

Committee: **Council**

Date of Meeting: **23rd July, 2020**

Report Subject: **Covid-19 Emergency – Transition to the Next Phase**

Portfolio Holder: **Councillor Nigel Daniels, Leader / Executive Member
Corporate Services**

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Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
	11.06.20	16.06.20				24.06.20	23.07.20	

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to confirm the Council's strategic response to the Covid-19 Emergency and to outline the next steps as Wales moves to the next phase of the pandemic, with easing in lockdown restrictions and a gradual restarting of services. The report was considered and endorsed by Executive at its meeting on 24 June 2020.

2. Background

- 2.1 The World Health Organisation declared a global health emergency in relation to coronavirus on 31 January 2020.
- 2.2 The declaration of a national health emergency led to the establishment of Emergency Planning arrangements in the region, under the Civil Contingencies Act 2005. The Gwent Strategic Co-ordinating Group (SCG) was convened for its first meeting on 14 March. The SCG is chaired by Gwent Police and includes the Local Health Board, all five local authorities and Category One Responders.
- 2.3 In accordance with our Emergency Planning arrangements the GOLD Group was established in Blaenau Gwent and commenced meetings on 19 March. This comprises of all members of the Corporate Leadership Team, supported by the Civil Contingency Manager and Communications Manager. The strategic aim of GOLD remains to delay and mitigate as far as practicable the spread and impact of Coronavirus within our community
- 2.4 Heads of Service and Service Managers were convened as the Emergency Response Team, to support GOLD, with the Aneurin Leisure Trust, Tai Calon and Joint Trade Unions also members of the Team. These Groups continue to meet to ensure the proper management of the emergency response in Blaenau Gwent.

- 2.5 On 23 March 2020, the UK Government announced an unprecedented UK-wide 'lockdown' in order to limit the spread of the Covid-19 virus. This resulted in the Council moving to the delivery of Critical Services only (as defined in the Emergency Management Plan) and the closure of schools and offices, with most staff now working from home.
- 2.6 The lockdown restrictions remain in place and in recent weeks there has been a divergence in approach being taken by the UK Government and Welsh Government. In Wales Government has adopted a cautious approach seeking to balance the need to protect the Country from further surges in the Pandemic against the need to get the economy moving again. What is clear that when the gradual relaxation takes affect it will not be a case of simply 'returning to normal'. *Much as we might want it to, 'normal' life will not be possible for many months – possibly years.*
- 2.7 The Welsh Government has set out its strategy for leading Wales out of the coronavirus pandemic, publishing both a framework and roadmap <https://gov.wales/leading-wales-out-coronavirus-pandemic> <https://gov.wales/unlocking-our-society-and-economy-continuing-conversation>.
- 2.8 The approach in Wales is based on a red/amber/green framework for moving out of lockdown over an undefined period of time, with decision being based on the progress of the pandemic and the important need to reduce the R Number. The Test, Trace and Protect Plan – published on the 13 May – establishes arrangements for community testing and contact tracing which need to be in place to support any relaxation of restrictions. This Service went live in Wales on 1 June.

3. **Blaenau Gwent's Response to Covid-19**

- 3.1 Since lockdown began the Council has shifted its sole focus to the emergency response. This has resulted in delivery of only critical services with other available resources being redeployed to support the response. There has been a particular focus on Adult Social Services, supporting some of the most vulnerable in our community, refuse collection and recycling and public protection, with Councils taking on significant new enforcement responsibilities under the Coronavirus legislation.
- 3.2 The response has involved school closures and the creation of School Hubs to support key workers, by providing childcare for their children, and vulnerable learners, with schools also sustaining distance learning with the remaining pupils. School Hubs continue to be provided at seven locations (including four secondary schools and Pen-y-Cwm Special School).
- 3.3 The Council has continued to support families eligible for Free School Meals (FSM). Initially meals were provided at some local locations and then the service shifted to the delivery of food boxes to families. Since the end of April families now receive direct payments to cover the cost of providing meals and this provision will continue through the summer holidays. Over 2000 families are being supported in Blaenau Gwent through this service.

- 3.4 The creation of locality response teams has been a critical part of the Council's response. Some 3521 residents in the Borough have been identified as shielded, due to health issues, and as a result received letters from Government advising them to remain in their homes and to protect themselves from infection. Originally the advice was to 15 June but has recently been extended to 16 August. All these residents have been contacted by the Council to offer support and 570 have been registered for food boxes which are being delivered weekly. In addition, the Council has also identified a further 1353 residents who are vulnerable (over 70 or living alone) and have offered support to them through the lockdown. Over 500 people have been helped through the locality response teams with some people having multiple contacts mainly to arrange shopping, collection of prescriptions and befriending calls. This work has been supported by community and voluntary activity which continues to support the distribution of food boxes (to families eligible for FSM) and those who are shielded or vulnerable.
- 3.5 Unprecedented support has also been provided to local businesses, enabling them to access Government financial support schemes, with the aim of protecting our local economy from the worse impact of the Pandemic. Up to the 5 June the Council had facilitated the payment of 1,212 grants totalling £13.56m. In addition to this a number of businesses have also been supported to apply for funding through the Economic Resilience Fund (administered by Business Wales). The Council also took the decision to provide a one month rent free period to tenants renting our industrial premises, support has continued to provide rent holidays to help them through the lockdown period. The purpose of this has been to sustain local businesses and employment.
- 3.6 At the start of lockdown, the Council moved from a position where staff attended offices to work, albeit based on an agile working model which enabled some home working, to a position where staff now work entirely from home with very low attendance in the office. This has been supported by the rapid deployment of Microsoft TEAMS which is enabling the Council to work in a totally different way based on running virtual teams and meetings. This technology is being used highly effectively across the Welsh public sector including the regional work of the Cardiff City Deal and Gwent Strategic Co-ordinating Group. In response to this situation the Council temporarily closed the Civic Centre and General Office.
- 3.7 The decision was also taken to suspend formal council and committee meetings at the end of March. The AGM was held, virtually, on 2 April and Emergency Governance arrangements were agreed including establishing an Emergency Committee. Some formal business will be convened in June and July to deal with issues arising from the emergency response and other urgent business. Executive, Planning and Full Council are all scheduled to meet virtually before the Summer Recess. Technology and support has been deployed to all Elected Members to enable them to participate in these meetings.
- 3.8 Through the lockdown period Elected Members have undertaken their roles while working remotely. There has been a particular focus on community leadership and Members have worked with Officers to provide links into the community and to ensure that those in need of support were properly identified. The two Groups have continued to meet and the Managing Director has held weekly briefings in

order to ensure Members are kept informed and engaged in the work of the Council during lockdown.

- 3.9 The Welsh Government and local government have had a shared commitment to work in partnership. This shared leadership has been demonstrated and strengthened during this crisis and there has been an unprecedented level of dialogue and engagement and openness, with regular bilateral meetings between Ministers and WLGA spokespersons and weekly meetings between all 22 leaders and Ministers. The Leader of the Council has participated in these weekly Leaders meetings with the WLGA and Ministers, as well as continuing to participate in the Cardiff City Deal and other regional forums.
- 3.10 There has been a significant impact on the Council's workforce with high levels of absence in the early weeks of the pandemic as individuals self-isolated or were in receipt of shielding letters. The highest level of absence was 18%, however this has now reduced down to just over 7%, with staff being able to return to work. Those working in non-critical services have been available for redeployment with many moving into key roles in the locality teams, school hubs, supporting families eligible for FSM and, most recently, into the new contact tracing team. As services re-start then there will be a gradual return to substantive roles. There has been some requirement to bring in agency staff to cover staff who are not able to work and to support new measures in the workplace arising from social distancing. Some Council staff have been furloughed under the Government Scheme to mitigate some of the impact from loss of income and to support those who have to shield and cannot work.

4.0 Impact of Covid-19 on Blaenau Gwent

- 4.1 The latest ONS data shows that up to the 30 May there were 60 deaths in Blaenau Gwent from Covid-19. This comprised of 36 deaths in hospitals (60%), 22 in care homes (36%) and 2 at home (4%). This is based on the number of deaths that have Covid-19 identified as the cause of death on death certificates.
- 4.2 The pandemic has also had an unprecedented impact on the economy and on employment in the Borough. Many workers have been furloughed under the Government's Job Retention Scheme and large numbers have lost their jobs which has resulted in a sharp increase in the numbers claiming Universal Credit (UC) and other benefits. Total caseload for claims being is 9267 (UC=2520, HB=6747) an increase of UC cases of 535 between April to June.
- 4.3 As a result of the consequential impact of Covid-19 on economic activity, there has also been an increase in applications for council tax support. For the period 1 March 2020 to 31 May 2020, the CTRS live claims has increased by 3.1% (277) with approximately 375 new claims outstanding (7% increase).
- 4.4 The Housing Options Team has seen an increase in the number of clients presenting as homeless since the start of the Covid-19 outbreak. Up to the end of May there were 260 live cases with 41 households placed in temporary accommodation. This is an increase of some 100 cases in just two months.

- 4.5 The financial consequences of the pandemic for local business and the public sector is not yet fully known. Certainly the impact on the Council's financial position alone is significant with the additional costs of dealing with the emergency and the loss of income presenting a severe financial risk. The Welsh Government published its Supplementary Budget on 27 May, £189 million has been made available to support local authority budgets, including £40 million for adult social care pressures, £40 million for free school meal provision, and £78 million to account for lost income during the crisis. While this support is welcomed it is not possible to predict, at this stage, what the full financial cost will be for the Council. This is dealt with in more detail in another item on this agenda.

5. Transition to the Next Phase

- 5.1 In an emergency the Council would normally deal with the response and then move into recovery phase to support the community back to normal. What is clear is that dealing with Covid-19 is very different and while the peak experienced in the Spring has now passed the pandemic is not over. The relaxation of lockdown will be supported by measures, such as social distancing, community testing and contact tracing, to enable us to return to work, school and other activities whilst still living with the pandemic. The clear expectation is that many of these measures will be with us for months and until a vaccine or treatment are found. So we need to be able to continue to respond to the pandemic, while moving to the next phase and at the same time supporting some elements of recovery.
- 5.2 It has been agreed that a Recovery Co-ordination Group (RCG) should now be established to lead the Recovery work in Gwent. The nature of this emergency means we expect to run both response and recovery side by side. This will place a further demand on resources.
- 5.3 It is also the case that so much about the way we live our lives has changed and we will not simply return to normal once Covid-19 is under control. There is the opportunity for the Council to build on the positive work of the past three months with the expectation being that we do not seek to return to the way things were before but harness the positive aspects of the response to strengthen and modernise the Council, adopting new working practices and challenging how we did things before, in order to map out an ambitious future, create a stronger organisation and to sustain the strong relationships forged with our communities and partners.
- 5.4 The Council will continue to respond to the emergency but is now re-starting some services in line with the relaxation of lockdown. It will not be a case of delivering services as we have done before, service delivery will have to change to take into account the national framework which will for the foreseeable future involve mandatory social distancing alongside a clear direction to work from home, where possible; the phased 'restart' of wide range of public services and of the economy; and continued proactive work to prevent the further spread of the virus whilst also planning for potential future 'peaks.'
- 5.5 The Council has set out the conditions that will need to be in place for service delivery to re-start:

- Services will only be brought back when Government Legislation/Guidance supports this;
- Critical Services need to be prioritised and re-starting services cannot undermine critical service delivery – this will include the new services stood up to respond to the virus e.g. locality and contact tracing teams;
- Risk assessments, in conjunction with the trade unions, will need to be completed to ensure that it is safe for staff and service users;
- Those who are shielded or vulnerable will need to stay locked down at least until mid-August and until further advice from Government;
- Where new ways of working have proved effective these should be built into new ways of delivering services.

5.6 Services which have already been introduced include the HWRC, Bulky Waste Collection, Parks, Grounds Maintenance and Highways Maintenance. Service delivery models have been adjusted to ensure that social distancing is adhered to and that the working environment is safe for staff and service users. A standard procedure is now in place in advance of services being re-started that requires a full risk assessment to be in place and consultation with the trade unions. The decision for services to restart is taken at GOLD/CLT in consultation with the Leader and appropriate Executive Member. The mitigation being put in place is having an impact on the cost of service delivery with additional staff required in many cases.

5.7 The Minister of Education announced on 3 June that schools can re-open in Wales on the 29 June, with the end of term extended to 27 July. Work is underway with head teachers to plan for the return of pupils for this brief period before the summer holiday. Certainly this is not a return to normal for schools with social distancing meaning that no more than a 30% of pupils will be in school at any one time and attendance remaining optional for this term. This will provide an opportunity for teachers to check in with pupils and to plan for their return in September. However, with social distancing expected to be a requirement for the foreseeable future the shape of learning will change with distance learning being a core part of delivery going forward. The Council is currently repurposing and distributing laptops to some 1400 pupils who do not currently have access to ensure none are digitally excluded.

5.8 The re-opening of Council Offices is also being considered with planning being done to determine how offices could open safely and in a way that complied with social distancing and safe management of shared spaces. Government guidance currently requires staff who can work from home to do so, and the successful use of technology should be sustained to enable this to continue. It is now confirmed that offices will not open before the Autumn, and it is evident that when offices do re-open it will be with a significant reduction in capacity (50-60%) to accommodate the 2M social distancing, so home working will remain with staff moving to a blend of home and office working, with any attendance in the office being on a rota basis.

- 5.9 Return to formal Council business is being considered for the autumn and at present it is not known when Committees will be able to meet in person. Dependencies being further relaxation of lockdown restrictions and the completion of risk assessments to demonstrate that the workplace is safe for Elected Members, staff and the public. The Executive, Planning Committee and Full Council are scheduled to meet before the summer recess but this will be done using Microsoft TEAMS. Scrutiny Briefings will also be held to enable new Committee Members to meet virtually and to agree their Forward Work Programmes.
- 5.10 It is recommended that the next steps are for the Council to refresh its corporate priorities to ensure it builds in the commitment needed to build that stronger future. Ensuring that the good practice is becomes part of the way the Council works in the future.

6. Place Shaping – Blaenau Gwent

- 6.1 The Covid-19 pandemic has been devastating globally and will have a significant detrimental impact on the economy and the way we live, work, learn and socialise for the foreseeable future. The Council has had to respond to this unprecedented situation and has done so at pace, bringing an innovative approach to problem solving and changes in service delivery, ensuring that the health and well-being of our residents and communities has been the driver for our decision making and actions.
- 6.2 Despite the impact that the pandemic has had, it is possible to identify positive experience and good practice from the way the Council and community has responded in Blaenau Gwent. It is clear there is a real opportunity to hold onto these positives and to not simply return to normal but to build on our work to create a stronger and more resilient organisation and community.
- 6.3 The areas where this can be demonstrated include the way the Council has adopted new technology and modern working practices at pace, enabling it to continue operating with staff and Elected Members almost entirely working from home. The targeted support provided to the more vulnerable in our communities with services coming together into multi-functional teams and working very effectively with partners and community and voluntary groups. The strong use of data and information to build our business intelligence about our community and the increase in digital service delivery and contact to ensure we can continue to deliver services in a way that is safe for staff and residents. There has been strong support for local businesses – which will need to continue – and a step change in how we communicate with our residents about service changes and the decisions being made by the Council, resulting in a real sense of a better connection with the community and an appreciation of the work of key front-line staff.

- 6.4 The next steps will be really important now to ensure we use this experience to build that stronger organisation and Place in Blaenau Gwent, rather than simply reverting to normal.
- 6.5 The Council also needs to take a community leadership role in identifying the impact of the pandemic on the community and the interventions that need to be put in place to support recovery – this includes recovery for the local economy. Recognising that this is a task that will be delivered in partnership with other organisations across the Region. In support of this a Community Impact Assessment is being prepared to inform the work of the Council and wider Public Service Board.
- 6.6 Strengthening the ‘Place’ needs to draw on the wider partnership with public sector partners, through the BG Public Service Board, and the business community, through the BG Enterprise Board. Agreeing our collective priorities for the recovery and re-purposing of the Borough.
- 6.7 Blaenau Gwent also needs to continue to be part of the wider regional and national work to recover and create a stronger future. This work should lead into the wider G10 discussions (bringing together public sector leaders from across the region) and the work of the Cardiff City Deal. This will be supported by work undertaken by the regional partners on Horizon Scanning which will inform the recovery work across Gwent.

7. **Recommendations**

- 7.1 Approve the approach to moving to the next phase of the pandemic and recovery;
- 7.2 Approve the refresh of the Corporate Priorities to ensure a clear focus on what the Council wants to deliver over next 18 months;
- 7.3 Approve the proposal to use the disruption of the pandemic to reflect on how we work as an organisation and with our communities, partners, workforce and trade unions, informing a position on the ‘new normal’ to support delivery of the refreshed priorities;
- 7.4 Support the development of a wider place-based discussion with partners on the community impact of the pandemic and how the BG Public Service Board could respond and support recovery through its collective priorities and work programme;
- 7.5 Support the development of an Economic Recovery Plan through engagement with the BG Enterprise Board and Regional Forums – identifying the responding to the impact on local businesses in order to support economic recovery;
- 7.6 Continue to ensure that Blaenau Gwent is an active participant in regional forums – such as G10 and Cardiff Capital City Region – to support recovery and development of the Borough;

8. Implications Against Each Option

8.1 **Finance** – the response to Covid-19 has come at a significant cost to the public sector and places severe pressure on the Council's revenue budget. Welsh Government has given a commitment to meeting the costs of the response and put aside funding in its Supplementary Budget. Currently Councils are making monthly claims in arrears to recover these costs. Additional funding has also been provided for Social Care to support both in-house and external providers, and the Council has also made claims against this fund. The most significant risk is around loss of income and again some funding has been provided by WG but it is not known how much of the loss of local government this will cover and how long the funding can continue. A more detailed report on the financial impact of the pandemic is provided separately on this agenda.

8.2 **Risks** – the most significant risks at present are:

- the financial risk to the Council and how this will affect our longer term financial resilience;
- the risk to the local economy from the recession arising from the pandemic and the resultant impact on employment and income across the region;
- the risk that the Council will have reduced capacity and resource to support delivery of its corporate priorities and statutory obligations.

8.3 **Legal** – the Council will need to continue to fulfil its obligations under the Civil Contingencies 2005 Act to respond to the on-going emergency situation and, in parallel, to undertake recovery. Additional responsibilities have also been placed on the Council as a result of the Coronavirus Act 2020 with particular pressure on Public Protection around enforcement and the requirement to support contact tracing.

8.4 **Human Resources** – there will be a continued impact on the workforce as those staff who are 'shielded' will need to remain so until the middle of August and some will not be able to work from home due to the nature of their jobs. In addition, there are staff who are vulnerable or living with a vulnerable person who will also not be available for work during this period. At present there are 200 staff at home who are not able to work. The continued absence of these staff and the need to introduce new working practices i.e. social distancing, in the workplace also means there has been an increase in agency staff required to sustain and re-start services.

9. Supporting Evidence

8.1 Expected outcome for the public - the transition to recovery is critical for the wider community to ensure that life can return to some normality, following the first wave of the pandemic, with a return to work and school being an important aspect ensuring that everyone can do this safely.

8.2 Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation) – there has been some engagement through the lockdown period, particularly with parents as we seek to re-open schools, and the business community to ensure the level of support needed to protect employment within the Borough.

- 8.3 Thinking for the Long term (forward planning) – this report sets out how the Council is aiming to not simply seek to return to normal, but how it can build a stronger position as we emerge from lockdown. This is particularly relevant to building stronger and more resilient communities, and embedding new ways of working into how the Council does business in the future.
- 8.4 Collaboration / partnership working – strong partnership working has been a feature of the response to the pandemic and it is intended to continue and build on this positive work through the recovery work of the Gwent Recovery Co-ordinating Group (RCG), the Public Service Board and wider regional working through the Gwent G10 Partnership.
- 8.5 Integration (across service areas) – through the pandemic the Council has worked as a single organisation and across services and partnerships to deliver an effective emergency response. It is intended to take the learning from this and to build this into the way the organisation works going forward.