

**COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT**

**REPORT TO: THE CHAIR AND MEMBERS OF THE SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**SUBJECT: SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 17TH SEPTEMBER, 2020**

**REPORT OF: DEMOCRATIC SUPPORT OFFICER**

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**PRESENT: COUNCILLOR S. THOMAS (CHAIR)**

Councillors K. Rowson (Vice-Chair)  
D. Bevan  
G. A. Davies  
P. Edwards  
L. Elias  
K. Hayden  
J. Holt  
M. Moore  
G. Paulsen  
T. Sharrem  
B. Summers  
T. Smith

**WITH:** Corporate Director of Social Services  
Head of Children's Services  
Head of Adult Services  
Service Manager for Development & Commissioning  
Communications & Policy Officer  
Democratic Officer / Advisor

<b>ITEM</b>	<b>SUBJECT</b>	<b>ACTION</b>
<b>No. 1</b>	<b><u>SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION</u></b>  It was noted that no requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service.	

<p><b>No. 2</b></p>	<p><b><u>APOLOGIES</u></b></p> <p>Apologies for absence were received from Councillor G. Collier.</p>	
<p><b>No. 3</b></p>	<p><b><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATION</u></b></p> <p>There were no declarations of interest or dispensations reported.</p>	
<p><b>No. 4</b></p>	<p><b><u>TIME OF FUTURE MEETINGS</u></b></p> <p>The Committee AGREED that future meetings be held at 10.00 a.m.</p>	
<p><b>No. 5</b></p>	<p><b><u>SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MINUTES</u></b></p> <p>The Minutes of the Social Services Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 13th February, 2020 were submitted.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the Minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>	
<p><b>No. 6</b></p>	<p><b><u>ACTION SHEET - 13TH FEBRUARY 2020</u></b></p> <p>The action sheet arising from the meeting of the Social Services Scrutiny Committee held on 13th February, 2020 was submitted.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the action sheet be noted.</p>	
<p><b>No. 7</b></p>	<p><b><u>PROPOSED SCRUTINY FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME 2020/21</u></b></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Chair of the Social Services Scrutiny Committee.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the Social Services Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme 2020-21 be approved.</p>	
<p><b>No. 8</b></p>	<p><b><u>SOCIAL SERVICES RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC</u></b></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director of Social Services which was presented to provide Members with information on how the Social Services Directorate has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic over the last 4 months.</p>	

The Director of Social Services spoke to the report and gave an overview of the Social Services Directorate response to COVID-19. He said that the Directorate continued to deal with the virus whilst at the same time trying to move slowly and safely towards recovery, although a second wave was possible, especially in the next few months or early next year.

The Director hoped that Members would be reassured that the pandemic had not reached its worst case scenario regarding hospital capacity and support in the community had been able to cope with the initial outbreak locally and regionally first time round due to collaborative working by all partners. There had been spikes in some neighbouring authorities and enhanced in-house protection had been put in place. He stressed that unless people continued to follow social distance rules, hand hygiene and other safety practices then it may become more prevalent in the Blaenau Gwent area.

A Member expressed thanks to all agencies involved, our own and partner agencies, for the wonderful job they had done, their hard work was very much appreciated. The Chair said that all Members of the Committee agreed with these comments and also wanted to express their appreciation to staff and partner agencies in the community.

### **Children's Services**

At the invitation of the Chair the Head of Children's Services gave an overview of how Children's Services had managed during this time. Services had been maintained in relation to Information, Advice and Assistance (IAA) and priority had been given to safeguarding investigations for children on the Child Protection Register. Children Looked After cases had fallen from 214 to 207 and there had also been a decrease in the number of children in residential care.

In response to a Member's question regarding Children Looked After and children exiting care and new cases coming into care, the Head of Children's Services said that there was a combination of both and an increase in children looked after numbers was anticipated. In terms of children exiting care some were returning to their parents and some had been adopted. A full report was being prepared and would be presented to this Committee on 5th

November which would include further detailed information.

A Member enquired if the service was anticipating an increase in the number of referrals now that schools had re-opened. The Head of Children's Services said that Education was one of the biggest referrers and as such the Service was anticipating an increase in referrals from Education colleagues, although there had been no upsurge in referrals to date. There were also some proactive measures in place such as preventative services in Families First. It was noted that 4 social workers had been aligned to schools in order to support teachers and children.

A Member expressed disappointment that the 3rd Sector and Voluntary Sector had not been mentioned in the report. The Member gave an example i.e. free school meals. The Head of Children's Services said they had played a significant part in meeting the needs of the community, however, the purpose of the report for the Head of Children's Services was to report on how Children's Services had responded to COVID-19.

The Director of Social Services said that staff had worked collaboratively from across all the sectors to manage the outbreak and that collaboration had been essential.

### **Adult Services**

At the invitation of the Chair the Head of Adult Services gave an overview of how Adult Services had responded during this time. She said that similarly to Children's Services they had maintained the Information, Advice and Assistance (IAA) service and continued to provide support in people's homes with staff wearing full PPE to all visits. The pressure on Adult Services and on the Health and Social Care Sector was significant and there had been a need to move staff to 7 day working from the current 5 day working arrangements. The Service had taken on the operational running of Community Meals from 1st April and the take up of meals had increased. Staffing levels had initially fallen but quite quickly recovered and the Service was now back up to capacity.

In response to a Member's question regarding increased contact from vulnerable adults and from adults who had not thought of themselves as vulnerable in the past, the Head of Adult Services said there had been a significant increase in terms of contact into the Department, particularly with people who had lost confidence

and needed support in accessing community services. There had been a significant increase in referrals from people experiencing impact to their mental well-being. The Member enquired if extra staff would be needed to cope with demand. The Head of Adult Services said the Section was prioritising the workload, staff had worked extremely hard over the last six months and demands on staff would be monitored particularly if there was a new surge.

A Member enquired regarding a further lockdown and the impact this would have on residential care homes and the elderly and disabled residents. He also enquired regarding the provision of community meal services to residential care homes, if the 3rd sector could not mobilise as they had done previously, would there be a surge on the Local Authority to deliver meals to residential care homes.

The Head of Adult Services said that in relation to care homes there were significant concerns regarding sustainability of all external providers but reassured Members that the Service was working very closely with the Council's Commissioned Services who had been able to benefit from the hardship fund and without this investment there may have been care home closures. Working relationships with external providers had been strengthened due to the close working arrangements and the Service was well placed in knowing what community support was available in terms of the Community Meals Service. There was capacity to increase the number of meals delivered daily, however, there had been no significant increase in demand for that service. If there was a surge it would be difficult to predict what that would entail and whether this would impact on elderly people.

A Member enquired regarding staff from the voluntary sector who had been on furlough and had now returned to work and asked if the Authority could manage without them if there was a second lockdown. The Head of Adult Services explained that the community response to COVID-19 was not the responsibility of Social Services, and she would pass the concerns enquiry onto the Commercial Services Department. The Social Services Directorate focused on those people that were known to Social Services, whereas Corporate colleagues focused on wider issues across communities.

The Corporate Director of Social Services advised Members that they were awaiting details from the Welsh Government regarding a

worst case scenario model and would look at the model on a local authority basis to consider what measures could be put in place and staffing levels would form part of this. In the first lockdown some services had ceased and some had continued to be delivered bolstered by staff from the services that had ceased. If there was a prolonged lockdown the Directorate would probably revert back to this arrangement.

In response to a Member's question regarding respite for carers and whether those services were back online, the Head of Adult Services said those services had never stopped as they were part of domiciliary care contracts. Respite was now offered for 3 days per week plus a day to deep clean and could also be provided within their own home to provide carer respite. Staff would wear full PPE which could be a challenge when supporting someone with dementia or challenging behaviour. Services were still continuing and were supported wherever possible.

A Member enquired if funding would be required from the Welsh Government for extra staff if there was to be another lockdown. The Head of Adult Services said that confirmation regarding funding after October was still awaited. The Director of Social Services confirmed that no confirmation had been received regarding further funding after October 2020.

At this time the Chair expressed his appreciation to all the staff in Children's and Adult Services for the great work that had been undertaken. Members also wished to thank the staff and external partners for all their hard work and expressed a special thank you to foster carers who had supported the Authority during these difficult times.

### **National Issues**

The Corporate Director of Social Services gave an overview of national issues that had arisen during the pandemic.

PPE – Initially there had been difficulties with the supply of PPE due to worldwide shortages and priority had been given to the NHS, but currently there were approximately 4 weeks supply in place. Over one million pieces of PPE had been distributed across the Blaenau Gwent region and the Director assured Members that all staff had the PPE required to do their jobs safely.

Testing – Testing of staff exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms had been problematic at the beginning of the outbreak as places had been limited to 15 per local authority. The position had improved over the last few months as the limit of 15 places per local authority had been removed. There had been issues around capacity with the UK Government labs and portal and the Welsh Government were considering solutions to ensure that Public Health Wales labs were used for testing.

Care Homes – Care Home residents and staff were now tested fortnightly. Blaenau Gwent owned 1 care home and had commissioned services with 14 privately owned Care Homes. Key data from all Care Homes across Gwent was being collected to ensure rapid response to outbreaks. Currently there were 8 clean homes who had never had an outbreak or had no outbreak in a Care Home for the last 28 days.

In response to a Member's question regarding regular testing of care home staff, nurses and home care staff working in the community, the Corporate Director of Social Services said that in relation to Care Home staff, weekly tests had been carried out up until August, however, as there had been very low positive results it had been decided to move to two weekly testing which had been carried out by the Lighthouse laboratories and some delays had been experienced in receiving results. He was unaware if regular testing in relation to Health staff was being carried out in the same way as with Care Home staff. In relation to domiciliary care staff who visited people in their homes, the Welsh Government's position was that no regular testing was being carried out.

The Chair and Members of the Committee hoped the Welsh Government would reflect on this going forward as they felt that domiciliary care staff should be tested regularly.

A Member requested clarification regarding the figures in relation to point 6.19 of the report and the update the Director had given. The Director of Social Services confirmed that the figures differed slightly from the report as he had provided Members with the most up-to-date position.

A Member enquired regarding PPE and if the supply currently in stock included Care Home supplies. The Corporate Director confirmed that it did include Care Homes as they now came to the Local Authority to request PPE supplies.

The Member also enquired regarding the number of registered deaths associated with Care Homes. The Corporate Director said that across Blaenau Gwent Care Homes, from March until May there had been 28 deaths that had COVID-19 on the death certificate.

In relation to testing the Corporate Director confirmed that the move from weekly testing to a two weekly testing regime had been a Welsh Government decision as there had been very low positive cases at that time. The Member enquired if the number of positive cases increased would it be possible to revert back to weekly testing as a neighbouring authority had done. The Corporate Director said that Caerphilly Council had reverted to weekly testing of their Care Homes which was carried out by Aneurin Bevan Health Board with test results coming from Public Health Wales labs and felt that if there was a local lockdown within Blaenau Gwent then this process could be followed with weekly testing of staff and residents.

With regard to collaboration and partnership working a Member enquired if this would continue after the pandemic had ceased. The Director said that there had always been close working relationships with partners across Blaenau Gwent and this had been strengthened by the outbreak of COVID-19. He hoped this would continue and be further strengthened.

A Member enquired if Care Homes followed their own testing guidelines or followed national guidelines and how testing was carried out for them. The Corporate Director said that care homes followed national guidelines from Public Health Wales. Initially Care Home staff and residents were being tested by Health staff, currently swabs were being taken by the staff themselves with support from Health colleagues via online videos so they could correctly carry out the test.

In relation to testing centres at Newport and Cwm, the Corporate Director said that health staff may be encouraged to attend the facility at Rodney Parade in Newport as they used Public Health Wales labs and results were received quicker than the facility in Cwm which was privately run.

### **Impact on Budget**



The Corporate Director of Social Services gave an overview of the impact of COVID-19 on the budget. Claims had been submitted to WG for funding from the Hardship fund for the period March to July 2020 for £2.4m to fund additional costs incurred as a result of the Council's response to the pandemic, of which £1.06m relates to Social Services expenditure. There had been some loss of income from Care Homes due to suspension and reconfiguration of services due to COVID-19, however, the Council had been able to claim against income loss from the Welsh Government.

The Corporate Director of Social Services and both the Heads of Service commended the work of all frontline staff including Council staff, external providers, third sector colleagues, foster carers and their supervisors and managers who had worked tirelessly and compassionately under sustained pressure to ensure services were maintained over the last six months.

A Member raised concern regarding the amount of funding the Welsh Government would provide and what projects would be considered for this funding. He said that £8.2 million had been allocated to homelessness across Wales and asked that Members be informed regarding what projects were being considered in their localities.

The Corporate Director of Social Services said that homelessness was not under the remit of the Social Services Directorate but he would pass these concerns onto the Community Services Directorate to ensure they communicated with Members regarding what projects were being considered in their Wards.

In response to a Member's question regarding the effect of COVID-19 on the Social Services budget going forward, the Director said that some claims had been questioned by the Welsh Government but these had been small amounts and had not affected the budget significantly. The Directorate had an underspend after the first quarter and was managing to cope. If there was another spike in cases, then this would depend on further Welsh Government support. The Hardship Fund had enabled the Directorate to claim for loss of income and this had helped significantly.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2; namely that the report be accepted as provided.

