

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE REPORT

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Service Area	Social Services
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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 over the past 15 months 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, have continued to provide a targeted front-line response to the constantly changing situation that the coronavirus pandemic has presented. Working within guidance provided by the Welsh Government the Council has continued to deliver core services with a shared commitment to working in partnership.
- 1.3 The virus did not alter Social Services duties to vulnerable children, although Children's Services were required to make a range of adjustments in line with Stay At Home Rules in the initial lockdowns. Managers and staff worked closely together to look at ways in which we could discharge our duties to the public, whilst promoting both public and staff safety. However, due to the nature of requirements of delivering direct care to the most vulnerable people we support, both Children and Adult Services were not in the position to advise staff to remain at home. In order to maintain the safety of the workforce and the people that are supported there was a need to revise working practices in line with guidance issued by Public Health Wales.
- 1.4 This report will offer Scrutiny Committee Members an overview of the distance travelled from where we were in the initial lockdown to where we are now.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION

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

3.0 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.
- 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 conditions 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 A report was provided to scrutiny in September 2020 outlining the actions we needed to take following the initial lockdowns and the impact this had on the service. The report outlined the actions taken in the various assessment and care settings within Children's Services and Adult Social Care Services. It also outlined how social services continued to deliver key services, whilst also meeting unscheduled need that emerged within communities across Merthyr Tydfil as a result of the lockdown. It also identified lessons learned and future plans that were under development to address the recovery and resilience of the services. This report is to update Scrutiny on that recovery journey.

4.0 WHERE WE WERE

Children's Services

- 4.1 It must be noted that the pandemic never altered our duties to vulnerable children, and although Children's Services were required to make a range of adjustments in line with Stay At Home Rules and changing measures in place, children were still seen and visited. Throughout the pandemic we have always operated a system that has needed to include face to face contact. Managers and staff worked closely together to look at ways in which we could ensure we discharged 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 initially announced, Children's Services Management Team (CSMT) developed the following in response to corporate direction and in pursuit of maintaining essential statutory services:

- CSMT daily dial in to note new information about staff capacity in the service, agree, prioritise, manage risks and share information.
- Held staff briefings prior to 23rd March 2020 to support, inform and involve staff.
- Consultation with foster carers.
- Develop 1-minute Guides for staff in relation to:
 - Telephone Triage and PPE.
 - CP Conferences and Core Group Meetings.
 - Keeping in touch with CLA and Contact.
 - Working from Home.
- Contribute to Silver and Bronze command to coordinate work with partners in relation to safeguarding children.
- Develop and distribute resource packs for CLA, foster carers and families with care and support plans.
- Develop a process for providing urgent support to families where a parent requires in-patient treatment.
- Maintained Resource Panel on a weekly basis to ensure families and staff can access the resources required to support families.
- RAG rated cases and dip samples at week 4 to provide independent assurance that children and families are being seen appropriately.
- CMT agreed the Outline Business Case for additional resources including social worker, support workers and foster care placements for cases where a parent or parents are in hospital.
- Worked to ensure that staff had the necessary IT equipment to work from home.

4.3 In fairness the above is just a summary of the work completed. The initial lockdown required a change in everyone's way of working and a change in culture as people adapted to working at home, and online assessments. For Children's Services it was business as usual, but the office base became people's home addresses. Referrals were still received via the MASH and Early Help Hub and triaged as we would previously.

Adults Services

4.4 Due to the nature of requirements of delivering direct care to the most vulnerable people we support, Adult Services were not in the position to advise staff to remain at home. In order to maintain the safety of the workforce and the people that are supported there was a need to revise working practices in line with guidance issued by Public Health Wales.

4.5 When the Stay At Home Rules were announced, Adult Services implemented the following actions to continue to meet essential statutory services and support vulnerable adults:

- Worked with IT to ensure that all care management staff had the ability to work remotely.
- Revised working practices to incorporate symptom checking as part of the assessment arrangements.

- Developed individual team arrangements within the assessment teams to enable them to socially distance.
- Participated and contributed to regional joint health & social care bronze and silver planning groups to develop a response.
- Worked in partnership with CTMUHB, RCT & Bridgend to increase bed capacity which in Merthyr Tydfil included the re-commissioning of the former Glan-Yr-Afon nursing home as a step-down facility (Marsh House).
- Implemented daily calls to care home providers.
- Worked with Procurement team to obtain a supply of PPE for use across directly delivered and commissioned Adult Social Care Services.
- Discontinued the commissioning panel meeting and implemented alternative mechanisms for the commissioning of services.
- Liaised with RCT to revise arrangements for Deprivation of Liberty responsibilities.
- Worked with our commissioned domiciliary care providers to agree an approach to ensuring that the most vulnerable individuals continued to receive support.
- Developed a contingency plan for assessment services should there be a significant reduction in available staff as a result of the pandemic.
- Requested contingency arrangements from commissioned providers.

4.6 Again the above is a summary of the work completed by Adult Services during the initial lockdown. Staff had to adapt to changes very quickly. For those providing direct care they couldn't work from home. We needed to ensure that each staff member had the appropriate Personal Protection Equipment and followed the relevant guidelines.

Workforce

4.7 It was expected that there would be a reduction in the availability of staff throughout this period and plans were put in place to manage high levels of staff absence and initially there were a considerable number of staff self-isolating due to other family members presenting with symptoms. Weekly data was provided to Welsh Government in respect of workforce availability across the sector.

4.8 There were a cohort of staff who needed to shield themselves in line with guidance and wherever possible these staff have been provided with the necessary IT equipment to enable them to continue to work from home. The shielding period is now over.

4.9 We saw an increase in agency staff within the care home sector due to having to cover shifts when other staff isolating or shielding. Staff from Day Services were redeployed to help in our care homes when required in the early stages of the pandemic.

4.10 Contact and Trace was set up and was advising staff when they needed to isolate and for how long as per Welsh Government guidelines. There needed to be a change in culture for staff in care homes regards car sharing and having breaks together as this could impact on the number of staff who would need to isolate if anyone tested positive.

- 4.11 Testing regimes were introduced in the care home sector initially and this impacted on staff having to isolate as some would test positive and have no symptoms.

General

- 4.12 During the period of the pandemic to ensure that communities are supported, and statutory duties are undertaken, there was extensive joint working between public services. Throughout the period Social Care worked in partnership with Public Health Wales, Cwm Taf UHB, Welsh Government and neighbouring Local Authorities.
- 4.13 A system of silver and bronze command meetings took place to promote a joined-up response by services.
- 4.14 Initially the provision of PPE was a significant concern for practitioners both within the Local Authority and social care service providers. Whilst social care providers that support with personal care were accustomed to using PPE as part of their normal work pattern, there were additional requirements that were not normal practice such as the wearing of masks. Other staff such as Social Workers across Children's and Adults Services would not normally use PPE when coming in contact with the people they support, and this was an area that required new ways of working and clear guidance for staff. PPE has become the 'norm' now and there are no current concerns re supply.
- 4.15 We did see a decline in referrals across both Adults and Children. Also within Adult Services individuals were declining support and packages of care due to fear of having workers in their home and risk of infection. Some families made the difficult decision not to send family members to Day Services provision because of the risks.
- 4.16 Visiting in care homes for both Adults and Children's settings was halted face to face, with residents only seeing family members through window visiting or via digital means. This was distressing for both residents and families.

5.0 WHERE WE ARE NOW

- 5.1 In many ways Covid has now become part of our day to day working and we are now trying to focus on recovery and areas within the improvement plan that were delayed because of the pandemic.
- 5.2 Referrals across Adults and Children's are back to pre-covid levels. Some modelling work across Wales forecast an increase in referrals coming into the service, we haven't seen this as yet but what we are seeing is a complexity in cases certainly within Children's Services and in Adult Mental Health Services. We have been mindful that as services reopen and when partner agencies increase their level of contact with families, we will see an increase in referral rates. In the last quarter we saw a 43% increase in Early Help requests.
- 5.3 Within the past 16 months our Carers Officer came into post, and this was a timely appointment as we are seeing an increase in the need for carers support. Some families have reached crisis in the last months due to limited support and not wanting to access services due to the perceived risks.

- 5.4 Court work is now adapting to a new way of working and intervention work has increased significantly. The court has been dealing with the backlog of cases over the past months and hearings are now being held virtually.
- 5.5 All staff are being regularly tested. Initially only care home staff, but now home tests have been provided to all social work teams so that staff can be tested twice weekly via lateral flow devices. This has become increasingly significant since the new DELTA variant has been detected. We are not at this stage seeing the level of staff having to isolate as we did at the start of the pandemic, although as the guidance changes and people can have more contact with others then this may change.
- 5.6 Staff within the teams are adapting to agile working with teams working part time at home and part in office. This allows them to continue to socially distance and appears to be working well for staff. We are obviously mindful of support to new staff and students, and those who may need more support and plans are in place to address this as we continue to adapt to further plans to progress the agile working in future.
- 5.7 Digital working has made significant progress in the past year with assessments, conferences, review meeting, supervision, team meetings and business meetings taking place on teams or other digital platforms. In some instances, this has saved travel time, but we are conscious that staff spend a lot of time in front of a screen. Children and Young People have been encouraged to participate in their review meetings as feel confident in using the technology and speaking when not in a room physically with others. Digital working will continue to be developed. However, we will return to face-to-face conferences for families at some point as guidance is updated, as for some families the online meeting is not always easy.
- 5.8 The vaccine programme has been a major success. The roll out started in January 2021. Staff were keen to participate, and I am only aware of 10 staff members who to date have declined to have the immunisation for personal reasons. The majority of our staff have now had the second vaccine. Those who have not yet had the vaccine is due to either testing positive for covid and the vaccine had to be given some weeks after the positive test result or because they needed a different vaccine due to allergies. Across Cwm Taf Morgannwg data shows that 88.5% of social care staff have taken up the vaccine.
- 5.9 Regional Partnership working has recommenced. Governance arrangements have been updated with a clearer structured plan set under both Adults and Children's Boards. Priorities have been set with some focus on recovery from COVID.
- 5.10 The care home sector had been affected with several care homes having a significant number of deaths which had an impact on the financial viability. At this time financial support provided by Welsh Government through the "Hardship Fund" is covering some of the financial risk, however the longer-term impact will need to be monitored. This support will continue until September 2021, with a view to tapering off at that time. Further guidance is awaited from Welsh Government.
- 5.11 Within the Care home sector as outlined in the 'where we were' section, care homes closed their doors and no visitors were allowed in for a considerable period of time. Restrictions only started to lift in March 2021 following a very difficult year where residents could only see family members through the window or via digital means.

Initially we introduced outside visiting with social distancing measures in place, but this could prove difficult if the weather was poor. Outside pods were provided by Welsh Government and some providers bought gazebos and other equipment to facilitate outside visiting. Currently two family members can visit but have to maintain social distancing and be tested before entering premises.

- 5.12 Linked to above we are seeing a reduction in the number of incidents of care homes being in 'red' category, which means a staff member or resident has tested positive. This has meant that care homes have been in a position to recommence respite placements to assist families who require support. This was only offered in the past year if there was a crisis due to the risks.
- 5.13 Although our Day Services remained open throughout the past 15 months it was very much at reduced capacity. We are now able to review this position and look to increase the numbers who are able to access the service. We are not yet at full capacity due to the measures in place around social distancing. Also, some families are still nervous about attending these services. When Ty Enfys reopens in the next few weeks (Day Services facility at Kier Hardie) then this will assist in increasing capacity. The Day Services at Kier Hardie has undergone a huge transformation as part of the regional work in conjunction with the Health Board.
- 5.14 Within Children's Services we have increased our capacity within the Children's Outreach team in an attempt to support recovery in this area and to cope with future demand.

6.0 WHERE WE WANT TO BE

- 6.1 We want to provide an excellent service to the public of Merthyr Tydfil.
- 6.2 We wish to continue to improve our services and change and adapt when required.
- 6.3 We want to build on the positive partnership working over the past 15 months.
- 6.4 We want to provide the right services, at the right time and at the right place.
- 6.5 We want to support Adults and Children to recover from the pandemic and offer support at the most appropriate time.
- 6.6 We want to ensure our workforce receive the support they need now and in the future to recover from the past 15 months.

7.0 WHAT WE NEED TO DO NEXT

- 7.1 Focus on the key priorities for improvement and develop effective response activities that will support services to make positive progress towards achieving these.
- 7.2 Continue to positively progress all tasks and actions within the Living Well themes of both the Council's Corporate Wellbeing Plan; and the Recovery, Transformation and Improvement Plan (RTI).

- 7.3 As we look to recover from the pandemic then we need to address all aspects of the RTI plan. We need to revisit all the timescales and ensure we get back on track addressing all areas of the plan.
- 7.4 Continue to work with our partners across Cwm Taf Morgannwg. There are various projects underway which we will contribute to eg. Market stability assessment and IPC are carrying out a community modelling of services.
- 7.5 We need to be prepared for new legislation eg. Liberty Protects Safeguards (LPS) replaces the Deprivation of Liberty (DOLS) legislation which will commence in 2022. We are currently addressing the backlog of cases which occurred during COVID so that we will be up-to-date and ready for the new legislation in April 2022. There will be implications for Children's Services under LPS too and the Head of Children's Services is taking a lead on this for the 16+ cohort.
- 7.6 Ensure we support staff in recovering from the pandemic. Regular testing is available now across the whole service and the vaccine programme has been rolled out.
- 7.7 In the medium to longer term we will need to monitor the impact of the seasonal flu virus as many of the symptoms are similar to Covid 19. This could potentially result in an increase in short term staff absences as they need to self-isolate if they become symptomatic. Though this will be mitigated in some way through access to testing it could still mean an increase in short term unplanned absences which will be difficult to plan for.
- 7.8 The longer-term impact of the pandemic on the people we support will need to be monitored, there are already emerging examples of chronic symptoms associated with the disease and examples of delays in accessing health services both of which will have an effect of a person's ability to manage their own care.

8.0 CONTRIBUTION TO WELLBEING OBJECTIVES

- 8.1 This report specifically links to the Living Well objective within the Council's Corporate Wellbeing Plan: People are empowered to live independently within their communities, where they are safe and enjoy good physical and mental health.

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:

- Best Start to Life - Children and young people get the best start to life and are equipped with the skills they need to be successful learners and confident individuals; 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.

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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?		No