

COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT

REPORT TO: THE CHAIR AND MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

SUBJECT: SPECIAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE – 8TH JULY, 2020

REPORT OF: DEMOCRATIC SUPPORT OFFICER

**PRESENT: Leader of the Council/
Executive Member Corporate Services
Councillor N.J. Daniels (CHAIR)**

**Deputy Leader/Executive Member –
Regeneration & Economic Development
Councillor D. Davies**

**Executive Member – Education
Councillor J. Collins**

**Executive Member – Environment
Councillor J. Wilkins**

**Executive Member – Social Services
Councillor J. Mason**

WITH: Managing Director
Corporate Director Environment & Regeneration
Interim Corporate Director of Education
Corporate Director of Social Services
Chief Officer Commercial
Service Manager Accountancy
Communications, Marketing & Customer Access Manager
Head of Legal & Corporate Compliance

DECISIONS UNDER DELEGATED POWERS

<u>ITEM</u>	<u>SUBJECT</u>	<u>ACTION</u>
No. 1	<u>SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION</u>	

	It was noted that no requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service.
No. 2	<p><u>APOLOGIES</u></p> <p>An apology for absence was received from the Chief Officer Resources.</p>
No. 3	<p><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS</u></p> <p>No declarations of interest or dispensations were reported.</p>
	<u>MINUTES</u>
No. 4	<p><u>EXECUTIVE – 24TH JUNE, 2020</u></p> <p>The minutes of the Executive Committee held on 24th June, 2020 were submitted.</p> <p>RESOLVED that the minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>
	<u>DECISIONS – ENVIRONMENT MATTERS</u>
No. 5	<p><u>FUNDING OPTIONS – ABERBEEG ROAD</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to report of the Corporate Director Environment & Regeneration.</p> <p>The Executive Member for Environment presented the report which provided options for funding repairs to Aberbeeg Road. Flooding in February caused damage to the road which resulted in the road being closed to all traffic. However, the road was now open but restricted by means of traffic lights to one lane and assigned a 7.5 tonne weight limit.</p> <p>She said Aberbeeg Road continued to be a strategic link for the Borough and following a meeting with the Heads of the Valley Road Contractor, they informed the Council that they intend to undertake a significant temporary traffic switch at Brynmawr as part of their ongoing works, and Aberbeeg Road was an intended diversion route. As a result, the repairs needed to be undertaken as a matter of</p>

urgency. Also the 7.5 tonne weight restriction was not being adhered to which risked further damage to the road.

The Executive Member then went through the options detailed within the report and the implications associated with each option. She confirmed that the preferred option was Option 2.

She concluded that the call-in procedure as set out in the Council's Constitution would not apply in this instance as the decision was urgent, and likely to be delayed by the call-in process.

The need to undertake repairs to Aberbeeg Road at the earliest time was in order to mitigate the impact associated with the diversion route planned for closure works on the Section 2 A465 at Brynmawr, commencing later this Summer, and prevent Heavy Goods Vehicles illegally using Aberbeeg Road.

The Leader of the Council referred to the financial element of the report and said he agreed with the preferred Option 2, which he felt provided sufficient time prior to July 2021 and commencement of works on the Big Arch.

In response the Executive Member for Regeneration & Economic Development said he also supported Option 2, and stressed the importance of Aberbeeg Road being fully open to support businesses and residents during the HoV works. In terms of the Big Arch, this had been ongoing for some time, and he was confident that the allocated funding would come through, however, in the short term repairs to Aberbeeg Road was a priority.

RESOLVED that the report be accepted and the Executive approve Option 2, namely to utilise the BGCBC Capital Programme Big Arch allocation (£1,000K) - An application to CADW for consent to undertake remedial works has been delayed and works can't progress until consent is awarded resulting in actual works on site delayed until July 2021/22 at the earliest – the funding will be reviewed / reinstated prior to CADW approval and works on site. If Welsh Government subsequently agree the flood funding for the scheme then the £405k can then be 'repaid' to this capital allocation.

JOINT MONITORING ITEMS – ENVIRONMENT AND EDUCATION MATTERS

No. 6

WATER SUPPLY QUALITY IN SCHOOLS

Consideration was given to joint report of the Corporate Director Environment & Regeneration and the Interim Corporate Director of Education.

At the invitation of the Leader of the Council the Interim Corporate Director of Education presented the report which updated the Executive on the current position of the water supply quality issues in schools, following the announcement by Welsh Government that schools would reopen on 29th June, 2020.

He said the safety of our children and staff was the priority and of paramount importance in dealing with the school water supply issues, and it should also be recognised that the majority of the school water quality test results have indicated low levels of localised contamination, and this has been managed effectively and allowed a large proportion of schools to reopen as planned.

National Guidance in respect of COVID-19 resulted in schools being closed from Monday, 23rd March, however, some schools within the Borough remained open as childcare hubs for key workers and vulnerable learners. Following the Welsh Government announcement on 3rd June that schools were to reopen on 29th June, risks to the water supplies from the unprecedented period of closure, along with low water usage within schools was identified. A water hygiene testing regime was immediately introduced to check the water quality within schools prior to allowing the schools to reopen. Bearing in mind the timing of the WG announcement on 3rd June, meant that Council's effectively had three weeks to prepare for schools to reopen. This timescale was extremely challenging given that testing of the water systems for levels of Total Viable Count (TVC) and/or Legionella contamination were required.

Section 2.2 of the report stated that the Council had taken a very pro-active and responsible approach to school reopening from a health and safety perspective, including water testing. Further to the WG announcement on 3rd June that schools were to reopen on 29th June, the Council's resources were mobilised immediately. A plan was established and contractors commenced sampling/testing on 9th June. A programme of sampling/testing was agreed with the Council's water hygiene contractor to visit all schools as soon as possible, and the final school samples were collected on 18th June.

Of the 29 school sites sampled/tested, the large majority of sites identified varying elevated levels of TVC bacteria contamination, ranging from localised contamination to full system contamination. Localised contamination e.g. a tap outlet could be dealt with by flushing disinfecting and pasteurising, and a full system contamination required chlorination. Six schools were identified with full system TVC contamination, and these were highlighted in Section 2.4.1 of the report.

These schools required chlorination of their water systems, and in order to mitigate the situation, 26 portable hand washing units were purchased and bottled water was made available for drinking purposes, and this pro-active action allowed the schools to reopen as planned on Monday 29th June.

On 25th June, notification was provided that the test results for 3 schools were positive for Legionella contamination, and these schools were highlighted in section 2.4.3. of the report. Following discussions with the Executive Member and Headteachers on 26th June, the decision was taken to close these schools. These schools had a full system chlorination, and following a retest would not be able to open for a further 12 days until an all clear Legionella test result had been received.

The Interim Corporate Director then went through Section 2.4 of the report in detail and highlighted points contained therein. He said the report covered the fact the mitigating measure put in place, i.e. portable hand washing units and provision of bottled water had enabled schools to reopen.

He said it was also important to advise that communication took place with Welsh Government on 27th June, and as a consequence WG have requested confirmation of satisfactory health and safety checks, including water supply testing, from all 22 LA's in Wales. It was also important to report that colleagues in Health and Safety and Environmental Health are satisfied with the temporary arrangements currently being implemented in the affected schools.

The Interim Corporate Director said he was pleased to update that all Blaenau Gwent schools would be open from w/c 13th July, which was a significant achievement in light of the challenges faced. He said the corporate response had been outstanding and the Council

had taken a responsible approach to reopening schools which meant that circa 3,400 pupils were able to access catch-up sessions, and it was intended that this figure would increase this week in line with the current position.

He said the Council had generated positive outcomes in delivering the level of school provision in such unprecedented circumstances, however, there were lessons to be learned and therefore a review would be undertaken and the outcomes would be reported back to the Executive and appropriate Scrutiny Committees in due course.

The Executive Member for Education thanked the Interim Corporate Director for his comprehensive overview. She wanted to pointed out that every decision had been taken with the safety of children and staff in mind, and unfortunately this meant a few of our schools were unable to open on the 29th June. However, they were still provided with learning continuity digitally and that had been in place since March, and a huge amount of hard work has been undertaken to ensure schools are open next week to provide an opportunity for all pupils to check in and catch up.

The Executive Member said as soon as the water supply issues were identified, the Council notified Welsh Government of the situation, and as a result of the Council being open and transparent Welsh Government have requested that all LA's in Wales confirm the status of their health and safety checks, including water supply tests. Following this it became apparent that this was not just a Blaenau Gwent issue, and that we have been one of the more proactive LA's in advance of schools reopening, and that this approach has not been actively implemented consistently across LA's. Taking our approach the Council were able to identify and address the issues, and given the very challenging timescale of 3 weeks' notice to reopen schools, she felt that the Council had taken all appropriate measures and been open and transparent in its approach.

Also to achieve reopening of 26 out of 29 schools, with the remaining schools reopening next week, was a huge achievement in light of the challenges faced and she thanked all involved for their hard work in achieving a positive outcome.

The Executive Member concluded that given the unprecedented nature of the situation there were lessons to be learned, and she

confirmed that measures were already in place to enable a learning culture should we find ourselves in a similar situation with regards to an extended period of school closures, the Council would be able to apply those lessons learned.

The Executive Member for Regeneration & Economic Development said the work that had been undertaken was an excellent example of a 'One Council' approach, and that the safety of our children was at the forefront every step of the way. He thanked Officers and the Executive Members of both the Education and Environment Portfolios. He said whilst there are lessons to be learned he pointed out that this was an immense task and something that had never occurred before.

The Executive Member for Social Services concurred with these comments and also thanked everyone involved for their hard work. He also reported that he had received telephone calls from parents praising the Council's response.

The Leader of the Council said the health and safety of children and staff was paramount throughout these events. He then referred to section 7.3.3 which mentioned communication, and he said the Council had been very good over the last 3 years in its management of communication. However, the report seemed to lack reflection of the method of communication with parents, and he asked the Interim Corporate Director to explain how that was done and whether there had been any parental or professional concerns over the level of engagement undertaken.

In response the Interim Corporate Director said the communication mechanism had been very effective and thanked colleagues within the Corporate Communications team for their support. He said any communications sent to staff, parents and pupils was co-constructed with schools, and taken as a shared responsibility in constructing those comments. The important point was that any correspondence had been agreed in a co-constructed way and that the relationship between the Council and schools was strong in terms of consistently getting key messages out to key stakeholders across the board.

At the invitation of the Leader, the Corporate Director Regeneration & Economic Development reported that prior to the lockdown period revised guidance had been received on various issues, including

dealing with a Legionella outbreak in schools, so from the outset the Council had been implementing the Health and Safety Executive's approved code of practice, and undertook an enhanced range of flushing etc throughout the lockdown period.

On the 3rd June when the announcement was made that schools would be reopening, all technical aspects of reopening were considered, and due to the fact that schools had been closed for the longest period of time and with record temperatures during that period, the water quality was identified as a potential risk. As a result, Contractors were appointed, and commenced testing on 9th June, and this was completed on 18th June, which was a huge achievement. The testing and sampling process was detailed in Section 2.2 of the report.

A rolling programme of results were coming in, and as soon as we had that information we were able to take the necessary action and retest, and implement mitigation measures to enable schools to reopen.

The Corporate Director reported that colleagues within Education, Technical Services and Environment had worked together to develop alternative temporary arrangements to allow schools to reopen, and these were subject to a robust level of challenge by Health and Safety, and they were satisfied with the temporary arrangements.

He said the Executive Member of Education had referred to WG's request for all LA's to confirm their health and safety status, and he had also reached out to the Technical Services network to enquire what others had been doing, and whilst the response had been limited, he was aware of two other LA's who had schools not open due to similar challenges, so this situation was not unique to Blaenau Gwent.

The Executive Member for Environment thanked the Corporate Director for his update, and also the Interim Corporate Director of Education and Executive Member for Education. She said it was clear that health and safety guidance had been followed rigorously across Departments.

She pointed out that the meeting had commenced by mentioning the flood damage that had occurred, and then moved onto the

COVID-19 outbreak. She said we were not yet fully sure of the impact of COVID-19 on us all, and the possibility of a further spike was real, however, she welcomed the lessons learned review in order to prepare for that eventuality. In terms of looking forward it was not just about schools but other buildings both in Council control and others, and work was ongoing with that.

The lessons learned review would no doubt bring up good practice, and highlight not only what could have been done better, but also the positive outcomes, and provide a balanced overview. She concluded that communication was vital, and welcomed the update provided by the Interim Corporate Director on that issue.

The Executive Member for Regeneration & Economic Development said the number of tests taken was significant and pointed out that the testing centre was also undertaking testing of other LA's, so there were slight delays which also caused issues.

In response the Leader said he had heard comments regarding the timeliness of when testing was commenced, but he was satisfied with the explanation.

The Managing Director also commended the work of Officers across the Council, schools and also the Aneurin Leisure Trust over the past few weeks. She said it was very much a team effort in dealing with lots of issues in order to get our schools reopened safely. 26 of our 29 schools were able to reopen, and those not open, albeit for good reason, would reopen next week so all pupils would have the opportunity to catch up prior to the Summer holidays.

The Managing Director said she was firmly of the view that the decision taken to not open those schools was difficult, but it was the right decision based on the safety of our pupils and staff, and the Trade Unions were fully supportive of this decision.

However, moving forward we need to be a learning organisation and identify good practice, and also to understand what has happened over this 3 month period and why our procedures and working practices put us in that position at the beginning of June. As a result, it was intended to undertake a lessons learned review to pick up on good practice areas, and that this should be done by an independent organisation with the necessary expertise to advise

the Council where improvements were needed. Such reviews were not unusual and had proved to be very beneficial for the Council in the past. However, the Managing Director said this needed to be progressed quickly as schools would be closing on the 17th July for the Summer period, and we needed to be prepared and have robust procedures in place should further lockdown arrangements be required. Work on this would commenced shortly, and the outcomes would be reported to Executive and the Scrutiny process.

The Leader of the Council said he would like to echo the comments made. In terms of the lessons learned review, he expressed concern that the word 'enquiry' had been mentioned. He said using this word was to the detriment of staff morale. He said reviews had been common practice over the last 3 years to take stock of what we have done, in order to continually improve on every aspect of the Council's work. He said collectively across the Council staff had been amazing in dealing with this, and the amount of work that had been undertaken in such a short period of time, to reopen 26 schools to approximately 3,400 pupils was not to be underestimated, and the fact that a review would be undertaken was no reflection on this excellent work. The review was an opportunity to continue to improve, and in the event of a second wave of COVID-19, he said the Council has a duty of care to ensure the procedures we have in place and implemented this time are right, or whether they needed to be adjusted slightly.

He said the report was very comprehensive, and the Council had been open and transparent throughout this period. He assured that the outcomes of the review would be reported back through the political process and everyone would see that the actions taken were in the best interests of our children and staff.

He concluded by requesting that the Managing Director relay the Executive's comments to staff, as it was important they know that the Executive are fully supportive of them, and appreciate the work that has been done.

RESOLVED that the report be accepted and the Executive approve Option 2, namely to manage the contamination risks, implement mitigating measures; and control the risks within health and safety regulations and guidelines.