# WRITTEN STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE**  | **Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council** |
| **DATE**  | **24 October 2019** |
| **BY**  | **Julie James, Minister for Housing and Local Government** |

This statement updates Assembly Members on the next phase of statutory support to Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council.

Following a request for statutory support under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 from Cllr Kevin O’Neill, Leader of Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council, an external adviser, John Gilbert, was appointed to carry out a rigorous independent assessment of the Council’s key challenges and what actions are needed to make necessary changes.

John Gilbert has now completed his assessment and the report, *Key Challenges, Leadership Capacity and Capability, Governance and Strategy, is* attached in the annex

The report highlights the challenges the Council is currently facing. Although significant, they are not insurmountable and I believe they can be addressed with an appropriate further package of statutory support. However, external assistance will not, in itself, overcome these challenges. That will require a commitment by all members to creating a sustainable future for the Council which must be demonstrated through determined and constructive action.

John Gilbert’s report does not provide the answers. Instead, it should be used as platform from which the Council can identify a clear way forward, develop a robust plan and then take the steps towards change.

I recently met with the Council’s Leader, Deputy Leader and Acting Chief Executive to discuss the report and I was pleased by Councillor Kevin O’Neil’s commitment and desire to respond to John Gilbert’s findings and also his honest assessment of the Council’s current position. He has confirmed his intention to implement the recommendations in the report and I can confirm the Welsh Government and the Welsh Local Government Association are committed to helping him do so.

I have agreed with Cllr O’Neill to establish an Improvement and Assurance Board (the Board), with independent external members, including the Chair, appointed by me. The overall purpose and remit of the Board will be to assist the Leader in driving forward the required change and improvement in Council.

The Board will be made up of the Leader, Deputy Leader and representatives of the opposition as well as independent external members. I am pleased to appoint, Steve Thomas, former Chief Executive of the Welsh Local Government Association as the independent Chair. In addition, the following individuals will appointed to provide specific expertise to the Board:

* Christine Salter (former Corporate Director of Resources (S151 & returning officer), Cardiff Council),
* Chris Burns (former interim chief executive, Caerphilly County Borough Council and former assistant chief executive at Carmarthenshire County Council) and
* Tony Garthwaite (former Director of Social Services, Bridgend County Borough Council)

I expect the Board will meet for the first time early in November.

In addition, I will be providing a further focused package of support which will focus on:

* ***Member support and training*** which will involvedetailed bespoke training for all Councillors. Its emphasis will be on developing and strengthening working relationships between Members of all political groups; and also between Members and officers.
* ***Short term and targeted Governance, Corporate and Service support.*** Many of the recommendations in the report are a matter for the Council to take forward. The Council has already developed a focussed improvement plan and the Council’s progress in delivering against this plan will be monitored by the newly established Improvement and Assurance Board. However, I appreciate that in order to implement the plan effectively and sustainably it is likely the Council will require additional capacity and expertise. As a result, subject to further consultation with the Council, external advisers will be appointed to assist and enable the Council to address its immediate challenges at the earliest opportunity. Mentoring and Coaching support will also be provided to the Leader and acting chief executive to support them in taking forward this challenging agenda.

My overall purpose of providing a further package of statutory support is to ensure the Council can fulfil its ambition to provide good quality services to the people of Merthyr Tydfil.

The responsibility for change does not just rest with the Leader and Acting Chief Executive. There will need to be a full and effective commitment from all members and officers of the Council. There needs to be a shared goal of achieving a sustainable future for the Council. All members and officers need to work together to achieve that.

Further details and updates on progress will be provided to the Assembly.