Cyngor Bwrdeistref Sirol
MERTHYR TUDFUL
MERTHYR TYDFIL
County Borough Council

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE REPORT

Date Written	2nd September 2020
Report Author	Head of Protection & Safety Services
Service Area	Council-wide
Committee Date	22nd September 2020

To: Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen

Coronavirus Update – Response and transition to recovery

1.0   SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

1.1   Coronavirus (COVID 19) has had a devastating impact on many peoples' lives in Wales. The lockdown period and the requirements for self-isolation and shielding have had a serious impact on well-being and quality of life in local communities. Businesses, the economy and personal finances have been (in some cases) significantly affected and the Welsh, UK and the global economy faces a period of unprecedented challenge.

1.2   Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council, along with partners from other public bodies; and third and independent sectors, are continuing to provide a targeted front-line response to the constantly changing situation that the coronavirus pandemic presents. Working within guidance provided by the Welsh Government; the Council continues to deliver core services with a shared commitment to work in partnership.

1.3   Following announcement of the UK moving into a statement of lockdown; the Council worked closely within communities to sustain services where possible whilst working in different ways to meet emerging and different need.

1.4   This report offers Scrutiny Committee Members an overview of the distance travelled from where we were pre-pandemic to where we are now. It will highlight the key changes the Council has gone through. The report will outline how lessons learned has led the organisation to change the way in which it must work; and lay out what the next steps will be.

2.0   RECOMMENDATION(S)

2.1   Committee Members will receive the report, noting the actions taken by the Council in response to the pandemic.

2.2   Committee Members consider the future plans to respond to the phased relaxation of lockdown; and how the Council will work differently to meet the needs of the 'new norm'.

3.0   INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

3.1   Following the escalation of the risks and issues linked to the coronavirus pandemic; the UK government announced the whole of the UK was to enter a period of lockdown; commencing 23 March 2020. This was an unprecedented announcement that was implemented to provide the highest chances of stopping the spread of coronavirus across the UK.

3.2   The primary message co-ordinated across the UK was to 'Stay Home; Protect the NHS; Save Lives'. It was critical that the situation was managed to ensure the demand for NHS services was controlled; thereby preventing hundreds of deaths. An overview of key announcement made by UK and Welsh Government regarding the implementation and subsequent phased lifting of restrictions placed on communities as a result of the pandemic is outlined in Appendix 1 (attached).

3.3   On 26th March 2020 regulations were introduced in response to the serious and imminent threat to public health which was and is still posed by the incidence and spread of severe acute 1.6 respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) in Wales. In order that the Council could swiftly and effectively enforce these regulations delegated authority was given to Trading Standards Officers, Public Health Officers and Licensing Officers by the Deputy Chief Executive in accordance with paragraph 16(a) of Part II of Scheme B of the Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council Constitution. The regulations have been amended on several occasions, each time bringing in a slight relaxation of the restrictions. No additional delegation is required when a regulation is amended.

3.4   Every aspect of Council activity was been impacted by the lockdown. This report aims to offer an overview of what the Council has been able to achieve to sustain delivery of key services whilst also meeting unscheduled need that emerged within communities across Merthyr Tydfil as a result of the lockdown. The report will inform Committee Members of the scope and scale of the activities undertaken linked to lockdown over the past several months; and the future plans under development to ensure successful recovery for the organisation and the communities it serves.

4.0   WHERE WE WERE

4.1   Lockdown was implemented directly following the period where several heavy storms had had a huge impact on some areas of the County Borough. Services were still responding to the communities needs which arose as a result of significant flooding; with clean-up operations still underway at the point which lockdown was announced.

4.2 The impact of lockdown on communities was been immediate and dramatic; with all areas of the County Borough facing the threat of coronavirus; and new regulations had an unprecedented impact on the how people lived. The Council was required to work differently to meet both existing and emerging needs.

4.3 UK and Welsh Government guidance outlined the requirement that those who could work from home should do so. To respond positively to the challenges, the Council was required to operate the majority of its key functions with reduced staffing levels, Council buildings being closed and many staff began working from home. This was achieved with the support from the Trade Unions actively and positively engaging with the Council to provide constructive support and guidance.

4.4 As key partners of the Local Resilience Forum high level strategic and tactical implementation plans were put in place to meet potential excessive deaths based on reasonable worst case scenario situations. It was identified that there could be a profound effect on the ability to meet mortuary demands, funerals arrangements at cemeteries and crematoriums and burial space. Detailed contingency plans were put in place to attempt to mitigate any risks.

4.5 The commitment shown by Council staff, Elected Members and partners during this time has been, and continues to be, huge. The guidance issued by Welsh Government outlined organisations needed to support those workers that could work from home to do so. The Senior Leadership Team rapidly set up resource lists, led by HR. The Council was able to understand the current staffing arrangements and allocation of key equipment.
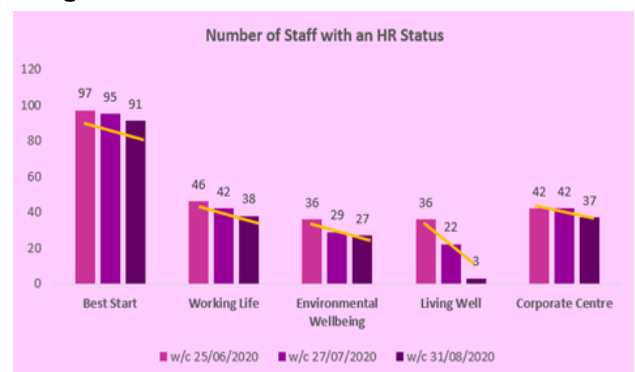
The data opposite was collected from across the Council and shows the effects of adhering to the guidance. The definition of 'Staff with an HR Status' (**Figure 1**) is staff who have submitted a special leave form which could be because they are symptomatic, family members are symptomatic, they have childcare issues or they are medically at risk. Where staff are categorised as 'not able to work' (**Figure 2**); this could be as a result of being off with symptoms, their families are displaying symptoms, they have childcare issues or they are medically at risk and they are in a role where they cannot work from home.

Figure 1

Figure 2
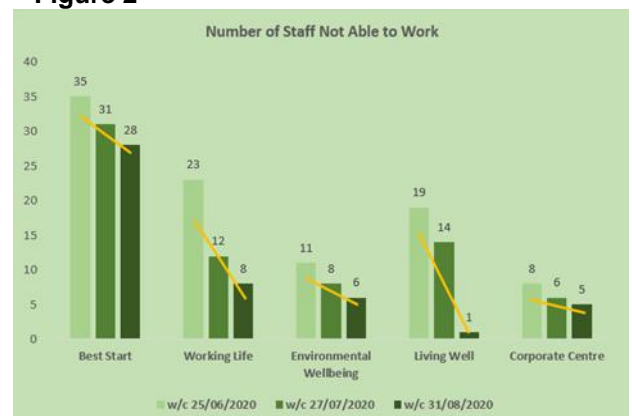
4.6 Those staff remaining in the workplace were often required to work in different roles which required that they do very different things. Committee Members may be interested in reports presented to other Scrutiny Committees in the Autumn of 2020

which set out the details of how each area responded to the crisis. Some examples include:

- co-ordinating volunteers to establishing a system to secure and deliver free school meals and developing a legacy system where direct payments could be made to those eligible for this;
- packaging and delivering food parcels and medications to those people that were shielding;
- co-ordinating volunteers to establishing a system to secure and deliver free school meals and developing and transitioning from physical food parcels to a direct payments system for those eligible for this support; and
- more recently; working with Welsh Government and Public Health Wales on the development of the 'Track & Trace' contact tracing programme – a critical function aimed to keep people safe as lockdown restrictions are released on a phased basis.

4.7 Particular praise must go to those in frontline roles, particularly colleagues in Social Services and Social Care; School Hubs where childcare was sustained for the children of key workers; Waste and Street Scene workers; the officers involved in Shielding Scheme & Food Distribution Centre; and Elected Members and key partners.

4.8 Our Economic Regeneration and Revenues Team worked with local businesses ensuring they were able to obtain the various funding streams made available via Welsh and UK Governments.

4.9 The Council's ICT team worked with Corporate Management Team and, within a space of a few weeks; were able to transform the way in which the Council worked.

5.0 WHERE WE ARE NOW

5.1 At the time of drafting this report; 477 or 37**%** of Council staff continue to work totally remotely. This figure relates to all council staff including front line services; but does not include schools.

5.2 Communications in line with Welsh Government guidelines is being developed to be sent to all staff. The key message continues to be 'work from home where possible'. The longer-term view will be to develop into a more modern workforce providing agile working opportunities to our staff.

5.3 The Senior Leadership Team have identified individual service risks presented by the pandemic which will factor into their business planning and corporate risk register.

5.4 During the last several months; our teams have worked together with key partners and other stakeholders to meet identified needs. Some of the positive outcomes achieved during this period are listed below (and appear in Appendix 2):

1,420
replies issued to direct messages on social media

52,263
hits on the Council's COVID-19 web-pages

2,877
people contacted on the shielding list in Merthyr Tydfil

2,534
welfare calls made

1,595
weekly referrals for food parcels and support with shopping

4,720
places provided enabling key workers to continue with their jobs

1,648
free school meal applications received online (March-May)

7,779
free school meals distributed in the first 2 weeks of lockdown

378,411
Items of PPE issued to staff in 31 locations

4,835
tons of waste collected

5.5 Throughout the management of the pandemic; the strength of existing collaboration and partnership working with key stakeholders has been critical to the successful management of the complex, multiple requirements.

6.0 WHAT HAS CHANGED

6.1 We have been able to rapidly move forward our digital agenda to ensure we continue to provide our services. Purchasing 950 Microsoft Teams licenses has meant our teams have been able to **work remotely, stay connected** and **limit risk** from the pandemic.

6.2 Most staff have adapted well to the new ways of working with a staff survey revealing **61%** answered either strongly agree or agree to **"I believe that working from home has enabled me to be more efficient in how I manage my time to complete my work"** (31% answered neither agree nor disagree).

6.3 **74%** of staff answered yes to **"Do you have the necessary applications or software to work from home?"** We have since worked address this position with purchasing additional laptops, software, and other IT equipment (also relocating office equipment to staff members' homes where necessary).

6.4 **83%** answered very important or fairly important to **"How important is having the flexibility to decide how you organise your working hours when working from home?"**

6.5 **53%** answered strongly agree or agree to **"I believe that working from home has increased my work productivity"** (38% answering neither agree nor disagree).

6.6 Public Protection services such as Environmental Health, Trading Standards and Licensing have had to reprioritise workloads to commit to the new additional statutory duties relating to business opening and COVID 19 measures. This has been dealt with via "**engage and explain**" exercises with businesses. It has included a trade seminar for the hospitality sector, dedicated sector specific Facebook groups, inspections of business premises and provision of information leaflets and risk assessments.

6.7 Front facing services have taken advantage of technology developments engaging with clients via **online platforms** such as Facetime, Teams and Skype meetings.

7.0 WHAT WE NEED TO DO MOVING FORWARD

7.1 To assist with the recovery process; a Recovery Group has been established to look at thematic areas of work affecting our whole organisation. This group has brought together staff data that will enable managers to look at sustainable, modern ways of working.

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Recovery   Response

Transition

Our recovery

Thematic issues are being assessed by our
Recovery Group

Key themes are:

Resource planning – Agile working/Staff
information and advice

Buildings – Reopening of Council estate

Schools recovery

Economic recovery

7.2 The initial work of the group is to embed home working and agile practices to

continue to provide services whilst protecting staff and users from a potential second wave. This work will go onto embed long term changes to ensure we are a modern organisation meeting the needs for our communities.

8.0   CONTRIBUTION TO WELLBEING OBJECTIVES

8.1   While taking actions to reduce the spread of coronavirus, the Council has endeavoured to ensure key messages have been clearly conveyed ensuring people stayed safe; and were able to maintain their health and wellbeing.

8.2   The work outlined in this report demonstrates how the Council has aligned to the four wellbeing objectives within the Council's Corporate Wellbeing Plan: Focus on the Future: wellbeing in our community (i.e.) sustaining key services such as maintaining waste and recycling services; through the provision of childcare for key workers; and social care services throughout lockdown.

8.3   Additionally; the Council has supported people to manage the impact of the pandemic through adjusting existing activities and developing new response activities in partnership with partners and key stakeholders. Examples of this includes supporting local businesses to access grants offered by Welsh Government so they could remain viable throughout the enforced lockdown period; delivering free school meals directly to eligible families' homes before transferring to direct payments to families; and offering physical activity services via social media platforms.

ELLIS COOPER
CHIEF EXECUTIVE

COUNCILLOR ANDREW BARRY
CABINET MEMBER FOR GOVERNANCE
& CORPORATE SERVICES

BACKGROUND PAPERS		
Title of Document(s)	**Document(s) Date**	**Document Location**
Does the report contain any issue that may impact the Council's Constitution?		**No**

Appendix 1 – An overview of key announcements made by UK and Welsh Government

March–April 2020

During the emergency period, no person may leave the place where they are living without a reasonable excuse (e.g.)

- To get food or medical supplies;
- To get money;
- For essential work; to exercise – once a day (except for those shielding)

Essential businesses remain open; however; retailers have a duty to ensure social distancing measures are observed and adhered to.

Police have the power to stop and request information from people out in public; people can be arrested for refusing to provide personal details and, as a last resort, can be fined (Initial fine in Wales - £60 – rising)

May 2020

08/05/2020
First Minister extends lockdown for a further 3 weeks - adjustment to restrictions:

- Outdoor exercise more than once a day;
- Councils can plan to reopen tips and libraries

15/05/2020
First Minister outlines a 'traffic light' route out of lockdown for Wales; which is currently in the red zone.

29/05/2020
First Minister announces the members of 2 households to meet up outdoors.

31/05/2020
Health Secretary announces those shielding can now exercise outdoors

June 2020

02/06/2020
All schools to reopen on 29/06/2020.

05/06/2020
UK government ban on tenant evictions is extended to 23/08/2020

08/06/2020
Welsh Government rolls out the 'Track and Trace' system to enable contact mapping that will support the reopening of facilities

19/06/2020
Change to restrictions:

- Retailers to reopen from 22/06/2020;
- Restrictions lifted on outdoor sports

22/06/2020
Changes to restrictions:

- Weddings/civil partnerships resume (ban on social gatherings);
- Shielding will be lifted for those affected

29/06/2020
Two households in Wales can form an extended household enabling them to meet indoors

July 2020

02/07/2020
Pubs, restaurants cafes and bars can open outdoors from 13/07/2020

03/07/2020
The 'stay local' 5-mile travel restrictions are lifted removing limited travel from 06/07/2020

06/07/2020
£21 million scheme to help firms provide trainee places announced

09/07/2020
All state schools in Wales to reopen in September; schools will have limited social distancing for groups of pupils; but adults will have to maintain social distancing

10/07/2020
Pubs, restaurants cafes and bars can open indoors from 03/08/2020

11/07/2020
Some holidays homes re-open in Wales

13/07/2020
- Hairdressers and barbers re-open in Wales

13/07/2020
- Face coverings to become mandatory on public transport from 27/07/2020

15/07/2020
First Minister confirms driving lessons can resume in Wales from 27/07/2020

16/07/2020
People who have been shielding will not need to do so from 16/08/2020

20/07/2020
Playgrounds, outdoor gyms and funfairs can re-open in Wales

23/07/2020
Pregnant women can take partner to antenatal appointments

24/07/2020
Beauty salons, tattooists, nails, spas, tanning shops, art galleries and museums re-open

27/07/2020
Welsh Government scraps law requiring people to work from home; but people are still advised to work from home if this option exists

31/07/2020
Swimming pools; gyms; leisure centres and indoor play areas can reopen from 03/08/2020

Appendix 2 – Information sheets relating to work done by the Council in response to Coronavirus

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council COVID-19 Response in numbers.

Did you know we have ...

7,779 meals
distributed 7,779 free school meals in the first 2 weeks

£11.7m paid
supported 945 businesses in Merthyr Tydfil by administering £11.7M of government grants

52,263 hits
had 52,263 hits on our COVID-19 web page

378,411 items
distributed 378,411 items of PPE to staff within 31 locations

1,420 replies
replied to 1,420 direct social media messages

1,595 meals
supported 1,595 weekly referrals for food parcels and support with shopping

900 updates
made over 900 proactive communication updates

4,720 places
provided 4,720 places per week to allow key workers to do their jobs

3700 tonnes
collected 3700 tonnes of waste from across the County Borough

3,150 hours
provided on average 3,150 hours of domiciliary care per week

2,877 people
contacted 2,877 residents on the shielding list within Merthyr Tydfil

2,534 people
made over 2,534 welfare calls

merthyr.gov.uk/coronavirus
Data collected between March 14th and May 29th

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council COVID-19 Digital analysis highlights

In the first two months of lockdown, we have had...

535 applications
For emergency childcare made online.

Over 300 new laptops
issued to staff to enable home working, ensuring council services continued to operate.

27% increase in
Fly-tipping reports made on-line.

46% increase in
Refuse/recycling containers ordered on-line.

Digitally Excluded Learners
400 Chromebooks and 190 internet connections provided to 500 learners.

1,648
Free School Meals applications made on-line.

Microsoft Teams
950 licenses purchased and being configured to enhance home working - video conferencing, phone calls and instant messaging.

Softphones
Giving staff the ability to be contacted on critical desk numbers at home – such as the MASH team.

Webex telephone conferencing –
to enable Child Protection meetings to continue and conferences with external partners.

COVID-19 Business Support Grant
All 1,412 applications made on-line.

merthyr.gov.uk/coronavirus
Data is based on 2 months before lockdown (23/01/2020 - 22/03/2020) to 2 months after start of lockdown (23/03/2020-22/05/2020.)