

Item which the Chairman has decided is urgent by reason of the need for Cabinet to consider the Scrutiny Committee's recommendations prior to the Council's August Recess.

Agenda Item No 11(i).

THE VALE OF GLAMORGAN COUNCIL

CABINET: 27th July 2020

REFERENCE FROM CORPORATE PERFORMANCE AND RESOURCES
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE: 15TH JULY 2020

“COVID-19 / CORONAVIRUS – WORKING TOWARDS RECOVERY (REF) –

The report had been included within the agenda pending its referral by Cabinet at its meeting on 13th July 2020. Cabinet had subsequently resolved that the report be referred for consideration by the Scrutiny Committee and although the reference from Cabinet was not yet available, the Leader and Deputy Leader were present for questioning by the Scrutiny Committee as required. The report provided an overview of the work underway to develop a recovery strategy for the organisation following the coronavirus pandemic and had sought Cabinet approval for the approach. The report was the latest in a series of update reports to Elected Members regarding the continuing Coronavirus pandemic and complemented the ongoing and regular communication and information sharing whilst the Council operated during the crisis

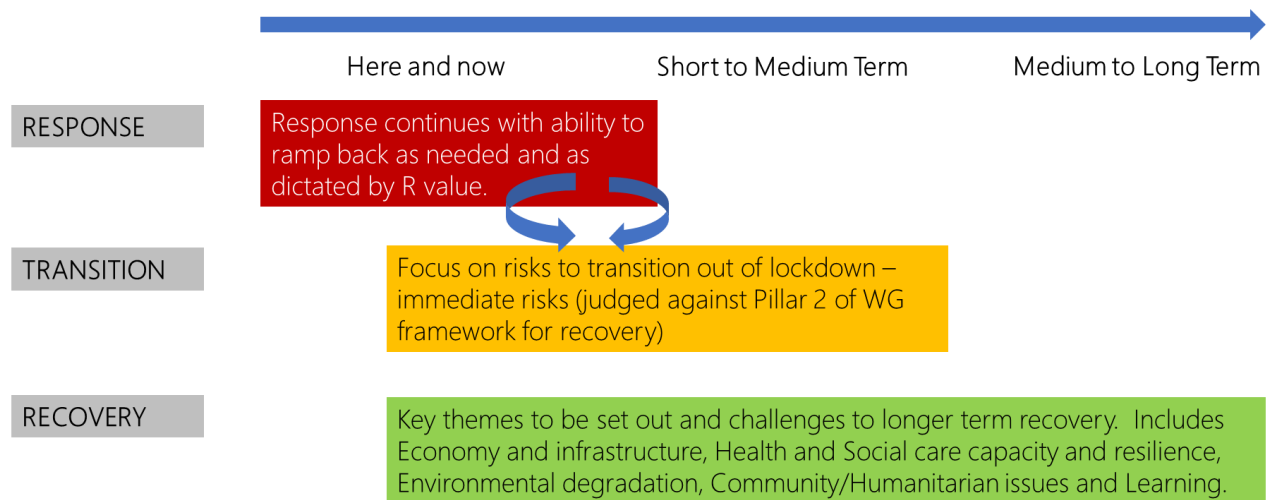
With the approval of the Committee a presentation was uploaded to the screen, which had been prepared as a summary of the report and which outlined key areas as follows: -

- From Response to Recovery
- Taking people with us
- Thinking about the challenges ahead and how we meet them
- Recovery update and next steps

It was suggested and agreed by all that pauses for questioning and comments by Committee members be undertaken following each of the above stages within the presentation. The presentation was to also be a joint approach between the MD and the Head of Policy and Business Transformation to Committee.

The Managing Director commenced by advising that the first section of the presentation was about the response objectives and ensuring that lockdown measures were in place in order to care for the most vulnerable. Members were informed that the Council had mobilised its workforce, the majority of which meant that staff were working from home and there was a huge amount of ongoing work across organisations. The initial activity within services to date had been on the Council's response to the Coronavirus, with the aim of the response phase being to reduce the transmission of Coronavirus whilst continuing to operate critical services

for those who needed them. The Cabinet report had also highlighted the Governance issues and arrangements that had been put in place for the Council.



The report to Cabinet had stated that in the short to medium term, services would begin to move out of response and into the transition phase. The managing of the transition phase would focus on moving out of lockdown in line with the easing of restrictions as set out by Welsh Government whilst recognising that services could not operate “as usual”. It was also always possible that changes made to the way in which services worked would be reversed and this would see a movement back to the response phase. The recovery work would commence in parallel with the transition phase for services and the phase involved the longer-term consideration of how the Council would work in the future. In referring to specific aspects of the presentation Members’ attention was drawn to the different phases within framework as illustrated in the figure identified below:

The Council’s crisis response objectives had focused on the following:

- “Care for our most vulnerable residents by ensuring the continuity of priority services e.g. social care, food parcels, childcare hwbs, homelessness;
- Maintain and manage our public spaces in general accordance with Welsh Government advice and objectives and having regard to local circumstances e.g. waste services;
- Ensure lockdown measures were in place, again in line with Welsh Government advice and objectives, and that such measures were regularly reviewed and enforced e.g. parks, resorts, enforcement, tannoy;
- Support our workforce to work flexibly and safely from their place of work or home e.g. PPE, guidance, working from home;
- Support our partners in their work e.g. UHB, PSG, WLGA;
- Help keep businesses sustainable by offering advice and guidance and administering financial assistance and support e.g. grants;
- Keep the Council running e.g. finance, governance, decision making;
- Keep people informed.”

The governance and decision-making arrangements during Covid had been as follows:

- The use of Emergency Powers process which was undertaken in consultation with senior politicians with decisions being published on a fortnightly basis;
- Regular communications with Elected Members and some virtual meetings e.g. Licensing Sub-Committee, School Admission Exclusion Appeals Panels and Planning Committee had taken place to date;
- Cabinet and the Scrutiny Committee itself had also taken place in July.

The Managing Director had also chaired Gold Command meetings which had initially taken place regularly 7 days, then 5 and now 3 days per week with an extended Corporate Management Team.

Committee was further informed that as a result of the response there had been a considerable amount of learning achieved to date, a number of services had continued in some form with notable exceptions such as schools in Learning and Skills and some Social Services such as day services. Face to face services had largely been suspended, office receptions had been stopped, there had also been an impact on the Capital Work Programme as works had been suspended and an impact on finance inbound call handling and collection rates had been seen. The Council had also operated differently throughout Covid-19 with digital working processes, video conferencing and data sharing taking place. Teaching and LSA staff had worked in different ways, for example digitally and with a changing emphasis on part of all roles to with a focus on wellbeing. Again as a result of the pandemic there had been different ways of working, digital learning for schools, libraries and adult education, the sharing of data and information across and outside the organisation, with staff also undertaking different roles and taking on different responsibilities, on line assessment processes had replaced paper and face to face and telephone discussions, PPE, crisis support and grants had also been made available. Many staff had been repurposed, red tape had decreased with an increase in risk taking and experimentation. Projects had been driven through at a pace, for example the Your Choice Project and Whatsapp had had a major impact. However, there were several areas that the Council could learn from and these were listed within the presentation and highlighted to Members as below.

- “Digital investment is required;
- Homeworking works but needs work –flexibility for staff, setup at home (e.g. space), kit, etiquette;
- F2F contact is missed in some scenarios –by staff and customers;
- F2F contact could be blended with digital offerings, rather than going back to F2F only;
- We cannot underestimate the impact ICT availability had;
- Need for training (especially in new areas –e.g. using video-conferencing);

- Need to join up decisions across the LA to understand impact of decisions on other departments;
- Potential for digital exclusion –especially socio-economically disadvantaged and elderly;
- People adapt very quickly (staff and service users);
- Office accommodation could be rationalised in the future;
- Communications and engagement with public and service users needed in design of services;
- Internal communication methods have changed. Staffnet+ seen as important;
- The working practices of now aren't what they will be, and not what they were;
- Policies need to be amended –e.g. home-working, meeting protocols.”

Another slide highlighted the demands and issues that were emerging which were listed as follows:

- “Need to profile / data to target interventions / services – the landscape has changed significantly;
- Using technology to truly collaborate, not just message;
- Increased Anti-Social Behaviour / Domestic Abuse;
- Social distancing arrangements – in workplaces and the public realm;
- Personal Protective Equipment for staff;
- Availability of materials / equipment due to supply chains stalling;
- Flexible working – expectations and working practices;
- Supporting the mental well-being of our residents and staff;
- Initial reduction in demand is now picking up again in many areas;
- There will be a further increase in demand at some point – e.g. courts begin operating again, government announcements;
- Increased staffing is going to be needed to safely undertake some functions;
- Office accommodation needs to be prioritised for those essential ‘F2F’ services;
- Repurposed staff and demands in ‘home’ departments.”

The Managing Director, at this point, advised that it was important that the Council considered the use of technology and took the opportunity to thank the ICT team who had worked tirelessly to ensure that staff could work from home.

The Council had also put investment into ICT connectivity. Work to ensure social distancing measures are in place in office and other buildings had been completed. There had been an issue initially in relation to the supply of PPE, but the Council had urgently sourced more supplies. A major focus for Gold CMT had been the consideration of staff's mental health and wellbeing. It was apparent, that working from home for some staff was a challenge with further challenges facing the Council being the increasing Government announcements being received and to be acted upon at a moment's notice. Although senior officials and Members had sought to be cited on any Government announcement earlier on in the process, such announcements were providing considerable workload for CMT and staff. Members were advised that it was important to note that it would take some time for staff to return to the office following any Government announcement, however, it was also noted that the Council may not be in a position to bring everyone back to the office for some time and indeed, whether this was an appropriate course of action to do so would need to be carefully considered in light of the lessons learned during the pandemic and ongoing.

At this point the Chairman asked Members for any comments on the information presented, a member took the opportunity to thank the Managing Director and the Head of Policy and Business Transformation for providing the update expressing particular thanks to all staff for the work undertaken to date noting that the work had been undertaken in similar fashion to other organisations throughout Wales. The challenge for the future he considered being how do we deal with ongoing Council issues whilst dealing with the return to normality. The Member felt that as a group leader although he had had communications from senior officers and politicians, he felt that there should have been a quicker "catch up" on at least a weekly or fortnightly basis as he felt he needed more information on what was happening on the ground and suggested that this be considered by Gold CMT as the Council moved forward. In particular, he referred to the number of deaths within the Vale and within care homes and stated that he would have appreciated an update on the impact on Council finances sooner in the process.

Another member although concurring in the main with the comments referred to the suggestion that a more detailed communication to Group Leaders system should have been incorporated as he was aware that Group Leaders in Swansea had developed such communication mechanisms early in the pandemic. In referring to the ability to undertake virtual meetings, the Member also stated that although the Emergency Powers system had proved effective, he considered that holding meetings was the way forward in ensuring that Elected Members made the decisions, not officers. The Member acknowledged that he understood the reasons why Emergency Powers had been considered as the most efficient decision-making process early on in the process, however for ongoing decisions, he suggested that virtual meetings be the mechanism for such decisions in the future.

Other Councillors also took the opportunity to thank the staff for their hard work in response to the pandemic, with a Member drawing particular attention to the work of Waste Management staff which he felt had been excellent throughout although

having spoken to a member of staff recently, it had raised concern about staff morale and pressure on staff. The Member also raised concern in relation to the fact that there appeared to be not enough staff to undertake inspections of contractors work which was in his view was essential in order to ensure the quality and quantity of work being undertaken.

A Member also referred to the need to provide Members of the Council with opportunities to query the effect of the pandemic on the Council's long-term finances and that they be informed accordingly.

The Leader of the Council, with permission to speak, stated that he too wished to take the opportunity to formally thank all the members of staff and indeed Elected Members who had been involved in keeping the Council's services working and in particular, referred to those working on the front line within Waste Services. In referring to schools, he stated that many vulnerable children had received free meals, Finance and Regeneration had come together with approximately £26m of grants being issued. The Council was logging as much as appropriate to the Covid Code in order to recoup any monies as a result of the pandemic from Welsh Government. With regard to staff working from home, a considerable amount of upgrading to the Council's infrastructure and ICT technology had been undertaken. this had all been achieved during a time when the Finance teams had been trying to close the accounts. The Leader further advised that Cabinet would also be receiving a report in this regard at its meeting on 27th July 2020.

Personally, the Leader stated that working from home had not been easy, very often he had commenced work at 8am and would not finish until well past 7pm. With regard to communications, he stated that all information had been made available on the Council website and that to date he had not received any requests from Group Leaders for any meetings or any further reports on any matter, however he advised Committee that he would be more than happy to speak with any Group Leader following any requests. The Leader also took the opportunity to advise the Committee that he was in contact on a regular basis with 22 Local Authority Leaders who were meeting and working together and meeting and discussing with Welsh Ministers on a regular basis.

In referring specifically to matters within the Vale of Glamorgan that had taken place to date the Leader referred to the incident at Ogmore that had been highlighted within the media, there had also been a number of problems in Council car parks and again a further report on such issues was to be presented to Cabinet on 27th July. In referring to the decision making process that had been put in place via the use of the Managing Director's Emergency Powers, the normal procedure had been amended in order to include that Deputy Leader, Cabinet Members, with their portfolio remit, and where appropriate, the Chairman of the relevant Committee had also been consulted. The Monitoring Officer, Head of Finance were also consulted as part of that process prior to the final decision being undertaken by the Managing Director. The Leader in conclusion, at this stage of the meeting, also wished to record his thanks to the Principal Civil Protection Officer for the Council, who, in his view, had been "absolutely superb" in managing the pandemic crisis from an emergency planning point of view. He further stated that if the Council had made any mistakes, he would rather be criticised for doing something than not doing anything

and again reiterated that all Members have the opportunity to call him or contact him via email whenever they wished to do so.

The Deputy Leader, with permission to speak, stated that she had made a number of points at the Cabinet meeting on 13th July, however also commented that there had been “huge levels of creativity and flexibility that had taken place to date” with staff working tirelessly and also without taking any leave during the lockdown weeks. The Deputy Leader also took the opportunity to congratulate the Schools Admission Team for the additional work they had undertaken in ensuring the provision of free school meals to the most vulnerable. With regard to PPE there was now a backup supply within the Council and supplies had also been provided to people within the community. With regard to the process for the 21st Century School Buildings Programme, the contractors had worked with the Local Authority and had developed skills on social distancing in order to keep children safe. The use of virtual meetings was a new experience for all she suggested and indeed was quite a learning curve.

There being no further questions, the Managing Director continued the presentation, referring to the focus on engagement and wellbeing.

The engagement sessions that had been planned prior to the pandemic had been cancelled, however during this period a wellbeing survey had been forwarded to all members of staff to gain an insight into a number of subject areas, for example health and wellbeing, senior leadership, line management support, communication and working conditions. It was noted that 1,126 responses had been received with an overall response rate of 44% of the current workforce. Of further note was the fact that 70% of the total respondents were currently working from home with the June workforce data suggested that around 48% of the Council’s workforce were currently working from home in some capacity or another.

A number of questions had been presented within the survey, for example “How worried are you about the impact of Coronavirus on you personally?”, with 70% being reported as somewhat worried. “How would you rate your mental health at the current time?” 47% said good or excellent with 11% saying very poor or poor. The survey also showed that 77% of staff felt they knew where to go for support regarding their health, safety and wellbeing and that 70% trusted senior leaders to make decisions that protected themselves and their colleagues. 54% considered that senior leaders of the Council had been sufficiently visible and accessible during the current situation. 55% indicated that they had had an opportunity to engage in two-way communication and 84% knew where to find information regarding the pandemic. 70% believed communication had been helpful and reassuring and 80% of staff felt they had been kept up to date and well informed. Advice for all employees continued to be updated to the Council’s StaffNet on a regular basis. 83% felt that their manager cared about their health and wellbeing and 91% felt that their line manager trusted them to do their job. 80% considered their manager kept them up to date and they were well informed regarding the Council’s response to the current situation. 87% also stated that their manager was accessible and frequently in contact with them when working and 80% also considered that they were aware and satisfied with the flexible working arrangements being made by the Council.

In response to a question regarding what were the top two biggest challenges you were currently facing while working, the first was noted as IT with the second being communication with co-workers.

At this point, the Chairman stated that he would like to see a more detailed breakdown of the information and the comments on the text boxes presented to a future Committee meeting to include an insight from an equality perspective. He also considered that Members needed to understand how the Council was managing vulnerable categories as well as details of the involvement of Trade Unions in the process. Having regard to the work of the Audit Committee, the Chairman suggested the Council needed to consider the impact of coronavirus in terms of corporate risk.

A member commented that as far as he was concerned, from the findings of the survey the Council should be proud of what they had achieved during the pandemic and that he had no intention to criticise what had been undertaken to date. He wanted to be part of the process and considered that all Members were involved in the same “storm” but obviously in different political boats. The Member also commented that in his view officers within HR should reconsider what the workplace offer looked like and that people received the right support when they needed it.

A Member also commented that they personally would have not liked to have been in the position that the current Leader found himself in dealing with such a pandemic, with the Member also expressing his appreciation with the communications that he received throughout the process. In particular he informed Committee that he was indeed pleased that he had voted for the budget earlier on in the year having regard now to the pandemic and the issues that the Council was facing.

The Managing Director stated that the main issues for him with regard to working from home centred around caring commitments, the environment staff worked within and wellbeing issues.

In referring to issues within communities the MD further advised that the main implications for the Council had been in managing opinions from communities. Some had considered the easing of lockdown should have been earlier in the process, however as this was Welsh Government legislation the Council had a duty to ensure that this was adhered to. As Managing Director, he had met with a number of organisations, including South Wales Police, Health Authorities etc where discussions regularly took place around how lockdown measures had affected antisocial behaviour as well as discussions of how all organisations could work together and move forward with the recovery process. For example, there were cross-cutting recovery teams looking at issues such as workforce social distancing. The MD also took the opportunity to advise Members of the work Headteachers had undertaken together as a team, which he had been privileged to witness. Future focus would of course be around schools returning in September, engaging with local traders and the challenge of hospitality reopening. It was envisaged that the hospitality sector would reopen indoors from 3rd August and that work was ongoing for arrangements to be put in place by that time. It was also evidenced that another main issue was around enforcement.

At this point the Managing Director stated that as the Council transitioned from response to recovery, it was time to think about the challenges ahead and how the Council should meet them. The transition objectives to be considered were noted on the presentation slide as follows

- “Ensure that the Council continued to manage and mitigate risks to the longer-term recovery and the easing of lockdown restrictions;
- Continue with the Council’s response objectives, within the context of responding to changes in lockdown arrangements, as necessary and appropriate. As an organisation the Council are on ‘stand by’ to refocus on its response should scientific evidence around the R value and WG advice demand it;
- Consider how the changes introduced in crisis response offer opportunities for long-term, sustainable change both of the Council and the communities it serves;
- Prepare and plan Council services and public spaces for the easing of lockdown with the health and safety of residents, businesses and visitors at the centre of that planning;
- Support the well-being of Council staff, Elected Members and residents, as the impact of Covid-19 continues;
- Communicate and engage with people and partner organisations in the design of our recovery.”

The MD stated that of importance was the fact that recovery was not seen as recovery to a previous state for all services, the recovery process would take a significant amount of time and be influenced by several significant issues which would not necessarily be linear. It was an opportunity unlike any other to fundamentally think about the way in which the Council operated and transformed. Although there was a great deal of uncertainty, he added there was also opportunity. and CMT and Heads of Service had worked to consider different time scenarios and high-level themes had emerged around issues relating to health and social care, community and humanitarian, public realm and public spaces, learning continuity, business economy and infrastructure and environmental. These cross-cutting areas would require effective involvement, engagement and communication, understanding partners’ issues, working together, and focus on the longer term whilst seeking to understand and prevent the root causes of issues.

A Member drew attention to the number of car parking issues that had emerged in Penarth, Holton Road and High Street in Barry and sought clarification on what engagement had been undertaken with businesses within these areas.

The Deputy Leader stated that this was a contentious issue and that it was a balancing act for the Council. She indicated that she personally totally understood the issues within Penarth; however, it was important to note that there were only 14

spaces that had been taken away to date and there were a considerable amount of car parking spaces that remained in and around the area. The Deputy Leader acknowledged the difficulties town centres faced as a result of the pandemic with the level of economic pressure being extremely significant. However, stated that it was important, from her point of view, to ensure that regular communication took place and that the Council needed to be as flexible as possible.

Councillor Rowlands, not a Member of the Committee but with permission to speak, stated that he had been led to believe ambassadors would be employed to work within town centres, but as far as he was aware this initiative had not been developed and having regard to the one way system that had been introduced in Holton Road, he had been advised by a number of traders that they had not been provided with any information in this regard.

The Deputy Leader advised that any initiatives took their time to bed in and that the public needed to be confident with their town centres and yes, she agreed that there should be some learning from what had happened to date, with regular discussions and meetings continuing to take place with traders and organisations as it was a shared approach that was required.

The Chairman also stated that he had received a number of referrals from traders and considered that an improvement in communications was important and that further opportunities should be explored for further discussions to take place.

The Managing Director advised that what the Council was currently doing had been the product of discussions that had taken place with all available organisations, and as things moved forward at significant pace and reactions having to be made very quickly, it was essential that all continue to be involved in the process, with the importance of communication / engagement being emphasised.

Other essential elements another Committee member mentioned that needed to be considered were equalities and accessibility.

The Chairman commented in his view, that the work that had been undertaken within Barry had been exceptional although further signage, particularly for people with disabilities, should be considered in all town centres.

Councillor King, not a member of the committee, with permission to speak, advised that he had himself been involved with a number of town centre recovery meetings emphasised the importance of continued communication.

In continuing with the presentation reference was made to a detailed session that had taken place with the CMT Gold team, the "Getting Real" slide that focused on new ways of working, consideration of old ways, what had been stopped, what had been started, what could end as a result of the response to the crisis, what new things had been considered to date and whether they could / should continue for the future and what services had been stopped in order to focus on the crisis.

In referring to the new Corporate Plan, the Head of Policy and Business Transformation stated that the new Corporate Plan for 2020-25 connected with recovery approach, with the Council aiming to work with and for its communities to

support learning, employment and sustainable economic growth, to support people at home and in their community and to respect, enhance and enjoy the environment. The CMT and Heads of Services' initial thoughts had taken the format of threats and opportunities as also outlined within the presentation and in respect of the four objectives. It was accepted that the strategic actions would form the basis of the recovery strategy and that these actions would be localised into Directorate Plans and cross-cutting Corporate workstream Plans. It had therefore been considered important that the next steps would be to identify the actions, to seize opportunities and mitigate threats, to document the recovery strategy in line with the Corporate Plan, to develop detailed recovery plans within Directorates and across corporate recovery streams with the intention to report to Cabinet and Scrutiny Committees as appropriate. A further draft report would be presented to Cabinet detailing the next steps and how the proposed recovery strategy would be formulated, together with the Council's ambitions.

Following consideration of the presentation and report, in conclusion the Chairman took the opportunity to thank the Managing Director and the Head of Service for their presentation and all staff for the hard work that had been undertaken to date, as a result of the pandemic He also expressed the view that officers and this he meant all staff had done very well given that many had to balance their working lives with their home lives. He also took the opportunity to thank the Democratic Services team for the support given to Members at this time. Although online and remote working arrangements were the way forward, he also considered that the need for personal meetings with social distancing also had a place.

Following consideration of the presentation and the report, the Committee unanimously

RECOMMENDED –

- (1) T H A T the contents of the report and its appendix be noted.
- (2) T H A T the approach undertaken in respect of the development of the Council's Recovery Strategy be noted.
- (3) T H A T a further update report be presented to the Committee, in due course, to include detailed qualitative and quantitative information, impact studies and alignment to the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act.
- (4) T H A T the discussions at the meeting be forwarded to Cabinet for its consideration having regard to Members comments relating to continued communications with organisations and Elected Members.
- (5) T H A T the report be forwarded to the Trade Unions within the Vale as well as all Elected Members, members of the Public Services Board (PSB) and Town and Community Councils.

Reasons for recommendations

(1&2) Having considered the update on the work being undertaken to develop the Council's Recovery Strategy.

- (3) To receive further updates in due course.
- (4) To ensure that the Cabinet is aware of the discussions of the Scrutiny Committee.
- (5) To ensure that other stakeholders are also provided with the information as key stakeholders.