

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE REPORT

Date Written	21 st September 2020
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Service Area	Neighbourhood Services
Committee Date	28 th September 2020

To: Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen

Coronavirus Pandemic - Update on Recovery and Activity

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.
- 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 state of lockdown on 20th March 2020; the Council has worked closely within communities to provide targeted support to those in need; and to sustain services where possible; working in different ways to meet emerging and existing need.
- 1.4 Managers and staff have worked closely together to look at ways in which we can ensure we discharge our duties to the public, whilst promoting both public and staff safety.
- 1.5 This report will offer Scrutiny Committee Members a holistic 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 works; and lay out what the next steps will be both in the short and long-term.

2 RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 2.1 Members are asked to review and note its content and consider future plans to support the Neighbourhood Services recovery across the County Borough.

3 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 3.1 On 23rd March 2020 the Prime Minister and First Minister made announcements outlining the Stay At Home Rules which increased the emphasis on working from home and social distancing in a bid to stop the spread of coronavirus¹. (Please see Appendix A for a brief timeline of the Government announcements.)
- 3.2 The link between deprivation and people having a significant negative impact from coronavirus has been greatly researched². It has been identified that people in deprived areas are at higher risk of exposure to Covid-19 due to a number of factors such as: people on low incomes are more likely to work in jobs that put them at greater risk of exposure to the coronavirus; people in deprived areas are more likely to have long-term health condition and be at greater risk of suffering severe symptoms from the virus if exposed; and over cramped or poor housing conditions. The impact of coronavirus on communities has been huge; with all areas of local government being affected by the need to meet new and emerging needs exacerbated by the impact of the pandemic. Every aspect of Council activity has been impacted by the lockdown.
- 3.3 This report will outline the actions taken within the various departments of Neighbourhood Services. It will demonstrate how the service areas managed by the Chief Officer of Neighbourhood Services were able to deliver key services over the past several months, whilst also meeting unscheduled need that emerged within communities across Merthyr Tydfil as a result of the lockdown. In addition to this, it will identify lessons learned and future plans currently under development for the recovery and resilience of the services.
- 3.4 Members are asked to review and note its content and consider future plans to support the Neighbourhood Services recovery across the County Borough.

4 WHERE WE WERE

- 4.1 Throughout the pandemic we have continued to operate services within the community. Managers and staff have worked closely together to look at ways in which we can ensure we discharge our duties to the public, whilst promoting both public and staff safety.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others>

²

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/articles/coronaviruscovid19roundup/2020-03-26>

4.2 When the Stay At Home Rules were announced, Neighbourhood Services management developed the following in response to corporate direction and in pursuit of maintaining essential statutory services:

- Worked with the Procurement team to obtain a supply of the necessary PPE and distributed it to all staff that required it.
- Determined which services could work from home.
- Developed and agreed appropriate processes for those services that needed to continue to visit properties i.e. Building Control and Planning. to enable them to socially distance.
- Re-designed the Street Cleansing operating model so that staff worked in the areas that they live to avoid all staff congregating at the Park and the need to travel together in vehicles.
- Held staff briefings and training sessions for staff required to work in the community (e.g. Waste and Street Cleansing)
- Participated in weekly all Wales Welsh Government Waste Covid-19 response meetings.
- Fleet sourced additional ‘follow’ vehicles for front line services to minimise the number of staff in a vehicle.
- Grounds maintenance and Highways staff were relocated to the priority services - Waste and Cemeteries to ensure those services continued.
- Worked with Corporate Communications to develop media messages asking the public to sanitise the recycling receptacles for the safety of the staff
- Property services Covid proofed all office buildings including Unit 20, Unit 5 and the Civic Centre, putting up posters, providing hand sanitisers, soap and paper towels, cordoning off toilet cubicles etc to ensure social distancing.
- Worked to ensure that staff had the necessary IT equipment to work from home.
- Staff given Microsoft Teams access to attend meetings.
- Kept in touch with staff working from home on a regular basis to identify priority task and monitor progress
- Developed rota’s for staff needing to come into the office.
- Ensure that office staff were aware and adhering to all the suggested Covid safety policies etc.
- Weekly managers meetings to note new information about staff capacity in the service, agree, prioritise, manage risks and share information.

4.3 Since this time Neighbourhood Services management have made the necessary changes in line with advice and guidance from the Welsh Government and Public Health Wales. Table 1 below provides a summary of our services to the public during the pandemic:

Table 1

Waste	<p>Business as usual</p> <p>Household waste and recycling collections continued as normal, throughout. The service experienced a significant increase in the amount of cardboard presented for collection which along with the number of staff self-isolating and shielding put a strain on the service. Follow on vehicles were introduced to reduce the number of staff in a vehicle from 3 to 2.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bulky waste collections were suspended for a month due to
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	<p>staffing issues but were re-introduced and continued throughout.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Green waste collections re-started on Monday 20th April 2020, 2 weeks later than normal • HWRC's closed after the lockdown announcement and reopened when the First Minister announced it was safe to do so (on 8th May) providing the necessary precautions were in place. Risk assessments were produced and traffic management measures were put in place to ensure social distancing. We worked with Comms to provide information to local residents. • A number of Waste office support staff were unable to work due to childcare which resulted in increased pressure on the Waste Operations Manager and Team Leader.
Parks	<p>There's been an amendment to the services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In line with the government's advice to keep public parks open, the grounds maintenance teams worked to maintain our parks in a useable condition. (The Leisure Trust closed Cyfarthfa Park) • Other than maintenance in parks and cemeteries, as it was not an essential task, grass was only cut in areas such as vision splays on road junctions and where health and safety issues made it a necessity. Essential tree work within parks and along roads and footpaths for health and safety reasons was carried out.
Highways	<p>There's been an amendment to the services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No general highway maintenance was undertaken due to the inability to obtain materials, only road repairs/potholes which posed a safety risk were carried out. • The drainage team continued as normal to unblock drains and carry out essential works to culverts and watercourses. • Other staff were redeployed to one of the essential services of Waste, Street Cleansing or Cemeteries.
Cemeteries	<p>Business as usual</p> <p>Cemeteries remained open and signs erected at the entrances encouraging the public to adhere to social distancing guidelines.</p>
Street Cleansing	<p>There's been an amendment to the services</p> <p>Social distancing measures introduced in order to protect staff in this essential service.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff moved to 'area working' whereby they work on the areas nearest to their home or nearest place of work. This is working well and areas which fall outside these allocated zones are being picked up by the mobile teams.
Fly-tipping	<p>Business as usual</p> <p>The service was supplemented by redeployed crews from the highways section so requests for removal of fly tipping on Council land were still dealt with.</p>
Planning / Building Control	<p>Business as usual</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both services continued to operate with staff working from home and coming into the office for essential tasks like scanning once

	<p>or twice a week. Some staff had limited IT access at first, but all staff now have laptops and are equipped for agile working.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any necessary site inspections were carried out in accordance with Government guidance and staff were provided with PPE. • WG issued a number of revisions to Planning legislation during lockdown removing the need for Planning Permission for certain developments on Council land and amending procedures. • Some staff were redeployed to delivering free school meals.
Engineering	<p>Business as usual</p> <p>This service continued to operate, however, response times were slower during the early part of lockdown as most staff were working from home with limited IT access.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some staff were redeployed to support the shielding scheme.
Estates and Property Services	<p>Business as usual</p> <p>Both services continued to operate. Estates staff working from home, whilst property services staff were in the office on a rota basis.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some of the capital projects they are responsible for delivering suffered delays due to availability of materials. • Some Estates staff were redeployed to the Track and Trace team initially set up.

4.4 Staffing Implications

- At its peak 40 staff were unable to work due to self-isolation, childcare issues, shielding, symptoms etc. which meant the staff capacity of Neighbourhood Services was compromised by almost 20%. This had a negative impact in terms of available resources and particularly in the front line area put pressure on remaining staff.
- It took a long time to ensure that sufficient equipment / laptops were available to enable staff to work from home due to services understandably being prioritised. In the short term when staff were waiting for laptops staff were either using their own IT equipment at home or working from an app installed on their phones. This was far from ideal but did allow some continuation of service delivery.
- Staff working in the community were comfortable with the guidance given and the PPE provided.

4.5 Financial Implications

The pandemic has resulted in the following additional costs:

- Additional vehicles to enable front line staff to socially distance;
- Agency staff to cover self-isolation / shielding etc.;
- PPE; and
- Loss of income for Planning & Building reg applications as well as trade waste.

5.0 WHERE WE ARE NOW

- 5.1 Despite the challenges and restrictions presented by the Covid-19 pandemic Waste, Street Cleansing & Fly tipping, Cemeteries, Planning, Building Control, Engineering, Property Services and Estates all sustained service delivery throughout thanks to the commitment of staff and their readiness for change in adapting to agile working. In

particular Waste collected more material during lockdown than previously, collecting 4835 tonnes during the lockdown period.

- 5.2 All meetings have had to take place over Teams instead of face to face which has been challenging for services such as Property Services and Building Control who deal with large plans and would ordinarily meet around a table to discuss the plans. Welsh Government funding for the Tidy Towns teams who assist with Street Cleansing and Fly tipping removal was withdrawn which has negatively impacted on the service and ultimately the street scene in Merthyr Tydfil. The urgent need to address this has had a financial impact.
- 5.3 Volunteering groups such as 'Friends of' have been unable to support projects such as 'Parks for People' in Trelewis Park. Online events have been held in order to mitigate this but the outcomes and impact of this have compromised the success of the programme.
- 5.4 As mentioned above, staff from Highways and Grounds Maintenance were redeployed into Waste and Cemeteries to ensure those priority areas continued to operate. This has proven to be a successful pilot exercise for a workstream that was about to get underway (and is a project within the Environmental Wellbeing Recovery & Improvement Plan) in relation to making front line roles flexible so that we can respond in this way. Our intention is to exercise this again over the Christmas period to support staff with increased collections.
- 5.5 An announcement was made on 11th September by the Chief Executive Officer that as part of this new guidance, as from Monday 14th September the Council will operate by:
- Encouraging all staff who cannot work from home and who need to attend any Council buildings to wear a face mask whilst indoors.
 - Staff must work from home where possible - For those staff that currently come into the office on a rota basis, guidance now states that where possible, you must work from home. (*Where there are tasks that can only be carried out in the office/community, we appreciate you will continue to need to do so. Please liaise with your line manager on this*).
 - Should you be a key/essential worker, please discuss working arrangements with your relevant line-manager.
 - We also ask that you maintain good hand hygiene - washing your hands for 20 seconds and use the hand sanitising stations on a regular basis.
- 5.6 Elements of some Neighbourhood services can only be carried out in the office, examples include scanning of plans for Planning & Building regs, Webaspex (route planning) and weighbridge monitoring for Waste etc, as such not all staff can work from home all the time. These offices are large enough for staff to be able to safely social distance and PPE is available for staff when using communal areas such as kitchens and toilets.

6.0 WHAT HAS CHANGED

- 6.1 For the most part services have continued operating successfully but where the pandemic presented a challenge the following things have been done differently.

- Planning & Building regs will now only accept electronic payments so that staff do not need to handle cash or cheques. It is anticipated that the closure of the HWRC's will negatively impact on the recycling target for 2020/21.
- Agile working has proven to be successful, moving forward managers need to strengthen their skills and become more adapt in managing remote teams and ensuring staff are contactable during office hours.
- Minor impacts have been experienced by those services where staff have been required to work on things outside of their usual roles/remit to sustain the Council to continue delivering services i.e. Track & Trace, delivering free school meals etc
- Whilst there has not been a Planning Committee during the lockdown period, the next Committee will be held over Teams.

6.2 The biggest change to note for all services is the introduction of agile working. This has been led by the Estates department. To date the following work has been carried out:-

- A data capture template sent out to SLT to ascertain how many permanent desks need to be provided and how many temporary/bookable desks and additional equipment are required. An exercise to determine the maximum number of desks that could be accommodated at the Civic taking in to account social distancing requirements.
- Meetings with all chief Officers to explain the plan and the data we need to collect and gain an understanding of any significant issues that we need to resolve.
- Investigating with RCT the use of a software system which may be suitable to use for booking desks.
- Committed to reducing floor space by 20% by the end of this financial year and an additional 20% over the next two years as part of the Recovery Plan.
- Property and Estates could be trialled as the first phase for a permanent agile working set up before rolling out to other areas.

7.0 WHAT WE NEED TO DO MOVING FORWARD

7.1 Short-term

Meet the targets in the Recovery, Transformation and Improvement Plan in relation to the flexible front line workforce project and agile working initiative.

7.2 Long-term

Implement the Recovery, Transformation and Improvement Plan projects that will contribute towards a reduction in Carbon Management and progress towards the WG recycling rate of 70% from 2025.

8.0 CONTRIBUTION TO WELLBEING OBJECTIVES

8.1 This report specifically links to the Environmental Well objective within the Council's Corporate Wellbeing Plan: **Communities protect, enhance and promote our environment and countryside.**

Through the continued provision of services through the pandemic we will also be able to demonstrate our team's contribution to support progress against other

wellbeing objectives set down by the Council in focus in the Corporate Wellbeing Plan. These objectives are:

- Living Well - People are empowered to live independently within their communities, where they are safe and enjoy good physical and mental health; and
- Working Life - People feel supported to develop the skills required to meet the needs of businesses, with a developing, safe infrastructure making Merthyr Tydfil an attractive destination.

In addition to this, the report has also identified focus areas and ongoing projects/tasks that directly contribute to corporate Recovery, Transformation, and Improvement Plan, which is currently being overseen by the Assurance Board.

JUDITH JONES
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COUNCILLOR DAVID HUGHES
CABINET MEMBER FOR PLANNING &
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BACKGROUND PAPERS		
Title of Document(s)	Document(s) Date	Document Location
Does the report contain any issue that may impact the Council's Constitution?		

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