



Welsh Affairs Committee

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From the Chair of the Committee

Ellie Fry

Corporate Director of Regeneration and Community Services

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

The General Offices

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22 February 2024

Dear Ellie,

Thank you for taking the time to appear before the Welsh Affairs Committee on Wednesday 24 January. It was an excellent session and will help us greatly going forward in our inquiry into population change in Wales. There are a couple of matters on which the Committee would appreciate additional information:

1. In response to Q109, you referred to Blaenau Gwent CBC's shared apprenticeship scheme. Could you please provide more details about this scheme, including how it operates, how many apprentices are currently on the scheme, and how many businesses draw apprentices from the scheme?
2. Could you please tell us about the role of the Shared Prosperity Fund in ensuring communities in Wales remain vibrant and resilient?

Thank you again for contributing to the Committee's work.

Yours sincerely,

Rt Hon Stephen Crabb MP

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Our Ref./Ein Cyf.



8th March 2024

Rt Hon Stephen Crabb MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Dear Stephen

Thank you for the opportunity of providing evidence at the Welsh Affairs Committee in January.

Enclosed is the information on our successful apprenticeship scheme and some of the Shared Prosperity Fund and Levelling Up Capital funding projects that we are progressing with at the moment.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

Ellie Fry
Corporate Director Regeneration and Community Services

Mae'r Cyngor yn croesawu gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg a Saesneg a byddwn yn cyfathrebu gyda chi yn eich dewis iaith, dim ond i chi rhoi gwybod i ni pa un sydd well gennych. Ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn creu unrhyw oedi.

The Council welcomes correspondence in Welsh and English and we will communicate with you in the language of your choice, as long as you let us know which you prefer. Corresponding in Welsh will not lead to any delay.

Aspire (Shared Apprenticeship Scheme)

In 2015 Ebbw Vale Enterprise Zone Board established through research that there was a significant skills gap of level 3 and above within the manufacturing industries across Blaenau Gwent. Aspire Blaenau Gwent was set up through a partnership with Welsh Government, Education, BGCBC. Unemployment levels are high, and skills levels are relatively low within the manufacturing sector across the Local Authority. There was a clear and established need for further investment as the AM&M sector when Aspire was set up, and the sector is still facing a significant skills gap over the coming years.

The development of a Shared Apprenticeship Programme had been identified as a mechanism for addressing both existing indigenous employer skills needs and those of any new inward investors.

Aim

- Support employers to recruit.
- Support young people with interview process.
- Ensure courses suit apprentices and employer needs.
- Issue contracts of employment
- Manage the rotation of apprentices.

Objectives

- To recruit 15-20 apprentices per year to be jointly employed by the local authority and placed within a host company.
- To ensure all pathways are linked to STEM subjects.
- To provide an opportunity for employers to take on apprentices facilitated and supported by a programme management team who:
 - Promote the opportunity of the SAP—demonstrating the benefits to business, increasing business capacity and potentially full-time employment opportunities.
 - Develop partnerships with local training providers, colleges & universities to provide additional skills and training.
 - Engage with schools to promote apprenticeships, demonstrating the viable career opportunities.

The project team facilitates relationships with the learning provider, apprentice, and host to establish learning pathway. The team ensures the apprentice is happy and having a fulfilling apprenticeship, supports with any issues and conducts monthly reviews. Rotations to other companies arranged when there is a skills gap identified and the young person needs to achieve units.

One of the key success factors of the programme is having a team in place to facilitate the employment of the apprentices with hosts and then dealing within any arising issues that may occur with learning pathways or personal issues. It is also vehicle for providing aspirational opportunities for young people within BG and would complement existing provision and not displace directly employed apprenticeships.

Aspire Apprentices are ambassadors of the project as well as their host companies, they represent at careers fayres and within in school's assemblies to talk about the programme and their personal journeys. The Aspire Shared Apprenticeship programme is hinged on its success of partnership working. To fulfil the needs within the companies, the

networking and partnership engagement is crucial in order to recruit a high calibre of young people.

As the project has been developed, the networking and partnership circles have increased. In turn the opportunities for the apprentices on programme to achieve additional qualifications and to trial varying experiences have been presented.

- Currently 40 Apprentices on programme – 18 internal to the council
- Utilised Over 22 host companies within BG.
- Apprentices that are live in BG - 44 %
- Percentage of 90% male 10% female
- Varying Apprenticeship Pathways – within an Advanced manufacturing setting over ten different departments including Business support, transport, social services, education etc.

STEM Facilitation Project

Funded by Welsh Government as part of Tech Valleys initiative, to establish a coordinated programme of support to schools, centred on industry. The programme is revenue and capital funded and provides the following:

- To raise awareness of opportunities and increase aspiration and attainment levels within STEM subjects.
- Address the disparity between males and females in STEM.
- Improve knowledge of digital skills with teachers and learners.
- Encourage the development of STEM work readiness in learners through business interventions / local industry.

The STEM Programme was launched early 2021 for Ebbw Vale cluster of schools only until March 2024.

- Additional funding secured early this year to extend programme to March 2025 and cover all schools across BG from April 2023 (including PRU and special school). Funding then ends.
 - Four clusters / 2 Liaison Officers
 - School engagement currently 90%
 - Education data shows an improvement in science attainment across schools.
 - Exceeded pilot phase targets.
 - Some targets already exceeded for this academic year
 - Wales STEM Awards Finalist

HIVE (High Value Engineering Facility)

There is currently no venue or facility across the Heads of the Valley that seeks to capitalise on the collaboration between academia, industry and challenges the boundaries of manufacturing to create more efficient methods of working. The UK Competitiveness Index sights this as a factor that adversely influences the competitiveness of the area. The HiVE will provide the following:

- The curriculum offer will range from L1 to L6
- These areas include Autonomous Manufacturing and Collaborative Robotics incorporating the ever-increasing Cyber influence, such as

machine learning, predictive analytics, artificial intelligence, and security. Aspects of this will be embedded in and delivered in conjunction with the Cyber College initiative Coleg Gwent has already established.

HiVE will raise the profile around higher skilled/better paid employment opportunities, especially to residents, it will contribute to the efforts around the skills/learning agenda by;

- Providing relevant, up-to-date qualifications for the next industrial revolution
- Raising awareness in schools, pupils, and the wider community.
- Raising aspiration and inspire future generations.
- Improving accessibility.
- Raising attainment levels, especially in STEM.
- Aligning with partners/stakeholders to develop a skills package/offer.
- Addressing the gender imbalance in Engineering.

Timeline

• 2015-2018

- Aspire set up in 2015 with Ebbw Vale Enterprise Zone to address skills shortages within the Advanced manufacturing Sector.
- Industry across BG raised concerns that there was no facility to acquire skills, train apprentices or upskills current work force.
- Had a small skills hub in Continental with equipment donated from Coleg Y Cymoedd.
- In 2018, the council acquired the Monwell factory and the journey to develop began.

• 2018-2020

- A number of concepts were presented to funders which included multiple providers in one building, utilising the equipment from CYC. Met with lots of different providers, AMRC, MTC in Coventry, Universities. Presented funding bids to Tech Valleys and Cardiff City Deal.
- The final presentation to Tech Valley had a recommendation – ‘engage with an anchor tenant, develop a business case together and lean on the success of Aspire which is a ‘partnership between Local Authority, Education, Industry and Government.’

• 2020-2022

- 2020, widespread disruption. Coleg Gwent had varying priorities not least how to homeschool students.
- a number of versions were presented to Tech Valley Board and December 2021 over £3million was awarded to the council to work in partnership with Coleg Gwent to develop the site.
- In July 2022, a Levelling Up bid was submitted to the UK Government

- In January 2023 £9.6 million was awarded to the council to complete HiVE (one of nine levelling application in Round 2 in Wales) The only one to date that has progressed this far.
- Over £ 3million will be spent on equipment

SPF - Quickstart

- SPF 'People and Skills' pillar – funding until 31st March 2025
- 6 month paid work placement for candidates 16yrs+ to build on experience,
- confidence and transferrable skills to help secure future sustained employment.
- Funding to offer one hundred placements over two years.
- Forty local employers have already expressed an interest in offering at least one placement.
- In partnership with JCP (suitable referrals) and Adult Community Learning (pre-employability training)
- Monitor progress of participants to ensure a suitable destination on completion of placement – Quickstart BG Mentor

Blaenau Gwent Enterprise Facilitation

Blaenau Gwent CBC delivers Enterprise Facilitation® services based on the principles of the Sirolli Institute.

The Sirolli Institute is an international not-for-profit organisation that teaches community leaders how to establish and maintain Enterprise Facilitation projects in their community. The Sirolli Institute specialises in responsive approaches to local economic development that grow the community from within; it aims to transform passionate people into successful entrepreneurs, by building teams of competence around them.

Blaenau Gwent was the first project in Wales to adopt the Sirolli Enterprise Facilitation® model. The intention was for the project to complement traditional business and enterprise support services provided by the Local Authority and other organisations such as Business Wales.

“Right now, in your community, at this very moment, there is someone who is dreaming about doing something to improve his/her lot. If we could learn how to help that person to transform the dream into meaningful work, we would be halfway to changing the economic fortunes of the entire community.”

(Dr. Ernesto Sirolli)

What is Enterprise Facilitation?

Convinced that the future of every community lies in capturing the passion, intelligence, imagination and resources of its own people, the Sirolli Institute™ has developed “Enterprise Facilitation™” as a person-centred approach to catalysing both community and economic development.

Enterprise Facilitators collaborate closely with a community-based resource network (called the ‘Volunteer Panel’) to provide free, confidential business management and

advice to both aspiring entrepreneurs and existing businesses. Since 1985, the Sirolli model of Enterprise Facilitation has provided an effective mechanism for mobilising community leadership and has repeatedly demonstrated the programme's capacity for inspiring community revitalization in many different countries, around the world.

- Local leadership is essential to the establishment of an Enterprise Facilitation programme and supporting network. Without the endorsement, understanding, wisdom and management of credible local community 'pillars,' nothing can happen.
- Enterprise Facilitation is controlled and managed at the grass roots of a community by a local Board of Management, comprised of business leaders (private sector), community professionals (community and voluntarily sector) and economic development practitioners (public sector).
- The Management Board then identifies a suitable candidate for becoming their full-time Enterprise Facilitator, who receives training and Board support and acts as the conduit for engagement with local businesses and entrepreneurs.
- Enterprise Facilitators provide intensive, one-on-one assistance. They link clients to wide ranging networks of people and the various programmes and resources offered by development organizations and professionals, as well as the local community.
- The Sirolli Institute supports the programme, through training and mentoring.

Why is it considered successful?

Enterprise Facilitation is based on the belief that in every community there is intelligence, imagination and a passion for self-actualization or fulfilment and so the supporting structure of the project must be person-centred in its over-arching approach to community and economic development. The model has been in use since 1985 and has seen success in such diverse areas as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Western Australia, and America.

In practice, Enterprise Facilitation® consists of two main components; an Enterprise Facilitator and a volunteer resource panel, together with a wider network, which is called upon by the panel members, to provide wider access to resources.

The Enterprise Facilitator becomes the initial point of contact for business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs and helps them understand their specific business idea. The service is free, informal, and confidential, and if the client requires any help or direction with their ideas, which the Facilitator cannot directly provide or secure, then the Facilitator can take the case to the volunteer resource panel.

Additionally, the Enterprise Facilitation® model places no time constraint on an Enterprise Facilitator's time or length of support available to each client, meaning that clients always have ready access to the form of support needed, as and when issues arise. The Sirolli method allows for increased engagement and proliferation, by being less intimidating and more in line with the mind-set, attitudes, and dynamics of entrepreneurial cultures.

The Facilitator uses a unique management coaching methodology i.e. the 'Trinity of Management'® to coach entrepreneur's and existing businesses. The belief of the

Sirolli Institute is that a successful business requires three main competencies: technical ability to produce a product or service, ability to market the product or service, and ability to manage the finances of the venture, and that few individual entrepreneurs have ever possessed all three competencies. Sirolli argues that successful entrepreneurs simply make up for their lack of a certain competency, by finding partners who possess the skills that they lack. Consequently, the model aims to aid local entrepreneurs in becoming successful, by building teams of competence around them, 'filling the gaps' needed by the venture.

The Volunteer Panel is a major resource adopted by the Sirolli method and is a key component of the Sirolli method's success. The Panel is comprised of a group of volunteers drawn from the local community, who come together to establish a credible, dependable, and trusted community resource. The Panel usually meets every 6 weeks or as and when the Enterprise Facilitator identifies a need and is made up of individuals from a range of different backgrounds and interests.

One of the main roles of the panel is to make introductions for the facilitator, to boost network contacts and to help increase the profile of Blaenau Gwent Effect. The theory is that by increasing the profile of Enterprise Facilitation and its services, more people in the community will be motivated to seek the support of the facilitator. Once the facilitator has met with a client and established what support they require, the panel can then be approached to collectively discuss the case and generate the ideas, leads and contacts needed to assist the situation and help the businesses grow and develop.

The real boon of having a resource panel drawn from the local community is that these links are already partly formed and can work in all directions; it also means that there is at least some shared understanding of local values and norms, so the entrepreneurs are made to feel comfortable – 'speaking the same local language'.

Two new Enterprise Facilitators (EF) joined the team in June 2023. To date, 132 individuals considering setting up their own business and 45 existing businesses looking to develop and grow have been supported.

Several business events and drop-in sessions have taken place and a series of events, drop in sessions and workshops are scheduled for 2024.

Blaenau Gwent Enterprise Hub

The BGEH will open in May 2024 as 'the front door to, and for, business in Blaenau Gwent' offering the following services: -

- **Co-working / Enterprise Hub** - supporting entrepreneurs and business start-ups and retention of new businesses in Blaenau Gwent via the Enterprise Facilitation programme and Blaenau Gwent Business Hub service.
- **Landing Pad for Inward Investment** – providing office space and on-site support to potential large scale inward investment projects/businesses, to increase the opportunity for Blaenau Gwent to secure longer term projects and maximise the

associated opportunities relating to creation of new employment, skills development, supply chain development etc.

- **Meeting and training rooms** – providing facilities for local businesses and other appropriate external organisations.

The project aims to create an active, connected community of start-up businesses from across Blaenau Gwent and will be based in a new facility in Ebbw Vale. Working in conjunction with co-working specialists the BGEH will become the 'go-to' location for start businesses to access expertise, offering a range of business support programmes to develop the skills and confidence of business owners and potential entrepreneurs.

The project will be funded by the Shared Prosperity Fund W24 Intervention - Funding for new and improvements to existing training hubs, business support offers, 'incubators' and 'accelerators' for local enterprise (including social enterprise) which can support entrepreneurs and start-ups through the early stages of development and growth by offering a combination of services including account management, advice, resources, training, coaching, mentorship, and access to workspace.