

COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT

REPORT TO:	<u>THE CHAIR AND MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL</u>
SUBJECT:	<u>ORDINARY MEETING OF THE COUNCIL – 23RD JULY, 2020</u>
REPORT OF:	<u>DEMOCRATIC OFFICER</u>

PRESENT: COUNCILLOR M. MOORE (THE CHAIR,
PRESIDING)

Councillors P. Baldwin
J. Collins
M. Cook
M. Cross
N. Daniels
D. Davies
G. A. Davies
M. Day
P. Edwards
L. Elias
D. Hancock
K. Hayden
S. Healy
J. Hill
W. Hodgins
J. Holt
J. Mason
H. McCarthy, B.A. (Hons)
C. Meredith
J. Millard
J. C. Morgan
J. P. Morgan
L. Parsons
G. Paulsen
K. Pritchard
K. Rowson
T. Smith
B. Summers
B. Thomas

G. Thomas
 S. Thomas
 H. Trollope
 D. Wilkshire
 B. Willis
 L. Winnett

AND: Managing Director
 Corporate Director of Social Services
 Corporate Director of Education (Interim)
 Corporate Director of Regeneration & Community Services
 Chief Officer Resources
 Chief Officer Commercial
 Head of Legal & Corporate Compliance
 Head of Organisational Development
 Head of Governance and Partnerships
 Service Manager – Performance and Democratic Communications, Marketing and Customer Access Manager
 Democratic Officer
 Democratic Support Assistant

<u>No.</u>	<u>SUBJECT</u>	<u>ACTION</u>
1.	<p><u>SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION</u></p> <p>It was noted that no requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service.</p>	
2.	<p><u>APOLOGIES</u></p> <p>Apologies for absence were received from Councillors D. Bevan, G. L. Davies, G. Collier, T. Sharrem and J. Wilkins.</p>	

3. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS**

The following declarations of interest were reported:

Item No. 36: Pay Policy Statement 2020/2021

- Michelle Morris – Managing Director
- Richard Crook – Corporate Director of Regeneration & Community Services
- Damien McCann – Corporate Director of Social Services
- Lynn Phillips – Corporate Director of Education (Interim)
- Rhian Hayden – Chief Officer Resources
- Anne-Louise Clark – Chief Officer Commercial
- Andrea Jones – Head of Legal & Corporate Compliance
- Andrea Prosser – Head of Organisational Development
- Bernadette Elias – Head of Governance and Partnerships
- Gemma Wasley – Service Manager Performance and Democratic
- Sean Scannell - Communications, Marketing and Customer Access Manager
- Ceri Edwards-Brown – Democratic Officer
- Deborah Jones – Democratic Support Officer

The officers would remain in the meeting unless a detailed debate took place. In this event, the following officers would remain in the meeting whilst this item was considered:

- Michelle Morris – Managing Director
- Andrea Jones - Head of Corporate and Legal Compliance
- Rhian Hayden – Chief Officer Resources
- Ceri Edwards-Brown – Democratic Officer (minute clerk)

Item No. 47 – Service Review

The following declarations of interest were reported:

Councillors N. Daniels – had been advised by the Monitoring Officer that he would be able to remain in the meeting whilst this item was considered and participate in any discussions, if necessary.

Councillors P. Edwards, J. Millard, and H. Trollope – Members of the Working Group.

Councillors W. Hodgins and L. Parsons – Board Members appointed to the Aneurin Leisure Trust.

The Head of Legal and Corporate Compliance confirmed that the above-named Members may remain in the meeting whilst the item of business was discussed.

4. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Covid-19 Pandemic

Members and officers took a minute of silent reflection to remember those who had sadly passed away from Covid-19 and also their friends and families who had been affected by this devastating virus.

5 – 27. MINUTE BOOK – NOVEMBER 2019 – JULY 2020

The Minute Book for the period November 2019 – July 2020 was submitted for consideration, whereupon:

Following a brief discussion at which Members raised concern that the minutes had not yet been considered by individual Scrutiny Committees before being presented to Council, it was confirmed by the Democratic Officer that the sets of minutes that had been agendaed for consideration had gone through the Scrutiny process.

Annual Meeting of the Council – 2nd April, 2020 – Item No. 15 – Recruitment – Statement Made by Member No. 3

A Member reported the following correction to the first paragraph of the above minute. He advised that it was during 2011 **and not** 2012 as reported that education had been placed in special measures under the previous administration.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED, subject to the foregoing correction, that the minutes be approved and confirmed as a true record of proceedings.

28. MEMBERS QUESTIONS

There were no questions submitted by Members.

29. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

There were no questions submitted by members of the public.

30. COVID-19 EMERGENCY – TRANSITION TO THE NEXT PHASE

Consideration was given to the report of the Managing Director.

At the invitation of the Chair, the Managing Director explained that the report had been considered and endorsed by the Executive on 24th June, 2020. However, since June matters had progressed and this report provided an update on the Council's strategic response to the Covid-19 emergency and outlined the next steps and transition to the recovery phase, as the whole country was now seeing a welcome pause in the pandemic.

It was noted that on 23rd March, 2020 a national health emergency had been declared and the Council had activated its emergency response prior to 23rd March, 2020 which had resulted in the delivery of critical services only with non-essential services and normal council business ceasing.

Whilst the emergency still remained there had been a pause in the pandemic with a significant decrease in the number of new cases and deaths being reported across Wales and the Gwent region. The Council was now at a stage along with other Councils across Wales where it was moving into a recovery phase.

The Managing Director continued to highlight the key elements of the response over the last few months and these were:

- Emergency planning structure had been operational since mid-March via a multi-agency approach to the pandemic and this continued.

- All non-critical services had ceased with a particular focus on Adult Social Services, supporting some of the most vulnerable in the community, refuse collection and recycling and public protection, with Councils taking on significant new enforcement responsibilities under the Coronavirus legislation.
- School closures had resulted in the creation of School Hubs to support key workers by providing childcare for their children and for vulnerable workers.
- The Council had continued to support families eligible for Free School Meals with over 2,000 families being supported through this service.
- The creation of locality multi agency response teams who had worked alongside volunteers to support those residents who had to shield due to health reasons. In addition, the Council had identified over 1,300 vulnerable residents who had been offered support during lockdown.
- Business sectors across Wales had been badly affected with many companies closing their operations and furloughing their employees. Unprecedented support had also been provided to local businesses, enabling them to access Government financial support schemes, with the aim of protecting the local economy from the worse impact of the pandemic. Up to the 5th June, the Council had supported over 1,300 businesses and had facilitated the payment of 1,212 grants totalling £13.56m. In addition, to this a number of businesses had also been supported through the process to apply for funding through the Economic Resilience Fund (administered by Business Wales).
- The workforce had quickly adapted to the new working arrangements and staff wherever possible were now working from home.

The impact of Covid-19 on Blaenau Gwent had been huge with 60 deaths reported to date due to the virus. In addition, the pandemic had had an unprecedented impact on the economy with many workers finding themselves without employment or being furloughed. This had resulted in a sharp increase in benefit claims.

The report referred to the transition to the next phase but whilst there had been a pause in the pandemic it was clear that all would have to continue living with the pandemic moving into recovery phase and this would need to be supported by measures such as social distancing, community testing and contact tracing to enable a return to work, school and other activities.

Officers had taken time to reflect on the response including lessons learnt and had identified a number of positives and good practice that would be retained moving forward.

The recovery work would be undertaken in partnership with the Public Service Board, Cardiff City Region and G10 and the Council was part of the Recovery Co-ordination Group (RCG) which had been established to lead the recovery work in Gwent. The nature of this emergency had meant that both response and recovery would need to be run in parallel and this would place a further demand on resources.

The Council would continue to respond to the emergency but was now re-starting some services in line with the relaxation of lockdown i.e. schools had restarted in June and planning was well advanced for pupils to return in September. It would not be the case of delivering services as previously, it had been recognised that things had changed significantly and it would not be simply a return to normal service delivery this would have to change to take into account of the national framework which would for the foreseeable future involve mandatory social distancing alongside a clear direction to work from home, where possible; the phased 'restart' of a 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.'

The recommendations in the report contained details of the next steps which had been endorsed by the Executive Committee on 24th June, 2020.

There had been a recognition that things had changed significantly but it was not simply a case of returning to normal service delivery. Social distancing in Wales remained for the foreseeable future and the way we worked, lived and learned would be very different in the future. The work to refresh the Corporate Priorities had been completed and there was a separate report on the agenda for consideration. Blaenau Gwent Public Service Board had met earlier in the week to reflect the impact of the pandemic on the community and had considered how the

Public Service Board priorities and work programme needed to be adjusted to support recovery.

It was emphasised that officers and elected Members had and would continue to be part of the work that was happening across the region to support the recovery process.

Finally, the Managing Director requested that her appreciation be recorded to all staff and community volunteers across Blaenau Gwent who had worked incredibly hard over the past few months to respond to this emergency in the best way possible, their commitment was hugely impressive and all should be proud of the support they had and continue to provide for the community.

Councillors P. Baldwin and M. Cross joined the meeting at this juncture.

Future Working Arrangements - the Leader of the Labour Group echoed the final comments made by the Managing Director with regard to staff and community volunteers and said that all had done a fantastic job supporting the community throughout the pandemic. He continued by referring to Paragraph 7.3 of the report and said that he hoped that with regard to the approach going forward that the trade unions would be consulted particularly in relation to working from home as this was not ideal for all staff.

The Managing Director confirmed that officers had worked with the trade unions closely throughout the course of the pandemic and they had been part of the emergency response team from the outset. Officers would continue to work with the trade unions throughout the recovery phase and this would include any new working arrangements going forward.

Return to Physical Council and Committee Meetings – a Member said he felt very awkward when residents were expressing the view that there was an expectation for children to return to school particularly as from the new academic year in September, but Members were still unable to return to the Council offices to conduct business. He asked when he could expect Scrutiny Committees and Council being held within a Council building.

The Managing Director advised that the Council was continuing to operate to Welsh Government guidance in Wales which indicated that

if staff could work from home they should continue to do so. Wales still had to adhere to the 2 metre social distancing rule which presented a challenge in terms of the number of people that could be accommodated safely into a room. The position would be reviewed during the autumn in the context of the guidance at that time. Alternative venues were currently being investigated that would allow larger group of Members to meet and contingency arrangements were also being looked at should the restrictions continue to apply into the autumn.

The Managing Director stated that the Council was not unusual in how it was operating i.e. similar to other authorities who were also continuing to work from home where possible and were using technology to undertake democratic meetings. She concluded by reiterating that this position including any contingency arrangements would be reviewed during the autumn.

The Leader of the Council said that he understood the frustrations of the Member and said that this was shared across the piece but acknowledged when the Council was able to return to some degree of normality it would be in the form of a blended approach in terms of the operation of council business especially in terms of the bigger picture for meetings such as G10, WLGA and City Deal.

He advised that he had visited the Council Chamber to see for himself the impact of the 2 metre social distancing and whilst the Executive Committee could be held in that venue he was adamant until a Scrutiny Committee could be held in the same venue, the Executive would continue to meet in the same way as all the other Committees. However, if social distancing reverted to a lesser distance than 2 metres this would be helpful but certainly in September there would be a need to look at some permanency in how the Council moved forward.

The Leader of the Council continued by echoing the comments made by the Leader of the Labour Group regarding the work undertaken by the staff and the voluntary sector and said that the way in which staff had responded to this pandemic had been absolutely incredible across the board. Officers had stepped up to the mark and this had really been a one Council approach and this was something the Managing Director would need to capture and this needed to continue during normal times.

The Leader continued by stating that whilst all officers had stepped up to the mark in particular he commended officers in the Resources Department who had been requested to turn around information and financial data for Welsh Government extremely quickly sometimes within days to ensure the monies were received from Welsh Government to help via the Hardship Fund and the loss of income. All owed a massive debt of gratitude to them. Also the speed and efficiency in how all this had happened over the last 4 months, local government should be looked on with a new degree of respect across the 22 authorities because without local government stepping up to the plate the way it had with all due respect to all the other agencies including Welsh Government involved, he did not think we would have got where we were as quickly and efficiently as we had been able to.

Provision of Free School Meals (FSM) - a Member enquired whether the system of direct payments for families eligible for free school meals would continue in September or whether it would revert back to the previous system. If so, he asked whether there was a possibility that this could be looked in order that the current two tier system could be removed.

The Managing Director said that Council support for families eligible for free school meals had been really important throughout this period, however, it was the current intention that direct payments would cease at the end of August as the Government had indicated that there would be a return to school in September. At present the intention was that direct payments would cease and Council would revert back to providing free school meals which was a statutory requirement in schools as from September.

The Managing Director noted the points made regarding a different approach to this in the future and mindful of the Council's statutory obligation she would discuss with the officers and Executive Member.

Another Member expressed her concern that schools had been advising parents for the first half of the term that children would not be provided with hot meals as from September only packed lunches and also that there would be no breakfast clubs available.

The Managing Director noted the point regarding hot meal provision and advised that the Council was currently in the planning phase in terms of what this would look like for the autumn term but had yet to

make a decision. There were a number of options being considered but a firm decision would be made in the next few weeks.

The Corporate Director of Education (Interim) reported that there were planning group arrangements in place for both the primary and secondary sector and these groups involved both head-teachers and the Council's catering team. Work was being undertaken towards providing breakfast clubs and originally a 'grab and go' approach for lunch time was being considered. However, in order to meet statutory requirements and food guidelines, the approach that was now being looked at was a hot meal provision from 1st September, 2020. Whilst the detailed arrangements for this provision needed to be finalised this was the Council's intention going forward.

Re-opening of Schools – a Member pointed out that a considerable number of senior staff in schools would be working throughout the course of the summer school holidays to some extent in preparation for and to be in a position to re-open schools in September and said these school staff should be congratulated for this.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and the following be approved and supported:

- the approach to moving to the next phase of the pandemic and recovery;
- the refresh of the Corporate Priorities to ensure a clear focus on what the Council wanted to deliver over next 18 months;
- the proposal to use the disruption of the pandemic to reflect on how the organisation worked and with our communities, partners, workforce and trade unions, informing a position on the 'new normal' to support delivery of the refreshed priorities;
- 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;
- the development of an Economic Recovery Plan through engagement with the BG Enterprise Board and Regional Forums

– identifying and responding to the impact on local businesses in order to support economic recovery; and

- Blaenau Gwent continue to ensure that it was an active participant in regional forums – such as G10 and Cardiff Capital City Region – to support recovery and development of the Borough.

31. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE 2020/2021 REVENUE BUDGET AND THE UPDATE ON BRIDGING THE GAP PROPOSALS

The report of the Chief Officer Resources was submitted for consideration.

At the invitation of the Chair, the Chair Officer Resources explained that the report gave an early indication of the impact that Covid-19 would have on the revenue budget in terms of expenditure and income. The report assumed that the lockdown had lifted at the end of June and that some normal activity would resume in July and future forecasts would be updated to take account of any revisions to the current situation.

Overall a net increase in expenditure of £2.4m was forecast together with a net reduced income of £1.6m which resulted in an adverse impact on the overall budget of £4m.

Welsh Government had announced a number of financial packages to support local government and these included £30m Hardship Funding, £14m Adult Social Services, support for Free School Meals, Homelessness and £78m was being provided across Wales to fund loss of income.

The report assumed all the additional costs incurred for the Council's response to Covid-19 would be fully funded and this would result in the cost pressure reducing to £1.465m. However initial indications from Welsh Government were that ICT costs would be only 50% funded and some costs were likely to be deemed ineligible.

The Chief Officer Resources advised that during Quarter 1 it was forecast that there would be a £1.7m loss of income with significant losses in the catering service (school meals) and waste. Welsh

Government had advised that the £78m to support lost income would be released in tranches, with the first tranche covering car parking, waste, cultural services and school meals. The remaining loss areas would be considered by the Wales Government Panel subsequently. Officers were currently in the process of finalising the quarter 1 claim submission which needed to be received by Welsh Government the following day. Any support received would improve the reported position, however given the fact that Covid-19 was still in the community, the resulting financial impact could continue to impact on the Council for future quarters and the quarterly budget monitoring reports would reflect this going forward.

Paragraph 5.2 of the report provided details of the additional expenditure incurred as a result of the pandemic and these included an increase in council tax support, adult social care, waste services and free school meals. There were also some cross cutting areas of expenditure which relating to ICT, personal protective equipment and sanitiser products.

Paragraph 5.3 of the report provided details of the loss of income that would be incurred as a result of the pandemic which included an overall reduction in Council Tax Collection whilst the report quoted 2.6% this had been revisited and was now 1.1%. It was hoped that this would be delayed income rather than a loss, however, given the current economic situation there was a high risk of non-collection and the possibility of debt write off was increasing.

The forecast assumed a loss of income from industrial units of £68,000 for the month of April 2020 only i.e. a one month rent free period for tenants. It also forecasted a loss of rental at the General Offices of £10,000 for the period April 2020 to June 2020. The forecast assumed the 2 month rent deferral would be collected by the end of the financial year but this would be dependent on businesses.

The other areas that forecasted loss of income was for school meals, loss of income for school catering and cleaning through service level agreements and the loss/delayed income from the disposal of recycling waste and trade waste operations. Other areas included the loss of income from bulky waste collection, grounds maintenance, littering and dog control orders.

With regard to the Bridging the Gap proposals it was forecast that £1.217m (83%) would be achieved at this point in time which would

offset some of the identified cost pressures combined with some additional income receipts detailed in paragraph 5.7.1 and reduced expenditure detailed in paragraphs 5.7.2 - 5.7.5.

As at end May, 140 staff had been furloughed and none of these staff had been put at financial detriment with all staff continuing to receive 100% of their salary.

All Council budgets would be reviewed to determine if the budget could be reprioritised to mitigate additional costs and the loss of income and management fees would also be reviewed to ensure that there was no double funding from the public purse.

Members were then given the opportunity to raise questions/comment on the report:

Corporate Risk Register/Funding – in reply to a question, the Chief Officer Resources confirmed that due to the potential financial and operational implications, Covid-19 had been included on the Corporate Risk Register. In terms of funding, the Council had limited resources available to establish a fund to help with Covid-19 and whilst the Council was grateful for the support provided by Welsh Government it was acknowledged that they also had limited resources available, therefore, alternative resources to fund the additional costs being incurred as a result of Covid-19 would have to be identified. This could be by the re-prioritisation or virement of current budgets or consideration of the utilisation of reserves. This would be considered as part of the budget setting process going forward later in the year and for 2021/2022 financial years onwards.

The Leader of the Labour Group said that given the comments made by the Chief Officer and the difficulties that the Council would be faced with in the future, he made reference to the Transformation Budgets that were detailed in paragraphs 5.7.12 and 5.7.13 and the assumption that these had been fully committed. However, he asked that when the final cost analysis was known and should a further spike occurred during the autumn. whether there would be any potential to un-commit these budgets for this purpose?

The Leader of the Council advised that all local authorities were in the same position and in terms of the budget position several discussions had already taken place with the Chief Officer Resources how to

approach this and how plan for the worst scenario but hope for the best. He advised that all budgets would be looked at.

One point he had continually made at WLGA and the Chief Officer Resources had been doing so at the Treasurer's meetings which was gaining some traction, was why not enough pressure was put on the Treasury around the capitalisation of revenue because this would have a major benefit on local authorities across Wales and this would ease the revenue monies the Welsh Government had been supporting authorities with to date.

Furlough – in reply to a question, the Chief Officer Resources confirmed that the Council had been successful in its claim to HMRC which would improve the financial position. It was noted that 140 staff had been furloughed from a number of different service areas but a significant number were from school catering service, midday supervisors and cleaning. This was as a direct result of school closures a service had not been required, however, some staff had been redeployed. Those staff who were more vulnerable or who were unable to work from home had been furloughed.

ICT Costs – at present the cost of ICT provision was £38,000 and 50% of this had been funded by Welsh Government. However, it was anticipated that this figure would increase slightly but this current figure was not known at present.

Council Tax Reduction – a Member referred to the fund of £9.3m for 2020/2021 and enquired whether this funding had been fully committed and would discussions be taking place to increase this funding provision. The Chief Officer Resources confirmed that there was an expectation that this budget would be fully utilised and at present due to the number of claimants, there was an expectation that this budget would be exceeded. It was important to note that the £9.3m which had been set aside was more than the actual funding element that had been received from Welsh Government as part of the Revenue Support Grant.

Discussions had taken place at the Treasury Group in terms of additional support for the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and Welsh Government was considering this at present and feedback on their determinations was currently awaited.

Members ICT – a Member expressed her concern that the figure of the £27,000 was so high especially as the majority of Members already had been provided with laptops. It was noted this figure was currently an estimate and included the provision of laptops, mobile phones, pulse fobs for remote access and licences.

Loss of Income – in reply to a question, the Chief Officer Resources confirmed that the vast majority of income loss could be claimed back from Welsh Government and the Council would be progressing and trying to maximise the income loss claims and Members would be updated on the success of the claims going forward. It was noted that the loss of income in relation to domiciliary care and industrial units formed the basis of income loss claim that was being submitted to Welsh Government the following day.

Vacant Posts – had not been included in the calculations due to the time elements but would be included in the quarterly reports and forecasts going forward.

Pay Bonus for Employers – a Member expressed her concern that no mention had been made in the report relating to the £1,000 pay bonus for employers for retaining furloughed staff and keeping them employed until January 2021 and asked whether this should be factored into the budget going forward.

The Chief Officer Resources advised that reason that this had not been factored in was because the announcement had been made after the report had been prepared but this matter would be pursued as the majority of furloughed staff would be brought back to assist with the re-opening of schools.

School Budgets – a Member referred to paragraph 5.7.10 of the report and said that as schools had also seen an increase in expenditure they should not be asked to refund monies to the LEA.

It was confirmed that the Council had not made a decision at present whether to change the funding for schools. However, for 2021 it was important that all budgets be looked at going forward because of the pressures that the Council, schools and other organisations were under. It was also pointed out that schools had also saved costs because they had been closed. The officer reiterated that no decision had been made on this at present but it was important to look at and

review all budgets going forward to determine if they could be repurposed.

The Member said that whilst she appreciated that schools had been closed the teachers were still teaching the children. Also expenditure had been incurred for supply teachers to cover staff who were unable to work.

Members were advised that Councils within the Greater Gwent area have been canvassed for their view in relation to school budgets. Responses suggest that whilst school funding was on the radar, no conclusions or firm decisions have as yet, been arrived at.

Appreciation – A Member expressed his to the Chief Officer Resources for the detailed report. However, he pointed out that due to the timetabling of the report unfortunately, Council would not have a full insight until the Welsh Government decision had been received in respect of the Council's claim for funding which was due to be submitted the following day. He reiterated his appreciation to Rhian and her team for pulling together this information at such quick speed given everything that was currently happening.

The Leader of the Council said that he was grateful for the comments made by the Member and concurred that the speed that the Chief Officer's team had to comply with deadlines and turn around this information had been absolutely incredible.

He acknowledged Members concerns regarding the finance issue but gave an assurance that whatever happened albeit repurposing, reprioritising or a refresh of the budget this would come back for a Council decision. The report provided details of the financial position at a point in time and possible suggestions but this would all be subject to the democratic process.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely:

- the current forecast position be agreed; and
- the progress made against the Bridging the Gap programme for 2020/2021 be noted.

32. **ESTABLISHING THE BLAENAU GWENT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL CONTACT TRACING SERVICE**

The Council considered the report of the Chief Officer Commercial.

At the invitation of the Chair, the Chief Officer Commercial gave details of the report the purpose of which was to establish a Blaenau Gwent Contact Tracing Service.

The Chief Officer Commercial explained that on 13th May Welsh Government had published their Test, Trace and Protect overarching plan which was supported by Public Health Wales Public Health Protection Response Plan which had been designed to support the move out of lockdown. As part of the Welsh Government Plan each region was required to develop its own regional regular response to the Plan and a Gwent wide service commenced on 1st June, 2020.

In order to achieve this, some staff were redeployed into the service to undertake contact tracing and contact advising. This was not sustainable arrangement beyond September and authorities had been asked to established a permanent arrangement from September 2020 to March 2021. The Gwent Co-ordinating Group had subsequently submitted a business case to Welsh Government which had resulted in £9.6m being awarded across Gwent to establish the service.

The model for the GCTS was based on an integrated model whereby the Local Authorities took the lead responsibility for their respective local teams and Aneurin Bevan University Health Board (ABUHB) would take lead responsibility for the Regional response.

The Chief Officer Commercial continued by providing details of the model and explained that staff would be specifically employed directly to resource the team in Blaenau Gwent and would work remotely from home to deliver the service. Based on the interim solution it was proposed to create a team in line with other Gwent models a service consists of i.e. Service Team Manager, Contact Tracers and Advisers, Shift Co-ordinators providing an 8.00 a.m. to 8.00 p.m., 7-day service.

The number of staff required was based on the population of Blaenau Gwent and the potential positivity rate i.e. 20% tests would be positive. Appendix 1 provided details of the governance arrangements and the team would report directly into the Strategic Co-ordinating Group as

part of response to Covid-19 and a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which included the Health Board and local authorities in Gwent was currently in development.

It was, therefore, proposed that the Chief Officer Commercial be provided with delegated authority to sign off the MOU in consultation with the Executive Member.

RESOLVED accordingly.

The Chief Officer Commercial concluded by advising that the performance management of new service would be in line with the Council's regular performance management arrangements.

In reply to a question, the Chief Officer Commercial confirmed that officers employed within this service would be provided with the offer of support such as counselling. In addition, at the beginning and end of every shift there would be a briefing and de-brief respectively. The Council had an employee assistance programme for those officers who had particular welfare issues and needed to speak to someone outside of the team and these team members would be fast tracked to receive that support, if required.

The Leader of the Council expressed his appreciation to the Chief Officer Commercial for the incredible amount of work that had been undertaken not only in Blaenau Gwent but across the region to provide this service. He proposed that Option 1 be endorsed. This proposal was seconded.

The Leader of the Labour Group commended the report.

It was unanimously,

FURTHER RESOLVED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that the proposals for the establishment of the local authority Contact Tracing Team, as part of the Gwent regional service be agreed.

33. **FORWARD LOOKING PLAN – CORPORATE PLAN REFRESH 2020/22**

Consideration was given to the report of the Managing Director.

The Managing Director advised as a result of the pandemic it was acknowledged that the corporate priorities up to 2022 needed to be revised and more importantly there was a need to reflect and build on the learning of the response to the pandemic and embed the good practice and good work into the future priorities and aspirations. This piece of work had been undertaken in conjunction with the Executive.

No priorities had been removed from the original plan but the document had been redrafted and reworded to try to focus on the outcomes to be achieved as a Council and to ensure the one council approach to delivery which, had been so successfully deployed over the last few months continued.

There were new areas of activity identified in this refresh including the ambition to become a low carbon Council and Borough; strengthened the need to look at how the Council would work in future taking on board the benefits of some of the new working and moving to a more sustainable model going forward in terms of agile working. Making sure as the Council going forward we continued to live with the pandemic, that a safe workplace was provided for employees and a safe environment for the service users when they came into contact with the Council and were receiving its services.

The Leader of the Labour Group said that he supported the report and pointed out that the outcome statements were still flexible enough to add elements over time.

He continued by advising that straying animals were becoming an issue in the County Borough and there were particular problems in the Nantyglo and Blaina wards and asked if this could be looked at again in the future. Another Member said that whilst other areas were more affected than others he requested if the issue of an impounding service could be prioritised and this pursued sooner rather than later.

The Leader of the Council said he would not have any issue with this request and said that was adequately captured in the outcome statement – “protect and enhance our environment and infrastructure

to benefit our communities”. Whilst it would not be embedded in the Corporate Plan as this detailed ‘strategic’ priorities he gave a commitment that he would raise the matter with the Executive Member for Environment and suggested it could be included in the remit of the Community Services portfolio.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that the Forward Looking Corporate Plan 2020/22 be approved for publication.

34. CAPITAL STRATEGY 2020/2021

Members considered the report of the Chief Officer Resources.

The Chief Officer Resources spoke briefly to the report and explained that the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy’s (CIPFA) Prudential Code for Capital Finance in Local Authorities, revised in 2017, introduced the concept of a Capital Strategy with effect from April 2019.

The capital strategy was intended to give a high level overview of how capital expenditure, capital financing and treasury management activity contribute to the provision of services along with an overview of how associated risk was managed and the implications for future financial sustainability. The development of a capital strategy allowed flexibility to engage with full Council to ensure that the overall strategy, governance procedures and risk appetite were fully understood by all elected Members.

It was noted that the Capital Strategy had been considered by the Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee during February and it had been the intention to be considered by Council in March. However, since that time the strategy had been revisited to ascertain if any amendments were required and officers were satisfied that no significant changes were required to the document as a result of Covid-19 and there had not been any significant changes since the last strategy was adopted in 2019.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that the Capital Strategy 2020/2021 be agreed.

35. TREASURY MANAGEMENT – TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY STATEMENT, INVESTMENT STRATEGY & MRP POLICY STATEMENT (INCLUDING PRUDENTIAL INDICATORS)

The report of the Chief Officer Resources was submitted for consideration.

The report was to provide Members with the opportunity to consider the Treasury Strategy, Investment Strategy and Minimum Revenue Provision Policy (including prudential indicators) for adoption for the 2020/2021 financial year.

It was noted that the suspension of formal meetings of the Council due to the coronavirus lockdown had resulted in a delay in Council considering this report and consequently, there had been some minor changes to the strategy to reflect recent economic data. However, the strategies had not changed significantly since it had been scrutinised by Corporate Overview on 3rd March, 2020.

Apart from the one minor change outlined above no other significant changes had been made to the strategy compared to the document agreed in 2019/20.

In reply to a question, the Chief Officer Resources confirmed that budget forecast for Minimum Revenue Provision from 2022/2023 would subsequently increase and would be factored into the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy going forward. In terms of estimated costs, the Chief Officer Resources undertook to pursue the matter and report back to the Leader of the Labour Group accordingly.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that the Annual Treasury Strategy Statement & Annual Investment Strategy & MRP Policy Statement for 2020/2021 financial year and the Treasury Management Prudential Indicators contained therein be agreed.

36. PAY POLICY STATEMENT 2020/21

The following officers declared an interest in this item but remained in the meeting whilst the item was considered:

- Michelle Morris – Managing Director
- Richard Crook – Corporate Director of Regeneration & Community Services
- Damien McCann – Corporate Director of Social Services
- Lynn Phillips – Corporate Director of Education (Interim)
- Rhian Hayden – Chief Officer Resources
- Anne-Louise Clark – Chief Officer Commercial
- Andrea Jones – Head of Legal & Corporate Compliance
- Andrea Prosser – Head of Organisational Development
- Bernadette Elias – Head of Policy and Performance
- Gemma Wasley – Service Manager Performance and Democratic
- Sean Scannell - Communications, Marketing and Customer Access Manager
- Ceri Edwards-Brown – Democratic Officer
- Deborah Jones – Democratic Support Officer

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Organisational Development.

The Leader of the Council advised that this was the traditional report which set out the policies relating to remuneration and he, thereupon, proposed that Option 1 be endorsed.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely the Pay Policy Statement 2020/21 be approved.

37. STATUTORY PARENTAL BEREAVEMENT LEAVE

The report of the Head of Organisational Development was submitted for consideration.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that the implementation of Option 1 be approved, with effect from 6th April 2020, on the basis that it would:

- meet the legislative requirements whilst putting the Council ahead of the statutory minimum requirement;
- was encouraged by the Government;
- was consistent with what was offered in other provisions;
- would incur minimal additional cost; and
- the Council would be seen to be a modern employer of choice which was linked to the proposals for the new Workforce Strategy.

Option 1	Considerations	• Benefits
<p>Amend entitlement to 2 weeks leave on full pay, irrespective of age or length of service, or those who suffer a stillbirth after 24 weeks of pregnancy</p> <p>That the provision was extended to include in-law and step relatives to ensure consistency with our other provisions of leave (which we would be unable to reclaim in respect of the SPBP).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would incur an additional cost for the Authority (minimal but exact amount unknown) • Above what was required by the Act. • Front line staff would need to be covered for the additional leave. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Links to Workforce Strategy of being a modern employer of choice which promotes the wellbeing of our employees. • Would expect additional cost to be minimal given the frequency this provision was utilised and that the statutory payment could be reclaimed for the two weeks. • Consistent Provision for all employees (regardless of age) which would mean fairness in the entitlements for all staff.

38. SCHEDULE OF MEMBERS REMUNERATION 2020/2021

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Organisational Development.

The Leader of the Council advised that in order to comply with the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 and the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales (IRPW) regulations, the Council was required to produce annually a schedule of payments it intended to make to its Members and Co-opted Members. He, thereupon, proposed that Option 1 be endorsed.

The Leader of the Labour Group referred to the list of Senior Salaries Entitlements outlined on page 546 of the report and pointed out that two responsibility allowances were also paid to the appointed representatives on the Silent Valley Board and asked whether these payments should also be included within the schedule.

The Chief Officer Resources explained that the schedule referred to the senior salaries allowances which formed part of the IRPW which determinations (which were capped at 17) and clarified that the Silent Valley Board appointments did not form part of these requirements. However, these payments were reflected in the annual Statement of Payments Schedule made to Members.

Another Member in relation to the same point advised that Council had previously agreed that in the interests of openness and transparency that these two payments would be included within future schedules.

The Leader of the Council said that he did not have a problem with implementing the suggestion even though this information was included within the annual Statement of Payments made to Members which was a public document. However, if it was felt that there was a need to duplicate this information and as long as it was within the realms of what could be done from a resources perspective he was sure this would not be an issue.

In reply to a question, the Chief Officer Resources confirmed that the Council was reimbursed by Silent Valley for the director's fees.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed namely, that the Schedule of Members Remuneration for 2020/21 be agreed and published.

39. STATEMENT OF PAYMENTS MADE TO MEMBERS IN 2019/2020

The Council considered the report of the Head of Organisational Development.

It was noted that in order to comply with the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 and the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales (IRPW) regulations, the Statement of Payments made to Members needed to be published on an annual basis. The Leader of the Council proposed that Option 1 be endorsed.

In reply to a comment made regarding that there appeared to be an individual that had been paid twice, the Chief Officer Resources said she believed that this was not a duplicate payment and the annual payments received related to two separate organisations and that no Member had received more than one SRA at any one given time. However, the officer undertook to pursue the matter and report back accordingly.

A Member raised concern in the column 'Amount Paid' that there were a number of areas where data was awaited and pointed out that this had also happened the previous year. He requested an assurance that this information would be received as soon as possible.

The Chief Officer Resources advised that this information was awaited from external organisations but when the final information was received both the Schedule of Payments and Schedule of Remuneration would be updated to reflect this. It was anticipated that this information would be received prior to formal publication of the Statement of Payments on the website and would be circulated to Members once received.

Another Member advised that the Gwent Police and Crime Panel had published this information on the website and the Chief Officer Resources undertook to pursue this.

A Member expressed concern that there was a disparity in the amounts claimed for travel allowances. The Chief Officer Resources

advised that this would depend on the individual claims by individual Members and was dependant on the number of journeys that individuals had to make in the course of undertaking their duties as a Councillor.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed namely, that the Statement of Payments Made to Members during 2019/20 be published, in compliance with relevant legislation.

40. FUNDING OPTIONS – ABERBEEG ROAD

Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director of Regeneration and Community Services.

The Leader of the Council advised in the absence of the Executive Member – Environment, that this report was primarily for information because it had been a matter of necessity that the work needed to commence on Aberbeeg Road as a matter of urgency for obvious reasons therefore, the Executive had taken this decision on behalf of Council. It was highlighted that the funding methodology was detailed in the report and that Option 2 had been approved.

A Member requested reassurance regarding the level of impact that the closure of Aberbeeg Road would have on the Covid-19 testing facility that was located in Cwm and asked whether it would have been more sensible to stagger the closure in negotiation with Costain with the Heads of the Valleys closure at Brynmawr.

The Corporate Director of Regeneration and Community Services advised that at the time the search for a testing site was being undertaken, the consultants had been advised of the pending road closure but they still felt for accessibility for the majority of the County Borough and wider than the County Borough the site was acceptable and they went forward fully aware of the pending road closure. In terms of reassurance, people were accessing the site and booking tests and it was fully operational at this stage.

In terms of the Heads of the Valleys (HoV) the impact of this was trying to be minimised but it had not been until a late stage that the Council

had received confirmation when the road closures on the HoV would be taking place. As soon as this information was received the Executive Committee was requested to approve the works to the Aberbeeg Road in order to minimise this impact. It was pointed out that if the work to Aberbeeg Road had not been undertaken until after the work on the HoV work it would have run the risk of heavy duty damage to that section road and it may have had to be closed. Once the work had been completed the road would re-open and become part of the diversionary route for the HoV.

The Corporate Director concluded by stating that the Council continued to work with the HoV team and would continue to try and minimise the impact that this and had done its best to avoid this. However, it may be a possibility that there may be an overlap of a couple of weeks between the two pieces of work.

Another Member referred to Option 2 and said that residents was concerned regarding the Big Arch project going forward and was seeking reassurance that as soon permission and commitment had been received from Cadw that work would on the Big Arch would commence within a short period of time and that the funding would also be reinstated swiftly.

The Leader of the Council gave an absolute assurance that this would be the case. The Executive Member for Regeneration & Economic Development whose portfolio the Big Arch covered had been consulted on this together with officers. Whilst the work on the Big Arch would not commence until 2021 and whilst applications for funding assistance had been submitted to Cadw if this was not forthcoming at the point in time work needed to be carried out, monies from capital programme would be identified and diverted into the necessary work and remedial action that needed to undertaken.

Although a contingency capital fund had been established instead of this being utilised immediately, the Council may be in a position in next 12 months for additional capital monies to be received by the authority and this would make the capital programme look healthier. The Leader concluded by providing a guarantee that the work to the Big Arch would be undertaken.

The Deputy Leader/Executive Member for Regeneration & Economic Development confirmed that the Big Arch had been one of the priorities

for a considerable time and whilst repairs were undertaken to the structure it remained a priority and the work would be completed.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and the decision taken by the Executive be noted, namely that:

The Executive had agreed to Option 2, to utilise the BGCBC Capital Programme Big Arch allocation (£1,000K) – this option was the preferred option on the basis that an application to Cadw for consent to undertake remedial works had been delayed and works could not progress until consent was awarded resulting in actual works on site delayed until July 2021/22 at the earliest. At this stage the funding would be reviewed / reinstated prior to Cadw approval and works on site. If Welsh Government subsequently agreed the flood funding for the scheme, then the £405K could then be ‘repaid’ to this capital allocation.

41. ANNUAL CYCLE OF MEETINGS 2020/21

Members considered the report of the Services Manager – Performance and Democratic.

The Leader of the Council said that this report demonstrated that from September there was commitment that the democratic process would return to some degree of normality. The following week Scrutiny Committees would meet to discuss forward work programmes in order that each Committee would be ready for their first meetings in September.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that:

- (i) The proposed annual cycle of meetings 2020/2021 be approved.
- (ii) The following decision making process to deal with any urgent business during the August recess be approved:

- a. the Leader and Deputy Leader in conjunction with appropriate Executive Members and Officers deal with any urgent items from 1st - 31st August 2020 (i.e. a Special Meeting of the Executive would be convened at short notice recognising that the matter was urgent and the call-in procedure would apply). The Managing Director / Head of Paid Service in conjunction with the Leadership would determine if a matter was urgent; and
- b. decisions should be limited to urgent matters and recorded on a decision schedule presented to the next Ordinary Meeting of the Council. No controversial or sensitive matters should be dealt with during this period.

42. STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Consideration was given to the report of the meeting held on 29th January, 2020.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED that the report be accepted and the information contained therein be noted.

43. STANDARDS COMMITTEE APPOINTMENT

Members considered the report of the Head of Legal and Corporate Compliance (Monitoring Officer).

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that

- the appointment of Mr. Francis Roy Lynch be approved; and
- the second vacant appointment which had not been filled be re-advertised.

44. MEMBERSHIPS REPORT

Consideration was given to:

- (a) **Aneurin Bevan Community Health Council**
- to appoint a replacement representative.

The Leader requested that expressions of interest be submitted if any Member was interested in taking up this vacant position.

- (b) **Advisory Panel for Local Authority School Governors**

The following recommendations were made by the Panel on 25th February, 2020 to appoint:

- Debra Fields – **Sofrydd Primary**
- Pat Smail – **Sofrydd Primary**

- (c) The following recommendations were made by the Panel on 10th July, 2020 to appoint:

- Claire Gardner - **St. Mary's CIW**
- Richard Bevan and Daryl Tovey - **Abertillery Learning Community**
- Joanne Davies - **Glanhowy Primary**
- Councillor John C Morgan - **Georgetown Primary**
- Councillor John C Morgan - **Tredeggar Comprehensive**

Upon a vote being taken it was unanimously,

RESOLVED that the above appointments be endorsed.

45. TIME OF FUTURE COUNCIL MEETINGS

RESOLVED that future Council meetings commence at 10.00 a.m.

46.

EXEMPT ITEMS

To receive and consider the following reports which in the opinion of the proper officer were exempt items taking into account consideration of the public interest test and that the press and public should be excluded from the meeting (the reasons for the decisions for the exemptions were available on a schedule maintained by the proper officer).

47.

SERVICE REVIEW

Councillor D. Wilkshire left the meeting at this juncture.

Councillors N. Daniels, W. Hodgins, L. Parsons, P. Edwards, J. Millard and H. Trollope declared an interest in this item but upon the advice of the Head of the Legal and Corporate Compliance remained in the meeting whilst it was considered.

Having regard to the views expressed by the Proper Officer regarding the public interest test, that on balance, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information and that the report should be exempt.

RESOLVED that the public be excluded whilst this item of business is transacted as it is likely there would be a disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 14, Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act, 1972 (as amended).

Consideration was given to the report of the Chief Officer Commercial.

The Chief Officer Commercial spoke in detail to the report which presented the findings and recommendations from the review undertaken in respect of Leisure and Culture provision and highlighted the salient points contained therein. The Corporate Director of Education (Interim) supplemented this information by providing details of the new Strategic Partnership Board and strengthened governance and structure arrangements.

It was noted that throughout the review process the Council and organisation had worked collaboratively and had developed a robust

business plan that had been checked for due diligence by financial colleagues. The Chief Officer Commercial concluded by outlining the options for consideration within the report.

The views of Members were, thereupon sought when Members commented that subject to the governance arrangements being strengthened, the preferred option detailed in the report was supported.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED that the report which related to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority) be accepted and Option 2 be endorsed, namely that Route B be pursued i.e.

A time limited contract extension period of five years with a break/review point at year 3 be provided. Using the proposed new governance structure formally reviewing the performance of the organisation's delivery of the business plan against the new specification and revised financial and management arrangement. Use clear checkpoints to identify risks and take action to mitigate those in a timely manner. If the organisation fully delivered to their business plan the Council would consider a further extension to the contract subject to a further review.

The Leader of the Labour Group commended the work undertaken by officers and Members of the Working in respect of the service review.

Due to the nature of their declaration of interest Councillors W. Hodgins and L. Parsons did not participate in the vote in relation to this item.

48. FESTIVAL PARK, EBBW VALE

Having regard to the views expressed by the Proper Officer regarding the public interest test, that on balance, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information and that the report should be exempt.

RESOLVED that the public be excluded whilst this item of business is transacted as it is likely there would be a disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 14, Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act, 1972 (as amended).

The Managing Director made the following statement prior to the consideration of the report.

Council would be aware that a press article, regarding this report and its recommendations, appeared in the South Wales Argus last Friday evening. This was an exempt and confidential report and it appeared, from the article, that the journalist was given a copy of the report.

The publication of the contents of this report had now introduced some significant additional risks for the Council – not least of which was the ability to negotiate a good commercial position and the reputational damage, to the Council, with our partner, and most notably Welsh Government.

As Managing Director, she had written to the Editor of the South Wales Argus regarding this matter. She also reminded Council that both Officer and Elected Member Codes of Conduct impose a duty of confidentiality on all and that the disclosure of this exempt report amounted to a serious breach of that duty.

The Managing Director advised that in making this statement today to impress on Council the impact of the action of sharing this report with a journalist and as a firm reminder that exempt reports must remain confidential.

The Leader of the Council supported the statement made by the Managing Director and said that he was aware first hand through discussions the level of disappointment, and anxiety there had been about this issue. Any individual who could do something like this with potential commercial and reputational ramifications had little or no

regard for the Council. He personally felt that this was a leak too far and said that there should be some form of investigation into this to attempt to uncover where this leak had emanated from.

The Deputy Leader of the Council concurred with the comments of the Leader and said that all Members and relevant officers should make the relevant electrical devices available as part of the investigation process.

The Leader of the Labour Group expressed his concern that some Members had external confidential information available on their devices and the particular organisation in question would not allow this to be accessed as part of the GDPR regulations.

Another Member said that this information had been in the public domain long before the report had become available to Members and officers the previous week. In addition, the Member of Parliament was also aware of the content of the report.

A lengthy discussion ensued when various views were expressed when one Member said that whilst he agreed with an investigation this needed to go back as far as December 2019 when people had first been made aware of the situation.

The Head of Legal and Corporate Compliance (Monitoring Officer) advised that the disclosure of a confidential report to the press was a breach of both the Member and Officer Code of Conducts and this was a serious matter. She noted the comments that had been made with regard to electrical devices such as laptops and advised these were Council devices and it would be perfectly proper and in order that such devices were part of any investigation. It was noted that data protection compliance and requirements would be considered as part of any investigation.

The Chair concluded by stating that any investigation would be left at the discretion of the Managing Director to conduct.

Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director of Regeneration and Community Services.

The Corporate Director spoke in detail to the report and highlighted the points contained therein. Approval was sought to enter into Heads of Terms negotiations for the purchase of the freehold of Festival

Shopping and associated premises and to consider accepting a surrender of lease from the current owners. In addition, to develop a business case outlining the uses and costs of the proposed development for consideration and agreement.

The Executive Member for Regeneration & Economic Development said that this was a huge opportunity in terms of regeneration and the development of a business case would be vital to achieve this. There would be linkages to other regeneration projects across the County Borough and there was an opportunity to redefine and consider the delivery of front line services and if and how they could be provided more closely to the residents within town centre hubs. Partnership working would also be key to deliver the vision and to take services forward.

The Executive Member proposed that a Working Group be established comprising of the Executive, Chair and Vice-Chair of Regeneration Scrutiny Committee and 2 Labour Group Members to help progress the business case. Consultation with other Members including Ward Members would take place at the appropriate juncture.

The views of Members were, thereupon, sought which were summarised below:

- Complaints had been received from residents regarding cold calling from the Council requesting information about shopping habits. The Member asked who had authorised this and requested an indication of the cost implications.
- There was a wider picture that had to be considered including the impact on the local economy. Blaenau Gwent received a considerable number of visitors and these visitors spent up to £55m per annum which contributed to the local economy and Festival Park was one of main reason to visit the area. This proposal would have a major impact on food, beverage and hotels outlets and concern was expressed that this level of revenue would not be available if there were no visitors. The Member requested that as part of any discussions, consideration should be given to the possibility of retaining an element of retail as part of the proposal as there to support the traders within the site and also the surrounding businesses that relied on this site to bring in tourism into Blaenau Gwent.

- All avenues should be explored in relation to the site including the parking restrictions at the site and transport links.
- Concern was expressed that the report provided little financial information.
- A Member said that his main concern was the reputation of the Council as the proposal was to use part of the site for office space. Whilst the report indicated that there was no interest in the site, no information had been provided detailing how the Council had tried to market the site. It was also pointed out that the Owl Sanctuary was in close proximity to the site.
- Concern was expressed that consultants had been commissioned to undertake this initial piece of work but the Council had the relevant expertise in-house to do this work which could have saved money.

The Corporate Director of Regeneration & Community Services responded as follows:

- The business case would provide further details in respect of the financial element of the scheme. In terms of the cost alluded to which was outlined in paragraph 5.1.2 of the report, this cost could potentially be shared with Welsh Government. The Corporate Director had been granted delegated powers to commission the specialists named in the report and to progress and explore the potential opportunity. This had been undertaken in consultation with the Executive Member.
- The inter-relationship between tourism and spend was acknowledged and this work would be linked and looked at in conjunction with the Valley Regional Park. In addition, the business case would also include details of the future of the tourism assets at the site.
- All economic development opportunities would be explored and there was a compelling reason and argument to look at the regeneration as a real opportunity and this should not become a missed opportunity. In terms of reputation this would be questioned if the Council had failed to act.

- Transport links had been included in the report and would be explored as part of the overall scheme.
- Discussions had taken place with the current owner's agents who had confirmed that prior to contact with the Council only one expression of interest had been received but the interested party was unable to complete.
- In terms of the cold calling of residents the Corporate Director had not been aware of this but undertook to pursue and advise the Member accordingly.

The Leader of the Labour Group requested that written answers be supplied.

The Executive Member for Regeneration & Economic Development said that in its current position there were more questions than answers and it was anticipated that the development of a business case would address many of these matters. He, thereupon, proposed that Option 2 be endorsed with the additional proposal to establish a Working Group to assist in the development of the business case going forward. This business case would then be submitted to the September Meeting of the Council for consideration.

In reply to a question regarding the involvement of Ward Members on the Working Group, the Executive Member advised that there would be opportunities to co-opt Ward Members onto the Working Group as it progressed.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED, subject to the foregoing, that the report which related to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority) be accepted and Option 2 be endorsed, namely that the following be approved:

- Option Two be taken forward and detailed negotiations commence with the current owners of Festival Shopping with a view towards agreeing Heads of Terms for acquisition of the site for refurbishment/redevelopment.
- A Business Case be prepared for acquisition and future use, for consideration by Council in September 2020.

- The costs associated with commissioning specialist external advice should be funded through the Council's Transformational Fund.
- Discussions with Welsh Government be taken forward regarding funding for any acquisition, refurbishment and redevelopment of the site.

FURTHER RESOLVED that

- a Working Group be established comprising of the Executive Members, Chair and Vice-Chair of the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee plus 2 Members of the Labour Group to work on the business case alongside officers.
- An internal investigation be undertaken into the circumstances surrounding the content of a confidential report being published within the public domain.