

The Vale of Glamorgan Council

Cabinet Report: 22 January, 2018

Report of the Cabinet Member for Learning and Culture

Vale Seren Programme

Purpose of the Report

1. To inform members of the progress in implementing Welsh Government's Seren Programme.

Recommendations

1. That Cabinet note the progress made to date on the implementation of the Seren Programme in the Vale of Glamorgan.
2. That Cabinet receive a further update in 12 months by which time it will be possible to report on the impact of the programme.
3. That Cabinet refers this report to the Learning and Culture Scrutiny Committee for consideration.

Reasons for the Recommendations

1. To ensure members are aware of the progress being made in implementing the Seren Programme in the Vale of Glamorgan.
2. To enable members to evaluate the impact of the programme once the two year cycle of activities is complete.
3. To ensure the Learning and Culture Scrutiny Committee is aware of the Seren Programme and the progress being made.

Background

2. Paul Murphy MP, former Secretary of State for Wales, was appointed to be Welsh Government's Oxbridge Ambassador. His remit was to improve the decline of Welsh applications and admissions to Oxford and Cambridge universities. The Seren Network was established in 2014 to support teachers and students to access information and resources and to inspire and help students progress to the top universities in the UK.

Relevant Issues and Options

3. The Seren Network consists of 11 regional Hubs covering the whole of Wales. The aim of the Network is to support Wales' brightest and most able students to reach their academic potential and gain access to leading universities.
4. The Vale Seren Hub was formed in November 2016.
5. Seren students are selected if they have achieved a minimum of 7 A's or 5 A* in their GCSE's.
6. The Seren programme is offered to students over a two year period starting in year 12 through to year 13; therefore the initial two year cycle will be completed in September 2018, at which point it will be possible to measure the impact of the programme.
7. The event to launch the Vale Seren Network was held in November 2016 and was attended by approximately 380 guests which consisted of 188 students and their parents. The launch event hosted 6 masterclasses in subject specific areas; each class was attended by approximately 30 students. The subject specific areas were as follows:
 - Societies in crisis in the medieval and modern world.
 - Health promotion and the marketing of anti-depressants.
 - The strategic implication of America's use of armed drones and the rise of military robotics.
 - The importance of tissue culture in blood cancer research.
 - Stem cells: Basic concepts, regenerative medicine and cancer.
 - Gods and Demons: how karma relates to the concepts of rebirth and liberation.
8. During 2016/17, a number of events were attended by Vale Seren students, these were as follows:
 - An introduction to Oxbridge and like universities delivered by Churchill College, University of Cambridge.
 - Writing personal statements and making use of the summer vacation, Churchill College University of Cambridge.
 - Fine tuning application and preparing for academic interviews, Churchill College University of Cambridge.
 - An admissions session and information and guidance hosted by Bath University.
 - The first National Seren Conference in Newtown held in December 2016, was attended by 70 Vale Seren students, this was the largest turnout from South Wales. The conference focused on collaboration, providing information and guidance and academic challenge to students. The academic programme provided four streams; these were - arts and humanities, social sciences, life sciences and physical sciences. A separate timetable for teachers offered Continuing Professional Development (CPD) across a wide range of areas such as personal statement and reference writing, university readiness, research and advancing access.
 - Cardiff University delivered a Modern Foreign Languages and medicine open day in collaboration with other Seren Hubs in South Wales.

- Oxford Summer School hosted by Jesus College, was attended by 2 participants from each of the 11 Hubs. Four days were spent with experts on 'what tomorrow may bring'; covering climate change, demography and migration, artificial intelligence, trade, politics amongst many other subjects.
9. The 2017/18 Seren programme launch event was held in October 2017. The event was attended by approximately 500 people including 202 students, parents, teachers, and partner organisations. Students participated in an interactive session around wellbeing-fear and courage, the event included the following speakers:
 - Ex Stanwell School student who attended Cambridge University, now a ITV Wales news reporter;
 - Yale University admissions lead;
 - Bath University Director of Admissions;
 - current law student at Cambridge University; and
 - 2 Seren students from the 16/17 cohort who spoke about their experience of attending a 4 day summer school at Jesus College Oxford.
 10. The launch event was a huge success and was praised by parents, students and teachers, and partner organisations.
 11. The 2017/18 programme of activities for year 12 Seren students include the following:
 - preparing Oxbridge applications;
 - wellbeing sessions;
 - information and guidance;
 - interview techniques;
 - Modern Foreign Languages;
 - information and guidance Yale and USA Universities Overseas
 - Cambridge University admissions and tests;
 - Young Lawyers Programme, University College London;
 - Oxford University day trip, and a range of masterclasses.
 12. The number of activities is likely to increase through collaborative work as the year progresses.
 13. Approximately 100 year 12 Seren students from the Vale attended the second National Seren Conference in Newtown in December 2017. The event was attended by 1,100 students and 137 teachers. The event focused on two strands, professional development for teachers, and student development.
 14. The conference hosted 31 leading Universities that included both Russell Group and Oxbridge Universities. Students attended masterclasses in social sciences, humanities, natural sciences, literature and language, English and maths, and medical science. Students had an opportunity for a questions and answers session and attended professionalism workshops. Oxford and Cambridge universities led on specific sessions, including navigating the application and admissions process.

15. Welsh Government has also funded Seren students to access learning through the Open University (OU). During 2017/18 we have seen 3 Vale students accessing these courses.
16. Work is being undertaken with Cardiff and Vale College to ensure that talented students are included from Further Education settings. The Dean of Foundations of Learning at CAVC is a representative on the Vale Seren Network and the Seren Board that meets twice a year.
17. Initially, the emphasis of the Seren Programme was on encouraging students to make successful Oxbridge applications. Since the Vale Network was established there has been a total of 5 sessions of information and guidance in applications, interviews, and personal statements delivered by Cambridge University. There is also a Cambridge 3 day shadowing scheme running from the 18th January 2018, to which Vale Seren students have signed up to. Cambridge University has also delivered admissions tests. Oxford University has delivered test preparation sessions and a day trip to Jesus College Oxford took place in November 2017. A second day trip and tour has been planned for March 2018 that will include lectures in humanities/social sciences, natural sciences, interview masterclass and admissions.
18. Whilst the focus has been on Oxbridge Universities, there has also been an increase in activities involving other Russell Group Universities. Over the last 14 months, the following Russell Group activities have been delivered to Seren students; Bath University has delivered information, guidance and admissions sessions; Modern Foreign Languages at Bath and Cardiff Universities, mock interviews for medics at Cardiff Medical University; 3 day young lawyer programme at University College London. A day programme and visit to Bristol University has been planned for March 2018. Yale University has provided information and guidance on USA universities and studying overseas.
19. In order to improve communication and information sharing, a Vale Seren Hub webpage has been developed to ensure that events and activities are promoted using social media. Students will be able to sign up to receiving information on activities as and when they are posted.
20. The Vale Seren Network Partnership Group has been established to operationalise the programme. Membership consists of heads of sixth forms and the deputy head teacher of Bryn Hafren Comprehensive School. The meetings are chaired by the Seren Hub Co-ordinator. The Hub Co-ordinator attends national meetings in Newtown, chaired by Welsh Government.
21. The Seren Project Board has been established to provide governance to the programme. Membership consists of the Director of Learning and Skills, or her nominated representative, head teacher representatives and representation from Cardiff and Vale College (CAVC).
22. Welsh Government have commissioned researchers from the organisation OB3 to undertake an evaluation of the Seren Network. In the Vale, a series of interviews and focus groups were undertaken with teachers who have been involved with Seren in a support capacity. A focus group with year 13 Seren students was also conducted. A session on Oxbridge applications, interviews, writing personal statements, and the Seren Network Meeting were observed. The initial feedback received from the interviews, focus groups and observations was highly positive. It is anticipated that OB3 will publish the report in February 2018.

23. As the Vale Seren Hub is only in its second year, the impact of the programme cannot be measured until September 2018. To enable this evaluation to take place schools have been asked to collect data on the number of applications made to Russell Group and Oxbridge Universities.

Resource Implications (Financial and Employment)

24. A Seren grant of £50,000 was received from Welsh Government for 2016/17. It is anticipated that a further £50,000 will be awarded for 2018-20 although this has yet to be confirmed.

Sustainability and Climate Change Implications

25. The Council is committed to promoting sustainable development and our understanding of our duties under the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act. This programme seeks to contribute to the national well-being goals established by the Act, notably a more Equal Wales, a prosperous Wales and a Wales of cohesive communities.

Legal Implications (to Include Human Rights Implications)

26. There are no legal implications as a direct result of this report.

Crime and Disorder Implications

27. There are no crime and disorder implications for this report.

Equal Opportunities Implications (to include Welsh Language issues)

28. The Seren programme promotes equal opportunities for student to reach the highest potential and raise aspirations to apply to the leading universities regardless of socio-economic, status, ethnicity, parental status and other distinctive backgrounds.

Corporate/Service Objectives

29. This report supports the Council's Wellbeing Outcome 3: An Aspirational and Culturally Vibrant Vale, Corporate Objective 5 'Raising overall standards of achievement'.

Policy Framework and Budget

30. The recommendations of this report are within existing policy framework and budget and are a matter for executive decision by Cabinet.

Consultation (including Ward Member Consultation)

31. Not applicable.

Relevant Scrutiny Committee

32. Learning and Culture.

Background Papers

None.

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