



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

COUNCIL

1st JULY 2020

UPDATE ON COVID 19 POSITION IN RHONDDA CYNON TAF

REPORT OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE IN DISCUSSION WITH THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL (COUNCILLOR A MORGAN)

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide an update of the action taken by the Council as a result of the COVID 19 national emergency.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Members:

2.1 Note the action taken by the Council to date in response to the Covid 19 pandemic;

2.2 Request that further reports are presented to each Council meeting for the next six months as the UK and Welsh Governments relax the lockdown, reopen key services and public areas, and allow greater freedom of movement, locally, nationally and internationally.

3 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 To provide a comprehensive summary for Council of the action taken by the Council since the Covid 19 restrictions were imposed by the UK and Welsh Governments; and set out the future steps the Council will take to manage the phased lifting of these restrictions.

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 In a televised address to the UK on 23rd March, the Prime Minister announced unprecedented lockdown measures to stop the spread of the Covid 19 virus between households, changing the way in which everyone in the UK lives their daily lives.
- 4.2 The purpose of the lockdown has been very clear as set out in the four UK governments' messages of Stay at Home; Protect the NHS; Save Lives. The overwhelming focus has been to delay the virus and ensure the demand for NHS services does not exceed the supply, which could result in many hundred thousands of deaths.
- 4.3 There is a requirement in the new lockdown legislation that the respective governments review the position every three weeks and determine whether they increase, decrease or maintain the existing lockdown restraints across the UK.

5. HOW HAS THE COUNCIL RESPONDED TO COVID 19?

- 5.1 To respond to the challenges posed by the Covid 19 lockdown, the Council is continuing to operate the majority of its key functions, with reduced staffing levels, the majority of buildings closed and many staff working from home.
- 5.2 The Council's Cabinet has recently considered a series of reports that set out the Council's position in respect of the Covid pandemic and the action it plans to take in the recovery of services and functions as the lockdown restrictions are lifted. These reports contain a wide breadth of information and the links to these reports are set out below:
 - **21st May 2020 – COVID 19 update** - A comprehensive summary of the action taken by the Council since the Covid 19 restrictions were imposed by the UK and Welsh Governments which also sets out future steps the Council will take to prepare for the future phased lifting of these restrictions; - <https://www.rctcbc.gov.uk/EN/Council/CouncillorsCommitteesandMeetings/Meetings/Cabinet/2020/05/21/Reports/Item3Covid19PositioninRCT.pdf>
 - **25th June 2020 – Council Infrastructure Projects – Supporting the Local Economy During Coronavirus** – A summary of the major infrastructure and regeneration work that has continued to be undertaken, safely in accordance with safe distancing and other health & safety guidelines, since the COVID 19 restrictions were imposed by the UK and Welsh Governments. <https://www.rctcbc.gov.uk/EN/Council/CouncillorsCommitteesandMeetings/Meetings/Cabinet/2020/06/25/Reports/Item6CouncilInfrastructureProjectsSupportingtheLocalEconomyDuringCoronavirus.pdf>
 - **25th June 2020 – Safer Places – Social Distancing in Town Centres and Public Places During Coronavirus** - A summary for Cabinet of the action taken since the COVID 19 restrictions were imposed by the UK and Welsh Governments and to prepare for the future re-opening of non-essential supplies

and services, in particular within town centres;
<https://www.rctcbc.gov.uk/EN/Council/CouncillorsCommitteesandMeetings/Meetings/Cabinet/2020/06/25/Reports/Item7SaferPlacesSocialDistancinginTownCentresandPublicPlacesduringCoronavirus.pdf>

- **25th June 2020 – Safer Buildings – Social Distancing & Other Safety Measures In Council Offices, Schools And Other Public Buildings As The Lockdown Is Lifted** - A summary for Cabinet of the action taken since the COVID-19 restrictions were imposed by the UK and Welsh Governments and to prepare for the future safe re-opening of Council buildings, and schools.
<https://www.rctcbc.gov.uk/EN/Council/CouncillorsCommitteesandMeetings/Meetings/Cabinet/2020/06/25/Reports/Item8SaferBuildingsSocialDistancingOtherSafetyMeasuresinCouncilOfficesSchoolsandOtherPublicBuildingsastheLockdownisLifted.pdf>
- **25th June 2020 - COVID 19 – Financial Implications For The Council** - The ongoing response to COVID 19 continues with significant disruption across Council Services with many repurposed, reduced or suspended fully. Whilst the assessment of the financial implications is ongoing this report sets out the initial view of the impact upon the Council.
<https://www.rctcbc.gov.uk/EN/Council/CouncillorsCommitteesandMeetings/Meetings/Cabinet/2020/06/25/Reports/Item9FinancialImplicationsofCovid19.pdf>

5.3 These reports highlight the commitment from staff across the Council in supporting the communities of Rhondda Cynon Taf through this pandemic. Particular praise must go to those in frontline roles, particularly colleagues in Social Care, Meals on Wheels, School Hubs, Waste and Streetcare, and the Shielding Scheme & Food Distribution Centre. In addition, we have had over 360 staff change roles and work in our social care services, deliver meals on wheels, packaging and delivering food parcels and medicines to shielded individuals and more recently play a key role in the Contract Tracing Programme that is so important in keeping us safe until a vaccine is available.

5.4 It is also recognised that the Council's ICT and Digital Services team within the space of a few days transformed the way in which the Council works, with over 3,000 staff across the Council now working from home enabling them to undertake and support many of the tasks and actions highlighted in the paragraphs above. We all recognise this significant change and it has been welcomed by staff.

5.5 The Senior Leadership Team also appreciates the support from the trade unions for the way in which they have engaged with the Council and provided constructive support and guidance.

6 THE NEXT SIX MONTHS?

6.1 Over the next few months, the UK and Welsh Governments will continue to seek to phase the release of the lockdown measures. Their focus will be to try

to ensure that the infection rate remains at a low level and where clusters of cases do arise, as they have recently in Anglesey, take immediate action to isolate the potentially infected people.

6.2 The Council's focus over the coming months will be on the following five key tasks:

- Contact Tracing;
- Recovery and Service Planning;
- Decision Making & Democratic Engagement;
- Counting the Cost (now and into the future); and
- Economic Resilience.

6.2 **Contact Tracing** – The Council is playing a key role in leading on Contract Tracing, Welsh Government's Test Trace Protect Programme (TTP), across Cwm Taf Morgannwg in partnership with the local health board, Bridgend and Merthyr Tydfil Councils and Public Health Wales. The purpose of contact tracing and case management is to interrupt chains of transmission in the community by identifying cases of COVID19 (confirmed and suspected), tracing the people who may have become infected by spending time in close contact with them, and then requiring and supporting those close contacts to self-isolate so that they are less likely to transmit it to others.

6.3 The Council's Director of Public Health, Protection & Community Services is leading this process in Cwm Taf Morgannwg supported by other members of SLT. Since the end of May, over 100 Council staff have been working in 4 teams; a regional team focused on high risk settings such as care homes, school hubs, supported living, homeless accommodation etc; and three local teams contacting confirmed cases and tracing and contacting the people they have been in contact with.

6.4 Unfortunately, Rhondda Cynon Taf has one of the highest number of confirmed cases and the TTP teams have been very busy. Not only do they contact the confirmed cases and their contacts, they also telephone the contacts each day over the two week period of the isolation, which has equated to over 700 contacts telephoned per day.

6.5 Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board is also testing care homes residents and staff every fortnight for the virus and has started to undertake antibody tests of staff who were based in the emergency childcare hubs. It is planned that this antibody testing will be expanded across the health and social care sector in due course.

6.6 **Recovery and Service Planning** – The Cabinet and the Senior Leadership Team is focused on planning how to reopen services safely in the best interests of service users, staff and the general public as the UK and Welsh Governments

release the lock down measures. Each service has had to prepare a Recovery Plan, in discussion with the Cabinet Member, which sets out the steps required to reopen services.

- 6.7 For example, comprehensive recovery plans have been prepared to support the opening of the Community Recycling Centres, Town Centres and Public Spaces, Libraries, and over the past few weeks, considerable focus has been to open schools on 29th June for a 4 week period in order to enable all learners to “*check in, catch up and prepare for the summer and September 2020*”. A summary of all the recovery plans will be included in a Cabinet Report for the July 2020 meeting.
- 6.8 Cabinet Members have also challenged services to learn from the experience of operating in a different way and ensure we do not routinely return to “normal – as we were” but take the benefits of working from home, delivering services digitally or in a different way. The use of technology such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams has changed the way many managers and staff have engaged with each other over the past few months.
- 6.9 A recent staff survey has captured their views and experiences of agile/homeworking over the past few months. The vast majority of the feedback is very positive, however, there are specific groups of staff where we need to introduce the schools methodology of “*check in and catch up*” to ensure we provide them with sufficient face to face support that will build upon the existing well-being support mechanisms we have in place to ensure their well-being. In addition, home environments will significantly differ with some being more conducive for home working than others. Furthermore, staff may need a break from working from home. Therefore, senior management is developing appropriate engagement and support options with the relevant staffing groups.
- 6.10 We also need to consider that we may need less staff in some services and more staff in others to reflect the changing work and home environment taking into account that we will have to work with Covid 19 within society for at least 18 months. For example, the TTP programme is temporarily staffed from staff employed in services that are not yet fully up and running. The TTP programme is key to the Government lifting the lockdown restrictions, and already we have seen how effective it can be in identifying outbreaks of the virus.
- 6.11 We also need to take into account that if we do not have a vaccine or treatment for the virus there are groups of residents that will still have to self-isolate for a long period and they will need our continued support. In doing so, we need to consider how we will continue to engage the army of volunteers that have provided a sterling service to support the Council.

- 6.12 **Decision Making & Democratic Engagement** - Since the lockdown, decision making and governance has continued to operate in compliance with the Council's Constitution. Key Executive decisions such as closing services have been made by the Leader of the Council and/or the relevant Cabinet member in discussion with the Chief Executive and relevant Senior Leadership Team Director(s). A variety of decisions have been taken either as part of the wider coordinated CV19 emergency response, or as mandated by the laws that have been enacted as part of the response. All of these decisions have been within the normal delegated powers of Chief Officers, and where possible taken after consultation with the relevant Cabinet Member.
- 6.13 Weekly briefings of the Cabinet with the Senior Leadership Team have been held weekly via Microsoft Teams and more recently Zoom video conferencing. The Senior Leadership Team for the first two months met daily, with the Leader also in attendance. This has allowed the Senior Leadership Team to make appropriate operational decisions in consultation with the Leader, which has enabled immediate action to occur which has been important. This method of open discussion and decision making between the Leader and officers has been extremely effective.
- 6.14 Since May, Cabinet has started to meet in public via Zoom video conferencing, along with the Planning and Development Control Committee and the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and Council this evening. We expect that we will have to reinstate all the committees over the coming weeks. This has been helped by the Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Meetings) (Wales) Regulations 2020 which have changed the pre-existing laws to enable fully remote meetings to take place as long as those participating can hear and be heard. It also provides for the distribution and publication of all associated documents via electronic means only.
- 6.15 Virtual meetings may not allow for the “cut and thrust” of previous council meetings but they can be effective in ensuring political engagement is strong and effective.
- 6.16 After the virtual Annual General Meeting in September 2020, the full virtual committee meeting programme will be published. This timetable will need to be flexible as members and officers learn and adapt to holding committee meetings in this way, over the coming weeks and months, recognising that there may be future local or regional lockdowns.
- 6.17 **Counting the Cost (now and into the future)** – The additional cost to the Council of responding to the Covid 19 pandemic over the past three months is nearly £14m, on average £4.5m per month. We have shared the analysis of

these additional costs with Welsh Government and we expect to receive the majority of this expenditure funded by WG.

- 6.18 With the relaxing of lockdown measures and a reduction in the infection rates across South Wales, we should see staff return to work as the need to shield or self-isolate reduces. This will reduce the staffing pressure across key services and enable staff that have worked constantly through the pandemic to take a well-earned rest.
- 6.19 However, we have a number of service pressures due to the level of demand for a range of community based services, including a doubling of the provision of community meals to the vulnerable, supporting care homes to remain financially viable, providing suitable responses to children who need to be looked after, the increase in waste disposal costs and the need to supplement the supply of PPE available where necessary across services.
- 6.20 An additional cost yet to be considered by Welsh Government is the new Cwm Taf Morgannwg (CTM) Contact Tracing Team, the cost of which is estimated to be, regionally, £15m per annum based on the forecast case data produced by Public Health Wales. A separate business case will be submitted to request funding for this team, the cost of which is currently being funded by the four organisations in CTM.
- 6.21 The Council is also losing income it would have generated from a range of services such as leisure, car parking, theatres, visitor attractions, school meals, the sale of recycled waste materials, and other sundry sales. The Welsh Government has set aside £78m to financially support local authorities for the lost income but this funding is only available until the end of June 2020.
- 6.22 It is clear that the budget set in March 2020 needs to be reviewed and reset to ensure it is focused on how we deliver our services over the remainder of the financial year and to support the recovery phase of the Council and the wider economic position of the County Borough. It is proposed that Cabinet and the Council will consider a Mid-Year Budget Review in September, along with an updated Medium Term Financial Plan to help inform the budget setting for 2021/22 financial year.
- 6.23 **Economic Resilience** – With the level of Covid-19 infections decreasing and life beginning to return to some form of normal, we need to consider how we deal with the economic difficulties the virus has created. Whilst, the UK and Welsh Governments have put in place a range of interventions to support businesses across a wide range of sectors, we are already seeing a rise in the number of unemployed people in the UK and many businesses going into administration.

- 6.24 Some town centre based businesses have been able to continue to operate during the pandemic and have seen an increase in footfall. Over the coming months we will look to work with local businesses to see how we can best support our town centres and develop an offer that attracts residents to shop locally and support local businesses.
- 6.25 There are also opportunities for businesses in the County Borough. The big lesson for us all is not to rely on overseas imports for key supplies and services. As a country we need more resilience in terms of our supply chain, and therefore more manufacturing in the UK. This will require the public sector in Wales to undertake a radical re-evaluation of our supply chains. We have already made progress on this. We have local companies manufacturing visors, and we have two distilleries manufacturing hand sanitiser and a local company manufacturing bottles and filling them with the sanitiser. This local procurement has already protected and created many jobs, and it is something we need to consider urgently across our supply chain.
- 6.26 The Council's capital programme is an important contributor to the local economy providing a valuable work programme to local building and highways contractors, which many rely upon as their stable income. The initial messages from UK and Welsh Government are positive in respect of tackling the economic recession through large scale capital infrastructure. It is proven that building new infrastructure lays the groundwork for future economic growth, whether that is an improved transport network to move goods, a digital backbone to power a new economy or education facilities to train a skilled workforce of the future. Furthermore, regions that spend on new infrastructure tend to attract more private investment, which boosts productivity and enables sustained economic activity.
- 6.27 We are working with WG and the Cardiff Capital Region to explore opportunities to bring forward investment in new infrastructure, such as schools, renewable energy, digital networks, homes and public transport that creates jobs, and delivers tangible assets that fuel long term growth.
- 6.28 Working with our partners across the Region and locally, we are developing projects to ensure we will maximise the capital investment in the County Borough. In doing so we will encourage local contractors to come forward and tender for the work, and ensure as many contracts as possible require local employment opportunities.
- 6.29 We are also reviewing our procurement approaches to maximise local spend but also increase the number of apprenticeships offered by our suppliers and contractors. Young people across the UK will face some of the greatest

challenges in securing jobs over the next couple of years, and we need to support this group to continue, where appropriate, in education and training, and create the incentives to encourage businesses to employ more apprentices and graduates.

- 6.30 We are therefore exploring options to double the number of Council employed apprentices and graduates to be employed during this financial year, having a number of recruitment rounds. The first round of apprenticeships has just closed and for 9 apprenticeships and we have had over 1,000 applications. We will seek through our workforce planning to see whether we can employ over 100 apprenticeships and graduates in the coming months by re-engineering the way we work. We will also seek to work with local businesses and public sector organisations to offer internships and work experience to young people to support their job applications and provide them with the relevant experience.

7 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 An Equality and Diversity Assessment has not been carried out in connection with the recommendations set out in this report as the contents and actions do not require a policy or service change, resulting in no reasonably foreseeable differential impacts.

8 CONSULTATION

- 8.1 There is no requirement to consult on this report, it is primarily for information.

9 FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

- 9.1 The financial implications of the Council responding to the Covid 19 pandemic are considered in paragraphs 6.17-6.22 of this report.

10 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

- 10.1 There are no legal implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

11 LINKS TO THE CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT.

- 11.1 This is an information report on progress in responding to the Covid 19 pandemic. No decisions are being taken in this report.

12 CONCLUSIONS

- 12.1 The past few months have been challenging on an unprecedented scale for the Council, local businesses and residents with the Covid 19 pandemic quickly following Storm Dennis. To date we have all pulled together, communities supporting each other and the vast majority of people complying with the lockdown restrictions. However, life is unlikely to return to normal for many

months if not a couple of years, and the Council and communities of Rhondda Cynon Taf need to change the way we live and work, where social distancing, personal hygiene and shielding the vulnerable becomes the norm.

- 12.2 To date, the Council has responded to these challenges efficiently and effectively, and the staff have been outstanding in their response, and particular thanks go to the frontline social care staff.
- 12.3 We are now in the recovery phase of the pandemic and gradually the lockdown is being lifted with town centres opening up, schools and other key services opening. We need to maintain a watchful eye on the virus and its future spread.
- 12.4 We also need to look forward and learn the lessons from the pandemic. The pandemic has changed the way we work and the way we live. I expect you all would have seen the pictures of the clean canals in Venice full of fish and the Himalayas once again seen from parts of India, all as a result of the lockdown. In planning for the future it is essential that we take this opportunity to reflect on the role we, the Council, can play in affecting climate change through for example:
- Ensuring our infrastructure investment programmes are environmentally sustainable;
 - Exploring better ways to optimise our transport systems by staggering the start and end times of the working day;
 - Reducing asset usage through working from home, and
 - Investing in new technologies to reduce carbon emissions, creating greener towns and public spaces.
- 12.5 Building an environmentally sustainable and resilient economy will be a priority out of necessity shortly – so why not do it now? If we create the right environment now it will have a lasting effect on our economy and our health.