



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MUNICIPAL YEAR 2020/2021

HEALTH AND WELLBEING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	Agenda Item 5
12TH JANUARY 2020	
REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR, PUBLIC HEALTH, PROTECTION AND COMMUNITY SERVICES	PUBLIC PROTECTION SERVICES-COVID-19 RESPONSE

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide the Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee with an overview of the Public Protection Services' response to the Coronavirus pandemic in Rhondda Cynon Taf. This report also provides an overview of the Cwm Taf Morgannwg Contact Tracing Service operated by RCTCBC on behalf of the Region.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Health and Wellbeing Committee:

- 2.1 Acknowledges the information contained within the report; and
- 2.2 Scrutinises and comments on the information provided.

3 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

To provide the Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee with an opportunity to examine the response of Public Protection Services to the pandemic, in terms of Regulatory Services (including Environmental Health, Trading Standards, Licensing, Community Safety), Homelessness Provision and the Registrar Service. The report also provides the Committee with an overview of the Regional Contact Tracing Service and an opportunity to scrutinise the role of RCTCBC in providing that service for the population of Cwm Taf Morgannwg.

4. **BACKGROUND**

- 4.1 The Coronavirus Pandemic has had a particular impact across the Public Protection Services of the Council. Since the first lockdown was announced on the 23rd March 2020, successive Regulations have been enacted by Welsh Government to impose restrictions and other control measures on businesses in Wales. In addition, demands for services to the vulnerable such as homeless people have increased significantly, while maintaining support for victims of domestic abuse or people who misuse substances has been vital. New challenges in preventing and controlling the coronavirus infection in the community have come within the remit of the department too, necessitating the rapid development of new services, to protect the communities of RCT. Many normal services have reduced as result of the priority given to tackling the pandemic and other work has been prioritised to ensure the actions to protect public health have been delivered within available specialist staff resources.

Regulatory Services

- 4.2 The series of new regulations from Welsh Government commenced with The Public Health (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) Regulations on 26th March 2020. Since then, over 20 amendment regulations have been issued and new regulations have been required in response to the control measures imposed by Government to slow the transmission of the virus in Wales. Specific statutory guidance has been issued with each piece of legislation and has been tailored to each setting and trade affected by the new laws. Enforcement of each set of regulations has fallen to Trading Standards, Licensing, Environmental Health and Community Safety Officers of the Public Protection Department. The officers have had to work at pace to assimilate the new laws and guidance to ensure they could support businesses and provide consumers and residents with the assurance that the measures required were being implemented across the County Borough as required.
- 4.3. Since March the following actions and activities have been undertaken by the Department:

Activity	Number
Premises proactively advised	1,079
Enforcement Visits carried out	1,407
Enquiries responded to	1,321
Warning letters issued	20

Fixed Penalty Notices issued	8
Premises Improvement Notices issued	65
Premises Closure Notices issued	18

Many premises have received proactive advice and guidance on more than one occasion, as a result of the frequent changes to legislation and guidance. The licensed hospitality sector in particular, has received targeted information on at least two occasions during the year to help them ensure compliance with requirements. Regrettably, in spite of this proactive work by the Department, the hospitality trade has been subject to the most frequent enforcement action (including closure notices), followed by close contact services such as hairdressers and barbers.

- 4.4 In addition to ensuring business compliance, officers have been liaising with other Council service areas to ensure compliance or to share good practice. This includes advice to: care homes, schools and colleges, adult education, social care workforce training, procurement (in respect of PPE checks and test-house analysis), leisure, events, town centre regeneration and community centres. Many of these service areas have had to deal with changing guidance throughout the pandemic period.
- 4.5 In September 2020, Welsh Government provided additional resources to local authorities to employ specific, Coronavirus Enforcement Officers. These ten new officers are employed by RCTCBC and work across the Merthyr Tydfil CBC area too, as part of Joint Enforcement Teams with South Wales Police. These additional staff work alongside Public Protection Officers to respond to complaints received and undertake proactive visits to premises.
- 4.6 Maintaining normal, essential public protection services has been a challenge in the face of the increasing new demands on the service. Some services such as food regulation inspections were suspended under the direction of the Food Standards Agency for a period due to restrictions however this work has now recommenced with a backlog of visits now to be undertaken with some initial audits of premises now being undertaken online to reduce the time required on site by officers. Recurrent business closure regulations has further hampered the ability of the service to undertake this work. Priority to date has been given to inspecting those businesses with a previous poor record of compliance. In addition, the restrictions saw much entrepreneurship in the County and 215 new food businesses opened during 2020, all of which need an inspection to verify compliance with legal standards. To date, businesses preparing high risk foods have been prioritised and completed while there remains a number of low risk, new businesses such as home bakers, that require a visit.

- 4.7 While some demands reduced during the year, such as complaints from consumers, others increased such as a 23% increase in domestic noise complaints during the period March to September 2020. Anti-social behaviour referrals also increased slightly during this period, largely linked to breaches of coronavirus requirements. Other work has continued in a new way, such as the licensing of houses in multiple occupation through online applications and assessment of compliance for previously licensed premises. Demand for substance misuse services and support for victims of domestic abuse have remained constant throughout the year although services have been re-modelled to ensure they can be delivered remotely wherever possible.
- 4.8 Licensing has been particularly affected as events have not been held and the hospitality sector has been affected by repeated closure periods. The taxi trade has been detrimentally affected by the loss of the night-time economy trade and this has had a knock-on effect to applications for driver licences which has been managed through sensitive application of policy requirements enabling drivers to defer renewal of licenses for a period until business conditions improve. This has seen the normal work of the licensing team reduce but this has been superseded by the increased focus required on ensuring the sector can operate safely when open. The hospitality sector is recognised as a key environment where transmission of the virus has been high.

Homelessness

- 4.9 In advance of the first National lockdown in March 2020, it was recognised that homeless people were at particular risk during the pandemic. Welsh Government required local authorities to ensure there was adequate accommodation available to ensure that no one had to sleep rough during the pandemic. Previous legislation that defined eligibility for emergency accommodation based on priority need criteria was suspended and this ensured that eligibility was based on presenting need for housing as opposed to other, additional criteria such as vulnerability, age, medical condition. Welsh Government provided funding for this first phase of the homelessness response
- 4.10 In RCT, action was taken by the Housing Solutions Service to work with local hotel and bed and breakfast providers to ensure accommodation was available. This required 6 hotels between March and May to remain open under the direction of the Council to support homeless people. Between 23.03.2020 and 31.12.20, 645 people were provided with emergency accommodation with 520 households placed in bed and breakfast accommodation. This is a 79% increase on the same period in 2019/20 when 290 households were placed in bed and breakfast.

Single males aged 25 and over are the most common client group housed during the pandemic. Many of these individuals have high support needs, including chronic substance misuse and offending backgrounds.

- 4.11 Due to the restrictions in place and the ongoing social distancing and other infection control requirements, moving people on from emergency accommodation has been challenging this year. However, the Team has continued to make good progress with re-housing individuals, through Rapid Rehousing, the Housing First Scheme and into supported housing schemes. In addition, the Council has been successful in obtaining funding from Welsh Government during September 2020 to support projects to prevent a return to homelessness for clients. These include funding to establish a Social Letting Agency to widen access to the private rented sector and funding for a specialist substance misuse worker to support homeless people. Capital funding has also been secured for a new young person's accommodation unit to be built by Rhondda Housing Association in the Rhondda.

Registrar Service

- 4.12 The first wave of the pandemic required urgent action within the Registrar service to ensure there was adequate capacity and trained staff available to register deaths and support bereaved families. Detailed models were produced by Government to enable the service to plan for the excess deaths projected in the early months of the pandemic. The General Registrar Office for the UK issued official guidance in February 2020 requiring the suspension of all Registrar services such as marriages and civil ceremonies and the deferral of registration for births within the statutory timescale. In addition, the Registrar service had to ensure the rapid deployment of electronic document management procedures to enable deaths notified to them electronically by doctors and then to be registered by telephone by the notifying person.
- 4.13 In order to ensure adequate capacity, staff from other departments in the Council were redeployed to Registrar roles. In total, the staff base was increased by 100% to cope with projected excess deaths (8 fulltime equivalent staff increased to 16). During this period, 796 deaths were registered, which is in excess of the 526 average for the period. This equates to an overall increase of 51% although notably there was a 110% higher number of deaths registered in April 2020 alone.
- 4.14 Since the summer, other services in the Registrar service have resumed which has required 40 births to be registered retrospectively. The number of births required to be registered in RCT is low as

maternity services are largely delivered outside the County now, at Prince Charles Hospital. The GRO has permitted the continuation of the pandemic electronic death registration process, and introduced a partial electronic birth registration process. Citizenship Ceremonies have also been approved for conducting via Video Link; Rhondda Cynon Taf is one of the few Local Authorities in Wales to offer this. All three of these service delivery changes have reduced foot-fall within the Municipal Building, critical to ensuring the safety of staff and maintaining service delivery.

- 4.15 The pandemic wave this Winter is again putting pressure on the service. During November and December 2020, 552 deaths were registered, which is in excess of the 375 average for the period (47% increase). The GRO are not permitting the postponement of other statutory services, as occurred during the first wave: this means that the Registrar Service still must maintain marriage and civil ceremony bookings, birth registrations and citizenship ceremonies. The previously redeployed staff have been returned to substantive roles, and additional capacity to ensure services can be maintained is currently being sourced.

Regional Contact Tracing Service

- 4.16 In May 2020, Welsh Government published its Test, Trace, Protect Strategy outlining the framework for recovery from the pandemic which included the necessity to establish a National Contact Tracing Service for Wales. This required local authorities to work with Regional Health Board partners and Public Health Wales to ensure cases of coronavirus were identified and required to isolate along with those people they had been in contact with. This service was established for RCT in late May as part of an initial pilot of contact tracing. The National Model was launched in early June and between then and September 2020, over 100 members of staff were either re-deployed from their substantive roles or otherwise recruited to the service and trained as Contact Tracers and Contact Advisors. Environmental Health and Trading Standards Officers from within Public Protection were redeployed to specialist roles to directly support the Contact Tracing Service and Environmental Health Officers trained in Infection Control were assigned to specialist roles within a Regional Response Team, investigating clusters of infection and taking action to protect vulnerable people in care homes and other at risk settings.
- 4.17 In August 2020, it was agreed within the Region that a single Contact Tracing Service for Cwm Taf Morgannwg should be established and RCTCBC was to be the host organisation. This Regional Service went live on the 1st September 2020. **Between 1.9.20 and 31.12.20, 30,570 cases of coronavirus have been traced by the service** to identify their close contacts and the locations they have visited where there

may have been a risk of them passing on the infection to others. **Over 78,179 contacts have been identified** through these interviews. All cases and contacts have been required to self-isolate for between 10 and 14 days. For Rhondda Cynon Taf, the total of cases identified to the contact tracing service between June 2020 when it was launched, and the 31st December 2020 is 16,290 cases and 42,090 contacts. By December 2020, almost 400 people are working in the Regional Contract Tracing Service for Cwm Taf Morgannwg.

4.18 In addition to tracing cases and their contacts, specialist EHOs in the Regional Response Team have actively investigated clusters and outbreaks of the infection. Significant resources have been deployed since April 2020 to supporting nursing and residential care homes and supported living schemes in the County Borough to ensure they had robust infection prevention and control procedures in place. Officers work in close partnership with Adult Social Care, Health Board and Public Health Wales to identify and manage clusters of infection to prevent and control transmission in these vulnerable settings. Investigations of other outbreaks in hospitality sector, care settings, workplaces and the service sector were also undertaken and **between the 14th September and 29th November 2020, over 175 clusters were identified.**

4.19 Public Protection Officers have supported schools with their infection control procedures and in managing cases among pupils, teaching and support staff. **Schools had 1363 cases reported between 3rd September and 15th December** but clusters have been contained through robust contact tracing undertaken by the schools in partnership with the Education Department and Public Protection Officers.

5 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

There are no equality and diversity implications associated with this report.

6 CONSULTATION / INVOLVEMENT

There are no consultation implications arising from this report.

7 FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

There are no financial implications arising from this report.

8 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

There are no legal implications arising from this report.

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

- 9.1 The work of Public Protection Services as described in this report supports the Council's Corporate Plan 'People' Priority in particular. Activities to enable people to stay safe and live independent lives is the key goal of the coronavirus response provided in recent months.
- 9.2 Links to many of the wellbeing goals are also clear, namely a healthier Wales and a more equal Wales while work to address non-compliance and anti-social behaviour promotes a more cohesive Wales. The work of the department to support businesses during this challenging period also contributes to a more prosperous Wales. The department continually strives to embrace the five ways of working.

10 CONCLUSION

- 10.1 The pandemic has had a particular impact on the Public Protection Services of the Council. Resources have been redeployed at pace to ensure we can protect the most vulnerable and deliver new services and interventions aimed at reducing the transmission of the virus in our communities. The staff of the department have shown tremendous resilience and flexibility in how they have responded to the successive challenges we have seen.
- 10.2 As a result of the redeployment of specialist trained staff to key roles and the scale of the response mobilised, some services and activities being suspended or scaled back with priority given to resourcing those actions that are essential to protect public health and the most vulnerable. A detailed recovery plan will be required for the department as we emerge from this pandemic, hopefully during 2021/22.