



**RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**CABINET**

**21<sup>st</sup> MAY 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 a report estimating the potential financial impact of the Council's response to the pandemic is presented to the next Cabinet meeting;
- 2.3 Request that further reports that set out how the Council plans to reopen key services and public areas such as town centres and transport hubs are presented to future Cabinet meetings.

**3 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

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

#### **4. BACKGROUND**

- 4.1 In a televised address to the UK on 23<sup>rd</sup> 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. This resulted in an initial three week lockdown of the movement of people, forcing people to remain at home, other than key workers, a significant increase in the UK Government's response from the changes introduced on:
- 16<sup>th</sup> March, which focused on avoiding all non-essential contact with others;
  - 20<sup>th</sup> March all bars, pubs, cafes and restaurants were closed, followed by the closure of schools and childcare facilities, except for the children of key workers.
- 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. The most recent review of the current lockdown was at the weekend of the Victory In Europe celebrations on 8<sup>th</sup> May. The First Minister for Wales stated that whilst the virus infection rate had fallen and fewer people were being admitted to hospital, progress had not been sufficient to lift the lockdown restrictions, other than to ask local authorities to consider re-opening libraries and community waste recycling centres. The message from the Welsh Government remains the same – Stay at Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives.

#### **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.
- 5.2 The following bullet points provide more detail for Members on the level of service provided in response to this pandemic based on the Corporate Plan priorities of People, Place and Prosperity:
- **People**
    - Despite the impact of the pandemic across the country, our staff continue to provide social care services to vulnerable people in very difficult circumstances across the County Borough in people's own homes, residential homes, nursing homes, supported living and hostels;

- In order to manage the impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing of our most vulnerable adults and children and ensure safeguarding issues are addressed during this time we have established multi-agency regional and local Command responses to coordinating the critical safeguarding activities of our partner agencies;
- The Environmental Health, Procurement and the Social Care Commissioning teams working together to provide infection control support and guidance along with PPE to the care sector across the County Borough;
- Homelessness services, domestic abuse services and substance misuse services to vulnerable people. Over the past few weeks we have seen further rises in cases across these services;
- Community Meals services to the elderly. We have seen a significant increase in the take up of this service since with 635 people are receiving daily meals in their homes. A further 413 frozen meals are delivered each week to shielded vulnerable individuals who are unable to cook for themselves.
- We are also coordinating the Shielding Scheme and made contact with 6,726 people identified by the NHS as vulnerable to Covid 19 and are providing them with regular deliveries of food and medicines. This is managed and coordinated by staff displaced from services such as the Leisure Service;
- Key step down social care services for people leaving hospital to ensure the hospitals have the capacity to deal with Covid 19 patients
- The new extra care facility in Aberaman opened on 4<sup>th</sup> May and as at 12<sup>th</sup> May, 4 people have moved in and a further 5 new residents will be supported to take up occupancy over the next two weeks. The extracare facility will also provide some temporary respite accommodation in the short term to enable step up/down from people's own homes, where appropriate;
- The Community Services teams working with the HR and Prosperity teams have put in place the Shielding Scheme for vulnerable individuals and families, providing a service at a level well beyond that imagined by Welsh Government. The new service is managed and coordinated by staff displaced from a range of services such as the Leisure Service. The team has also made contact with 6,726 people identified by the NHS as vulnerable to Covid 19 and are providing them with regular deliveries of food and medicines;
- The Shielding Scheme is superbly supported by our Resilient Families Service and 361 community volunteers whose contribution has been appreciated by the Council and the local residents they are supporting;
- Our Children's Services, Attendance & Wellbeing Service and our schools are keeping in touch with some of our most vulnerable children and families. In addition, our education psychologists and specialist teachers are providing wellbeing support, advice and guidance to the individuals and families that require it, in these very stressful and uncertain times;

- In terms of back office functions a number of initiatives have been ongoing including the development of a Well-Being Helpline and counselling service that we have made available to all staff (including the independent care sector) who may be feeling worried, anxious and isolated which is available throughout the week;
- Whilst, on average, we have had over 1,600 staff unavailable for work due to sickness, self – isolating; being part of the shielded list; have underlying conditions that places an individual at risk, such as being pregnant; or lives in the same household as someone that needs to be shielded, many staff have offered to undertake different roles. Through an ongoing staff survey, 3,000 employees have already responded to the survey to say they will undertake work in the Care Sector and other essential services. So far 365 employees have been assigned to the Care sector, 200 employees have been assigned to the Community Hubs, 95 employees have been assigned to the telephone service to contact shielded residents and 25 employees have been assigned to the food distribution centre;
- To support the communication of key information to residents, the Council's web-pages have provided key service and public health messages. The Council has developed and promoted its own social media content to communicate the importance of social distancing measures and has proactively targeted these messages during key times, such as bank holidays to compliment the 'Stay at Home' public message . During this period the Council has communicated 2,400 social media messages relating to coronavirus, which have been viewed over 16M times to date; the Council's coronavirus webpages have also received 1.1M visits over this eight week period.
- **Place;**
  - The level of waste and recycling that is being collected is the equivalent of a Christmas period nearly every week, yet the waste collection and disposal services across the County Borough continue to provide the usual high levels of service.
  - Street cleansing, fleet maintenance, parks, and the essential highways maintenance teams are continuing to ensure communities are clean, and essential roads maintenance continues;
  - The highways and land reclamation engineering teams continue to address the flooding issues that caused so many problems for communities a few weeks before the lockdown and are monitoring (weekly in some cases) former colliery tips and addressing water issues to ensure their safety;
  - Our youth services, library services, and adult education services are delivering a wide range of provision on-line and the increased take up of these services has been considerable;
  - Increasing the capacity of our crematoria and burial services to cope with the extra demand and ensure funerals can be held with dignity and within a reasonable timescale;
- **Prosperity;**

- Business grants – we have processed and provided over £38m of business grants to over 3,300 businesses, 2,000 (£23m) of which were processed during the first week of the scheme;
- Business Support – we have been proactively working with small businesses who are finding it difficult to navigate the range of Government support measures available. This includes identifying support they could be eligible for and providing a brokerage service liaising with other Council services and external organisations such as Business Wales. The majority of business owners have expressed their appreciation for the support;
- Free school meals – for the first few weeks we provided 1,600 daily packed lunches to FSM pupils from their local primary school. Nearly 100% of the families of the 9,300 children eligible for free school meals are having payments direct to their parent’s bank accounts. This has been quite an administrative achievement;
- Emergency childcare provision is made in school settings for vulnerable children between the ages of 4-19, including children looked after, on the child protection register, young carers or have additional learning needs. Provision is also made for the children of key workers, as defined by the Welsh Government from 8am-6pm, 7 days a week including holiday periods and bank holidays. Initially, all the schools offered this provision, but for the past six weeks it has been delivered on a hub basis with Headteachers in a cluster coordinating the staffing of this provision, which includes their own attendance at the hub facilities. On average 420 children are attending 13 hubs on a daily basis each week, 130 of whom are vulnerable children. In addition, provision is also made available for over 200 children aged 0-4 years as part of the Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme in 42 different settings;
- Digitally Excluded Learners - Welsh Government have pledged to provide an additional £3M across Wales to support continuity of learning arrangements for digitally excluded learners. An audit has been undertaken in partnership with schools to identify 3,048 digitally excluded learners and 1,709 surplus devices will be repurposed for the most disadvantaged. Mobile connectivity devices will also be provided for those who require it. A total of 246 devices have already been made available and a further 1,651 new devices will be disseminated for those with the greatest need.
- We have seen a significant increase in the applications and changes in circumstances for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support from individuals and families across the County Borough. To date we have seen over 900 new CTRS entitlements awarded since the lockdown started, more than any other Council in Wales; we have also awarded Free School Meal entitlement to an additional 400 pupils;
- Through home working, many other key administrative services such as Council Tax and Business Rates billing and collection, paying our staff and administering the pension fund with the thousands of pensioners being paid each month, have continued;

- We have worked with contractors to continue to safely deliver major construction projects such as Llys Cadwyn, the new industrial unit at Coed Ely, the new primary school in Hirwaun, completing the projects at Tonyrefail and Treorchy schools and reinstatement works following the flood damage.
- 5.3 The Council's staff across all services have been exceptional in the manner in which they have responded to the challenge of the Covid 19 pandemic and have been willing to come forward and do whatever has been necessary. 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.
- 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 all 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 STEPS?**

- 6.1 Over the next few months, the UK and Welsh Governments will seek to phase the release of the lockdown measures, and try to ensure that the infection rate remains at a level at which the NHS can meet the demand for its services. In doing so, the Council has 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 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. This task is quite a challenge as we are seeking to initially establish six teams across the region with over 300 staff from principally from local government before the end of the month. The team will initially focus on high risk settings such as care homes, school hubs, supported living, homeless accommodation etc, before expanding the number of teams to thirteen and providing a response to community clusters and actively testing the wider population.

6.4 **Recovery and Service Planning** - The Council's Senior Leadership Team has been preparing recovery plans that consider how the Council can begin to reopen services when the Welsh Government begins to lift the restrictions. In preparing these plans we are taking into account the changes we have been forced to make to our services, the different ways of engaging residents and clients, and the way we work taking into account that social distancing is likely to become the "norm" for quite a while. The UK Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty has said *"This disease is not going to be eradicated, it is not going to disappear... The UK will have to maintain some forms of social distancing until a vaccine or effective treatment for Covid19 are developed, both of which are unlikely this year"*.

6.5 In planning for the future:

- The Director of Education & Inclusion Services has begun to test out options with Headteacher groups to understand how social distancing could be managed in schools and what lessons can be learnt from other countries that have begun to re-open schools to specific groups of pupils.
- The Director of Corporate Estates is reviewing the Council's office accommodation to ascertain the maximum number we could base in each setting, and then work with the respective managers to balance the mix between office, agile and home working. Similar discussions are ongoing with leisure, libraries, theatres, visitor attractions and other services across the Council.
- The Group Director of Prosperity, Development & Frontline Services is reviewing how social distancing could work in town centres, transport hubs and other locations across the County Borough and put in place, initially temporary measures, to facilitate social distancing.
- The Group Director of Community & Children's Services is considering how to resume the full range of services the community will require in the coming months and has plans to:
  - Review safeguarding issues when all partners, including schools and communities, have more direct contact with children, families and adults;

- Review the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children, young people, adults and families, as some have found the lockdown period very difficult;
  - Complete Court work that has been started in the period such as care orders, revoking orders such as placements with parents, and adoption orders;
  - Review the Children Looked After placements and where appropriate make changes, as this has been very difficult during the lockdown.
- 6.6 SLT has also challenged services to learn from this experience 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 and the verbal feedback we have received suggests that we are more productive as a result of this technology. Through HR, a further survey is being undertaken with over 3,000 staff to capture their views and experiences of agile/homeworking over the past few weeks.
- 6.7 One of the big lessons we have learnt, is that we can be very decisive and move mountains in a very short time if we all pull together. In a week, we enabled the 3,000+ workers to have the technology to work from home – it would normally have taken us three years to do the same. Yes, it’s not perfect, but we can continue via trial and error to solve any problems we encounter.
- 6.8 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.
- 6.9 Over the next few weeks, as guidance becomes available from the two governments, further reports will be made available to Cabinet on how the Council could begin to reopen key services in a phased approach.
- 6.10 **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.

- 6.11 Due to social distancing, no Committees have met. 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 has also 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. I consider that this method of open discussion and decision making between the Leader and officers has been extremely effective.
- 6.12 However, Covid 19 is likely to be with us for at least a further year along with social distancing requirements, and we need to ensure that the committee processes of local government are reinstated. The Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Meetings) (Wales) Regulations 2020 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. . As a result, the Council will incrementally resume its committee functions. In consultation with the Chairs of the the Committees, arrangements are being made to hold virtual meetings in the near future, starting with Cabinet and Planning.
- 6.13 Holding large committee meetings via Zoom or Microsoft Teams can be a challenge, and all participants need to understand how to use the technology and the protocols and practices that need to be adopted to ensure the meetings operate effectively and everyone can engage in the meeting. Therefore, it has been proposed, in consultation with the Group Leaders, to adopt a phased approach to the resumption of committee meetings. All members are having the opportunity to have their respective devices updated to include the appropriate virtual conferencing technology and shortly training will be available to all members.
- 6.14 A draft timetable for the roll out of the virtual committee meetings is being considered by the Committee Chairs. 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.
- 6.15 **Counting the Cost (now and into the future)** – The additional cost to the Council of responding to the Covid 19 pandemic will be significant particularly with the likely restrictions being in place for the remainder of the calendar year. The Council is 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. In addition, sickness rates

and the need to shield or self isolate have created additional pressures on staffing resources across key services. Furthermore, the level of demand for a range of community based services has risen, 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. It is initially estimated that the financial impact on the Council of the pandemic is at least £4.5m per month over and above its existing resources with further modelling being undertaken around for example the cost implications of future service planning and delivery requirements as referenced above.

- 6.16 Furthermore, the Covid 19 costs are in addition to the significant costs the Council has had to incur due to Storm Dennis, which occurred during the February half term holidays. The Council is actively working with the WLGA and Welsh Government to ensure the additional costs incurred as a result of Storm Dennis and the Covid 19 pandemic will be supported in full in due course. The Director of Finance and Digital Services will provide an update on the 2019/20 year end position and the estimated financial impact for 2020/21 financial year at the next Cabinet meeting.
- 6.17 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. As a result, the Leader approved the Education and Highways Supplementary Capital Programmes, in consultation with the relevant Cabinet Members, encouraging local contractors to come forward and tender for up to £30m of work. Clearly, a requirement of the contracts will be the need to ensure the safety of the contractors and the general public and strict application of the social distancing requirements.
- 6.18 **Economic Resilience** - Our primary focus will always be on our residents wellbeing and protecting lives, we also need to deal with the economic disaster that the virus has created. We can see globally that many countries in the first wave of the virus are struggling to get the right balance between opening up the economy and managing virus infection rates.
- 6.19 Despite, this difficult message, there are 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.

- 6.20 We have already made progress on this. We have local companies manufacturing visors, we have two distilleries manufacturing hand sanitiser and a local company manufacturing bottles and filling them with the sanitiser, and a company has ordered machinery to manufacture face masks for local government and the NHS, with the aim of starting production in early summer. This local procurement has already protected and created many jobs, and it is something we need to consider urgently across our supply chain.
- 6.21 Whilst, the UK and Welsh Governments have put in place a range of interventions to support businesses across a wide range of sectors, locally we need to work with Welsh Government and the Cardiff Capital Region to understand the potential impact of social distancing on the financial viability of our town centres. A number of national chains have recently gone into administration, such as Debenhams, Warehouse, Oasis, and Bonmarche and other key national chains such as Peacocks, Next, Primark and the Arcadia Group are reported, in the national press, to be under financial pressure from low sales.
- 6.22 Therefore, it is likely that fewer national stores will be reopened in the future. 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.

## **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 6.15-6.17 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 Throughout this pandemic, the Council has put in place the necessary plans to effectively respond to the potential impacts of COVID 19 and it has continued to deliver essential services and protect local communities and our staff. As we look forward into the future, it is impossible to plan for every eventuality, but it is inevitable that we will see further spikes in the virus as the lockdown restrictions are eased. Based on our experience to date the Council has many challenges to overcome but we are confident that we have the capacity and capability to respond to every situation.