to shape and further improve the blended learning offer and Council Services; and
- Schools worked tirelessly to develop robust processes and procedures to produce Centre Assessed/Determined Grades that accurately reflected learners' abilities.

Supported the most vulnerable

- Effectively delivered the Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme across 99 settings for 747 children;
- Administered and delivered breakfast clubs for in excess of 3,500 learners on a termly basis;
- Ensured access to free school meals in the community for approximately 8,500 learners at the start of the pandemic;
- Provided BACS payments for in excess of 10,000 learners eligible for free school meals;
- Provided targeted support and transport to engage the most vulnerable in childcare hubs and in distance learning;
- Provided virtual, telephone and home visits to support vulnerable learners and their families;
- Remodelled local authority services and school support for those in need, ensuring that non-statutory and statutory duties were met;
- Secured funding and the provision of family engagement officers for 6 all through/secondary schools;
- Secured additional funding to extend the family engagement officer pilot to 13 primary schools in the areas of greatest deprivation;
- Secured in excess of £1.1M for step 4 provisions in targeted all through/secondary schools which supported the development of bespoke provision for learners with significant social, emotional and behavioural needs;
- In partnership with a range of Council departments and school staff, co-ordinated and delivered a summer activity programme for vulnerable children and the children of critical workers across 7 educational settings; and
- Delivered the Summer Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP) in 16 school settings.

Enhanced digital capacity across the system

- Developed digital and agile working capacity across the Directorate and schools through the effective use of Zoom, Microsoft Teams and other digital applications and ensured access to training and guidance for the workforce on the use of applications;
- Improved the use of digital technology and management information systems across the Directorate and evaluated data to improve service delivery and secure improvements. This included:
 - ▶ collation of data on attendance at childcare hubs according to vulnerable groups and key worker status
 - ▶ production of live data reports on attendance, exclusions, admissions, COVID-19 cases in schools and in-year transfers
 - ▶ data reporting on engagement and targeted support for vulnerable groups

- ▶ data reporting on service engagement and involvement with the most vulnerable
- ▶ use of e-forms for wide ranging online applications
- ▶ use of Microsoft forms to inform swift multi-disciplinary decision making on COVID-19 cases and the reduction of transmission risks
- ▶ introduction of Microsoft forms for undertaking stakeholder feedback
- ▶ convened Hub leads, headteacher, governor and multi-disciplinary recovery planning meetings virtually
- ▶ introduction of 'My Concern' across all settings to digitise safeguarding procedures and to ensure consistency in approaches across settings;
- Implemented the Hwb Infrastructure programme and delivered improved connectivity across school sites; and
- Developed and consulted on a 5-year Digital Strategy for Schools.

School Improvement

- Schools and services continued to progress with Curriculum for Wales and ALNET Act (2018) reforms through professional learning opportunities, cluster workshops, strategic planning and implementation;
- Schools delivered an improved blended learning offer and demonstrated increased learner engagement over time;
- A total of 3 schools were removed from Estyn review during the pandemic;
- Historical red/amber schools actively engaged in progress meetings and have made good or strong progress on recommendations and Post Inspection Action Plans in nearly all cases;
- All schools in budget deficit have made excellent progress in delivering their budget recovery plans;
- Schools have effectively used step 4 funding to establish bespoke provision for learners with significant social, emotional and behaviour difficulties in 11 secondary schools;
- Induction for new and acting headteachers in RCT has been provided;
- A further cohort of aspiring headteachers have successfully completed a local authority leadership programme which was widely reported as transformational by participants;
- A cohort of middle leaders have completed a positively evaluated Leading from the Centre professional learning course; and
- In partnership with CSC and Human Resources, support and guidance for headteacher/staff well-being has been provided.

Continued to deliver on 21st Century Schools Developments

- Secured approval in principle of £167.39M (enhanced to £252.207M in September 2021) from Welsh Government for the delivery of Band B Capital projects:

- ▶ A new school for Hirwaun Primary School has been finalised and £10.2M invested
 - ▶ Significant works to increase capacity and provide early years childcare are being undertaken in Ysgol Gynradd Gymraeg Aberdar with an investment of £4.5M planned
 - ▶ Ysgol Gyfun Rhydywaun is undergoing significant refurbishment with an investment of £12M
 - ▶ Plans for a new Welsh medium primary school for Rhydyfelin are underway at an estimated cost of £13M
 - ▶ A new 3-16 school is planned on the Pontypridd High School site, with an estimated investment of £8M
 - ▶ A new 3-16 school is planned on the Hawthorn High School site, with an investment of £21M
 - ▶ New block/remodelling for Bryncelynnog Comprehensive is planned at a cost of £15M;
- In addition to the Band B Capital projects, the Council has a number of Mutual Investment Model (MIM) schemes in development including 3 new schools for Llanilltud Faerdref Primary, Pontyclun Primary and Penygawsi Primary at an estimated cost of £23M;
 - The Council secured a brand new site for a new school planned for Ysgol Gynradd Gymraeg Llyn-y-Forwyn at an estimated cost of £8.5M;
 - The significant expansion of Dolau Primary School is planned with an investment of £10M estimated;
 - The Council has provided a new £1M early years setting at Treorchy Primary School;
 - A new classroom extension has been put in place at Ysgol Gynradd Gymraeg Llantrisant at a cost of £800k;
 - A new £700k Cylch Meithrin has been established at Ysgol Gynradd Gymraeg Ynyswen;
 - Ysgol Gynradd Gymraeg Abercynon has received an investment of approximately £200k to create a new Welsh medium sessional care provision;
 - Significant work at a cost of £730k is being undertaken at Dolau Primary School to create new Welsh medium sessional care provision;
 - A new early years provision at Gwauncelyn Primary School will be established at a cost of £745k with completion planned for January 2022;
 - A new early years provision at Cwmlai Primary School, costing £750k, is in progress with completion planned for April 2022;
 - A small capital grant scheme has resulted in improvements in a number of early years settings to make adaptations to support the effective management of COVID-19; and
 - A substantial amount of funding has been invested as part of the schools' Capital Programme during the pandemic.

It should be noted that the partnership working with schools extended to other Council departments including Public Health and Protection, Health and Safety, Human Resources, Corporate Estates, Finance, ICT, Children’s Services and many others. A culture and ethos of ‘one team’ working together to make a difference has been a strong feature throughout the pandemic and has enabled the Council and our schools to deliver positive outcomes for our communities.

Section 6: Our Mission

Our mission in Rhondda Cynon Taf is to:

‘To deliver equity and excellence in Education and enhanced well-being for all’

Our mission is to strive for excellence in all we do, where excellence is defined as the gradual result of always striving to do better and securing improvements. The benefits achieved from effective short, medium and long term improvement work focused on a set of key priorities will ensure improved outcomes for our learners and will take us on our journey to a better brighter future.

It is widely acknowledged that excellence ‘takes hard work, strong leadership, clear vision and relentless commitment to achieve’ (Estyn 2020). We will ensure that our schools are well supported on their journey to achieving equity and excellence in Education and enhanced well-being for all. For settings where practice is already deemed to be excellent or very strong, opportunities for sharing best practice and for facilitating school to school support, in partnership with the Central South Consortium, will be encouraged.

Equity can only be achieved if we ensure that the system successfully identifies and addresses the unique challenges that present themselves to individuals or groups of learners. Our learners deserve to experience equity in education and have access to the right support at the right time to overcome barriers to learning, engagement and attendance. Deprivation, gender, sexuality, adverse childhood experiences, ethnicity, additional learning needs or disability should not prevent our learners from reaching their potential and achieving positive outcomes. To achieve the four core purposes of the new curriculum, strong leadership and a relentless focus on ensuring excellent educational experiences and teaching and learning that meets the needs of all learners will be essential.

Section 7: Our Vision

Our vision is:

‘To inspire and support excellent leadership and professional practice so that all learners in Rhondda Cynon Taf make good progress and become ambitious, capable, creative and ethically informed’

Our workforce is central to us making a difference to the lives of our learners and communities. Despite the challenges faced during the pandemic, we remain positively focused on ensuring that we have the highest quality school leaders and educational practitioners in our schools. Having a highly skilled and trained workforce will enable us to deliver a transformational curriculum and high-quality educational experiences across our schools, which will remain a critical focus over the next three years and beyond.

An emphasis on strong leadership and professional learning, will help deliver on the high expectations we all share for our learners and schools. By investing in the professional development of our school leaders and workforce we aim to create high quality teaching and learning that is underpinned by a robust understanding of pedagogy, child development and subject knowledge. The challenges we face in closing the attainment gap are such that our teaching approaches and interventions need to be research informed and based on best practice at local, regional, national and international levels. Securing improvements in the quality of teaching and learning and the effectiveness of school support will be critical in securing the four core purposes of the new curriculum and sustaining excellent practice across all schools. Central to this vision is good school attendance and engagement in education where all teachers are skilled in meeting the needs of learners with significant ALN and promoting successful inclusion.

Investment in professional learning needs to span the education workforce so learners are well supported across the spectrum of staff with responsibility for teaching, supporting learning, engagement and well-being. Staff with skills in establishing warm, caring and positive relationships and learning environments will be critical in supporting our learners during this important phase of renewal and reform. Clarity in the professional learning offer will be important in minimising duplication across the system.

Section 8: Our Strategic Priorities

Our revised strategy will give priority to those areas proven to be effective in achieving our mission, vision and the areas identified from robust self-evaluation and stakeholder feedback. These are also reflective of our local corporate priorities set within the context of national and local recovery and reform.

Priority 1:	Developing a highly skilled educational workforce and excellent leadership at all levels.
Priority 2:	Supporting educational settings to deliver a transformational curriculum, high quality teaching and learning and improved outcomes for all.
Priority 3:	Ensuring equity and support for vulnerable learners and their families.
Priority 4:	Enhancing the well-being of our learners and the workforce.
Priority 5:	Delivering 21st Century learning environments and innovative services for our learners and communities.

Strategic Priority 1:	Developing a highly skilled educational workforce and excellent leadership at all levels.
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This priority focuses on developing a highly skilled educational workforce and excellent leadership at all levels by:

- ensuring that governors, senior and middle leaders have the highest ambition and expectations and achieve consistency in the implementation of key policies and systems;
- ensuring school governance is strong through high quality training, support and challenge;
- ensuring effective social partnerships to support the effective development and implementation of strategic developments;
- ensuring effective self-evaluation and the collation of regular stakeholder feedback, including learner voice, to shape strategic improvement plans at local authority and school level;
- establishing a headteacher reference group to assist with strategic developments;
- ensuring that school improvement support is aligned with the new draft framework for evaluation, improvement and accountability, and delivers the necessary school improvements;
- in partnership with CSC, further developing our schools as learning organisations as a means of realising the new curriculum;
- providing excellent professional learning for staff, in partnership with CSC;
- exploring and evaluating different models of professional leadership at school and cluster level through professional learning opportunities and strategic support;
- improving the quality of teachers' pedagogy and research informed practice;

- ensuring the effective implementation of professional standards for teachers and other professionals;
- ensuring school leaders develop effective plans to keep their school communities safe;
- ensuring that all newly appointed school leaders access induction and a mentor;
- ensuring that there is a robust succession planning strategy in place and that there is an investment in leadership training for aspiring headteachers;
- identifying staffing pressures and developing effective approaches to attracting and retaining the highest quality school leaders and staff to RCT; and
- working with partners to ensure the quality and sufficiency of staff for schools, particularly in the Welsh medium sector.

Strategic Priority 2:	Supporting educational settings to deliver a transformational curriculum, high quality teaching and learning and improved outcomes for all.
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Strategic priority 2 focuses on supporting educational settings to deliver a transformational curriculum, high quality teaching and learning and improved outcomes for all. This will be achieved by:

- ensuring that our commissioned school improvement service reflects our unique local context and supports our schools to continuously improve and deliver improved teaching and learning and positive learner progression for all;
- strengthening the development of a self-improving system, effective school to school support and the sharing of best practice;
- ensuring that the schools with the greatest needs access bespoke and effective support to improve and to get Curriculum for Wales ready;
- ensuring a fully integrated cross directorate early years strategic plan for 0-7 year olds that ensures that learners access the right support at the right time;
- ensuring that non-maintained and maintained early years settings provide the necessary development of appropriate cognitive, social and emotional skills and the necessary pre-requisite skills for learning and progression;
- ensuring that teaching and learning in all schools and PRUs is improved and aligned with the new requirements of the AOLEs;
- connecting new curriculum developments to innovative projects aimed at supporting the Council's ambitious Climate Change Strategy;
- ensuring that there is synergy between the Health and Well-being Area of Learning and Experiences and the Framework for Embedding A Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Well-being;
- strengthening cluster-based approaches to develop and deliver the new curriculum and to share best practice;
- exploring cross sector partnerships to develop the new curriculum with a view to improving learning and wellbeing and longer term health, prosperity and employment benefits;

- improving evaluation approaches at all levels to understand the progress made by all learners;
- ensuring that schools effectively track learner outcomes, and robustly evaluate targeted strategies and interventions aimed improving learner progression;
- ensuring that schools are supported to be research-informed and apply local, national and international evidence based best practice to their own settings;
- ensuring that schools have a shared understanding of Equity and Excellence in Education;
- ensuring that all learners make progress in literacy, numeracy and ICT; and the attainment gap between the most and least affluent peers is narrowed;
- implementing and evaluating the impact of the Council's literacy project aimed at improving standards in writing in secondary schools;
- developing and evaluating a strategic initiative aimed at improving the development of speech and language skills in the early years;
- ensuring that all schools have a programme of cultural, sporting, creative and recreational enrichment activities for learners throughout their statutory schooling;
- ensuring that parents/carers are kept informed about key reforms and are supported to enhance their child's learning; and
- working in partnership with CSC to ensure that schools are supported to develop bilingual competence and the development of Welsh language skills.

Strategic Priority 3:	Ensuring equity and support for vulnerable learners and their families.
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Strategic priority 3 focuses on ensuring the right learning pathway and support for vulnerable learners and their families. This will be achieved by:

- ensuring that all school staff have received appropriate professional learning on the ALNET Act and are fully aware of their statutory duties and the principles of person centred practice;
- supporting schools to effectively self-evaluate ALN provision and strategically plan for improvement;
- ensuring that governing bodies receive an annual report on ALN and scrutinise provision;
- establishing sustainable and self-reliant cluster-based approaches to ALNET Act transformation;
- strengthening partnership working with schools, health, social care and FEIs in order to deliver improved outcomes for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged;
- continuing to improve the quality of targeted support so that the educational outcomes of all vulnerable groups, including learners eligible for free school meals, with ALN, ethnic minority groups and children that are looked after are improved;

- ensuring that those most adversely affected by the pandemic are identified and access enhanced support to make measurable progress;
- implementing and evaluating the effectiveness of strategic programmes and interventions aimed at overcoming the barriers to attendance and engagement for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable;
- ensuring that all schools engage in provision mapping for ALN and can demonstrate impact;
- ensuring that models of enhanced capacity funding for ALN is aligned with the ALN reforms and supports effective mainstream inclusion;
- ensuring that parents/carers are well informed about the ALNET Act (2018) and are supported and empowered to meet their children’s needs;
- exploring the viability of establishing a sub-regional sensory service;
- further improving outcomes for children that are looked after by piloting a Virtual School for looked after children;
- reviewing and remodelling individual and group tuition provision;
- ensuring that elective home education processes, procedures and provision are effective in meeting the needs of learners;
- ensuring that there is an integrated early years offer for learners with ALN;
- ensuring seamless transition across all phases and ensuring greater continuity in education, particularly in the Welsh medium sector;
- developing more extensive alternative learning pathways for 14-19 year olds and evaluating the effectiveness of step 4 provision development across key schools;
- providing learners with access to high quality careers information and guidance that enables them to make informed decisions about their future educational path and careers;
- strengthening approaches to Gatsby and preparation for the world of work, training and further education;
- supporting effective family engagement and partnership working across the Resilient Families Service, families and schools; and
- further extending and evaluating the effectiveness of the SEREN programme.

Strategic Priority 4:	Enhancing the well-being of our learners and the workforce.
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Priority 4 focuses on enhancing the well-being of our learners and the workforce. This will be delivered by:

- supporting schools to self-evaluate against the ‘Framework on Embedding a Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Well-being’ and to deliver effective strategic plans aimed at improving staff and learner well-being;
- developing professional learning to support effective implementation of the Framework, in partnership with our regional school improvement service;

- extending trauma informed practice across all schools, including train the trainer models;
- establishing cluster well-being champions and effective cluster initiatives and practice;
- using evidence based research to inform best practice in the support of vulnerable learners and enquiry based research and intervention;
- further extending family engagement roles across the County Borough and evaluating the impact of funding on outcomes;
- ensuring that the continuum of support for learners with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties is fit for purpose and delivers improved outcomes for learners;
- re-aligning the Attendance and Well-being Service to ensure effective support for schools and learners to overcome barriers to attendance and engagement;
- ensuring enhanced wellbeing support is in place for learners and staff which is clearly defined and accessible (e.g., counselling services, mentoring schemes);
- developing integrated well-being pathways for learners in partnership with Children’s Services, Youth Services and CAMHS;
- extending PERMA across schools and evaluating impact;
- developing consistent and holistic measures of well-being and data packs;
- routinely capturing learner voice across the system about issues relating to well-being and learning, ensuring that this shapes strategic priorities;
- ensuring that approaches relating to children’s rights are embedded across all schools and that learner’s voices are listened to and inform strategic developments;
- promoting access to breakfast clubs and free school meals for eligible learners;
- ensuring that schools are proactively involved in healthy schools’ schemes and actively promote physical activity and lifestyles;
- promoting opportunities for learners to actively engage in their communities, through active participation in sport, leisure and play activities; and
- implementing an effective anti-bullying strategy.

Strategic Priority 5:	Delivering safe 21 st Century learning environments and innovative services for our learners and communities.
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Strategic Priority 5 focuses on delivering safe 21st Century learning environments and innovative services for our learners and communities. This will be achieved by:

- ensuring effective delivery of our ambitious Band B 21st Century Schools Capital and Mutual Investment Model (MIM) Modernisation Programme;
- ensuring new schools are built to Net Zero Carbon standards wherever possible and are low in carbon emissions and energy efficient;

- delivering on Welsh Government’s Early Years Grant and further developing the Childcare Offer;
- creating well designed and accessible schools that deliver the requirements of the ALNET Act;
- further developing effective approaches to outdoor learning and enhancing the external environment and the biodiversity of our school estate;
- supporting schools to deliver on the Council’s Climate Change Strategy;
- ensuring that developments are aligned with the Local Development Plan and address the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan;
- developing, implementing and closely monitoring the implementation and impact of the new 10 year WESP;
- developing effective partnership approaches to promoting community cohesion and the Prevent agenda;
- ensuring that schools have robust safeguarding processes and procedures, and consistent information management approaches;
- building on our Community Focused Schools approaches and opportunities for strengthening joint working between schools and communities for the benefit our learners and their families;
- delivering on our Digital Strategy for Schools and our Hwb Transformation Programme so that schools are well placed to deliver on the new Curriculum for Wales;
- developing more effective platforms for sharing digital information, guidance and policy documents for learners, schools, parents/carers and other stakeholders;
- enhancing opportunities for securing stakeholder feedback on all aspects of service design and delivery;
- strengthening engagement and communication channels with learners; and
- establishing an effective multi-agency approach to substance misuse and community safety challenges.

Section 9: How will we achieve our priorities?

Our work across the Education and Inclusion Services Directorate and schools will be underpinned by the four core values of:

Collaboration – Aspiration – Inclusion – Innovation

- Partnership and effective **collaboration** will be integral to supporting our most vulnerable learners and families so that they have the best chance of achieving success. Strong partnerships will be established across the system in pursuit of excellence and improved outcomes for all learners. Schools will be supported to address under-performance and timely action taken when there is concern about leadership, school performance or educational outcomes. With CSC, we will identify and provide access to the most effective practice in order to build capacity for improvement throughout the system. Headteachers, governors, senior and middle leaders and all practitioners will be supported to make a full and active contribution to system leadership and to build capacity for school to school support across the system.
- All learners will be encouraged, challenged and supported to have high **aspirations** and expectations of themselves. All learners will have the right to access the highest quality teaching and learning opportunities and support to enable them to achieve their ambitions and the best outcomes they are capable of. There must be a relentless focus on securing learner engagement, attendance and improvement in the outcomes achieved by all: only the highest level of ambition and expectations will do. We will work in partnership with families and the communities that we serve so that current and future generations of children and young people have the best possible chance of achieving success and prosperity.
- All learners and families face different and unique challenges and will access timely support and/or guidance to overcome potential barriers. Our schools will be supported to ensure they promote **inclusion** and restorative practices which offer solutions to assist learners to overcome barriers to learning and engagement. The well-being and rights of all learners will be at the core of everything we do, and their rights will be respected and their views on the decisions that affect them will be listened to and given due consideration. All learners will be safeguarded from harm and should feel safe and secure in their schools, homes and communities. All learners will have access to opportunities to develop their Welsh language skills and awareness of their cultural heritage. Difference and diversity will be embraced, and equity actively promoted.
- We must ensure that school leaders and all other partners share the belief that all learners are entitled to an education of the highest quality, recognising that their journey through school occurs only once. We will invest in the professional and personal development of our staff so as to maintain a highly skilled, resilient, aspirational workforce that is committed to **innovation** and creative practice. All learners will be educated in calm, purposeful and safe environments that are fit for 21st Century learning. We will take positive steps to protect our natural environment and assets for current and future generations to come. Resources, support and challenge must be targeted intelligently and placed where the need is greatest. There must be clear lines of accountability and rigorous evaluation of impact to ensure value for money from deployed resources: we must all be accountable for the successful deployment of resources for the benefit of our communities.

Section 10: How will our success be measured?

Success in achieving our priorities will result in:

- A highly skilled and trained workforce with the necessary skills, knowledge and experience to deliver on the Curriculum for Wales and ALNET Act (2018);
- strong leadership and professional practice across our schools resulting in the improved educational attainment, attendance, and exclusion rates of learners, particularly in targeted cohorts of disadvantaged and vulnerable learners;
- greater equity in the outcomes of learners experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and more affluent peers, resulting in a narrowing of the attainment gap between different groups of learners;
- improved teaching and learning across our schools, and a curriculum that is both innovative and strongly aligned with the AOLEs;
- more learners achieving their aspirations and securing places in further education, employment, training, and apprenticeships on leaving school;
- improved strategic planning and provision for ALN across all schools, inclusive schools and improved outcomes for learners;
- improved mental and emotional well-being for staff and learners;
- good progress will be made on our Band B 21st Century Schools Programme, with significant developments across the school estate;
- our schools will make a significant and active contribution towards the Council's climate change agenda;
- more learners will be accessing Welsh medium education with good progress reported against the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan;
- more learners and parents/carers reporting high levels of satisfaction in relation to the education provided for them;
- more stakeholders valuing the specialist support provided by the local authority;
- more partners actively involved and engaged in the delivery of our strategic plans, working collaboratively for the benefit of our communities; and
- increased uptake and use of our school premises by the wider community, with greater community engagement in cultural, sporting and youth engagement activities.

Section 11: Conclusion

The recent pandemic has presented us all with unprecedented challenges and we have all worked tirelessly to overcome these for the benefit of our learners and communities. As we now progress to the next phase of reform, it is imperative that this momentum is sustained and that we work in partnership to achieve our shared mission, vision, and priorities for improvement across the education system. A clear and cohesive strategy is now essential for ensuring that our learners have the best start in life, access to the right support at the right time so that they become successful lifelong learners. The need to intervene early and effectively is critical so that the inequalities and difficulties that have been compounded by the pandemic are overcome and greater equity is achieved.

Our school leaders and our education workforce need to access the highest quality professional learning so that our next generation of learners achieve good qualifications and have well established literacy, numeracy and digital skills so that they are well prepared for the rapidly changing and digitally connected world that we inhabit. The last 22 months have demonstrated to us that our current and future generation of learners and workforce need to be resilient, adaptable, and creative. We cannot be certain what challenges we will be presented with for the duration of this plan. However, we can be confident that by working collaboratively as one team we are stronger and better placed to achieve our mission for equity and excellence in Education, improved well-being for all and a better and brighter future for learners and communities.