

Education Skills and Culture Scrutiny Committee

(Via Microsoft Teams)

Members Present:

23 July 2020

Chairperson: Councillor S.H.Reynolds

Vice Chairperson: Councillor R.Mizen

Councillors: J.Jones, S.Miller, J.D.Morgan, R.Phillips,
M.Protheroe, S.Renkes, D.Whitelock and J.Hale

Officers In Attendance A.Evans, A.Thomas, S.Burgess, S.Blewett,
M.Daley, C.Furlow-Harris, T.Davies,
A.Manchipp, C.Davies and C.Plowman

Cabinet Invitees: Councillors P.A.Rees

1. **Recovery Strategy**

Members were presented with a draft strategy on stabilisation, the period between response and recovery, following the COVID 19 outbreak. The strategy set out a general framework that would support a consistent and co-ordinated approach as the Council moved towards recovery. It was noted that the draft strategy was being presented to all Scrutiny Committees for comments before presentation to Cabinet on 30th July 2020 for approval.

Officers gave a brief overview of the content of the strategy, explaining that it was split into three sections which consisted of looking back at what the Council did during the response phase of the crisis, looking forward as the UK moved out of the response phase and a road map of actions.

When looking back at what the Council did during the response phase, it was highlighted that a number of key actions were undertaken including setting up a seven day a week communication service so that guidance from UK Government, Welsh Government and Public Health Wales could be sent out as and when it was available. It was added that the Council closed down services to

assist in reducing the spread of the virus and changed the way some critical services operated in order to operate safely, for example the refuse service. Officers mentioned that the first part of the strategy also set out the changes that were made in relation to leadership and governance, including the use of the Urgency Action provision set out in the Constitution, to ensure that key decisions were still being taken during the response phase.

The second part of the strategy was explained to Members, which consisted of looking forward as the UK moved out of response phase into a stabilisation period which is the stage before moving into the recovery phase. It was explained that there were three areas identified as a focus as the Council moved forward:

1. The Test, Trace and Protect Programme
2. Standing up of Council services and functions
3. Understand and respond to the effect and impact that the virus has had on citizens, organisations and businesses across Neath Port Talbot

It was added that the second part also set out the changes required to be made in terms of leadership and governance, as well as some of the risks and issues identified that will need to be managed as the Council goes through the implementation of the strategy.

The third part of the strategy was presented as a road map of actions which was framed on the basis of a traffic light system, which set out how to move from a position of total lockdown, through the traffic light system, to a position where services are back up and running. It was noted that a number of services on the road map fall within the remit of the Education, Skills and Culture Scrutiny Committee.

Members asked for feedback on how the remote working with young people had been going, to which it was noted that the feedback had been positive, although the youth service had staff who were redeployed into the Safe and Well service, so the remaining staff had to manage the capacity within the youth service, therefore prioritised the most vulnerable young people. It was added that the staff completed weekly phone calls to ensure that the young people felt safe and had issues, with anxiety for example, addressed. Members were informed that a self-referral system was also set up for young people to use, so that if they felt under pressure they could self-refer

into the service. It was noted that Officers were satisfied with the level of engagement, however the benefits of meeting face-to-face with young people was missing.

Officers were asked if any details regarding travel arrangements for pupils had been confirmed, in particular if pupils would need to wear face masks on school buses and how the face masks would be purchased. It was stated that Welsh Government had published operational guidance for schools reopening in September, however some areas had not been developed to date, including home to school transport so the outcome was not known as of yet. It was added that the expectation was that if face masks were to be mandated, it would only be for pupils in secondary school (Key Stages 3 and 4) and not primary school pupils. Although Officers weren't aware of how the face masks would be purchased, it was noted that they were aware that approximately 3,000 secondary aged pupils were being transported every day, twice a day, therefore 6,000 face masks would need to be provided every day which estimated a significant cost of around £4million. The Committee was informed that once Officers were aware of the position of home to school transport in Wales, they would report back to Members.

The 'green' column on the Road Map was highlighted to be blank for early years, youth service and adult learning services, to which Members asked if this was due to no recent update from Welsh Government. Members also mentioned that they were aware that there had been an increase in mental health problems with young people and asked were there any considerations going forward to tackle these issues before schools opened in September.

Officers provided an update on the service areas mentioned, including the community learning services who were currently operating via Microsoft Teams and through other technological provisions, and due to the two meter social distancing measures in place, face to face delivery wasn't likely to be re-introduced any time soon.

In terms on child care providers, it was noted that there were currently 79 out of 129 providers operating in Neath Port Talbot (around 61%) but the need to ensure that all 129 providers are brought back to serve the communities where they operate from was highlighted.

In relation to funding, it was stated that the Council had two significant funding streams:

1. Summer support for vulnerable learners, which involves working with Social Services, schools and other agencies such as the police and health, to identify the most vulnerable learners. It was confirmed that £75,000 has been allocated to provide respite and other similar support over the summer.

2. Summer enrichment activities which will take the place of SHEP, as due to the current restrictions it would be difficult to run such an extensive programme. Instead, the summer enrichment activities will be provided from six of the Councils facilities over a fortnight and will be targeted at schools with a Free School Meal (FSM) profile of over 17%. It was confirmed that around £46,000 had been allocated to provide the activities.

Members noted that remote emotional health and wellbeing support for children was being provided and would continue over the summer for those who need it. It was added that the school based counselling service was still active, but was also being delivered remotely.

2. **Education, Leisure and Lifelong learning - Current Service Delivery and Recovery Planning (Presentation)**

Members received a presentation on the current service delivery and recovery planning from the Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning Directorate.

It was highlighted that throughout the lockdown period, Neath Port Talbot had provided a weekly payment of £19.50 to each registered child who was entitled to Free School Meals (FSM) to ensure that there was a significant and greater reach into the community. It was noted that previously, grab and go bags were provided, however they were only accessed by 20% of FSM pupils and now through the payment scheme, 95% of FSM pupils were accessing meals. Officers confirmed that to date, £1.1million in total had been paid out to eligible families and that this would continue through summer and possibly into the first fortnight of the new term.

As detailed in the circulated presentation, Officers expect that almost all members of staff would be able to return to work in September, although there were currently 12 teaching staff who were shielding. It was highlighted that risk assessments would be undertaken by each school to clarify the arrangements for the teaching staff who were shielding, being able to return to work in September. It was added that schools will go through risk assessments for all activities and the

risk assessments would be delivered sometime in late August (with a deadline of 27 August 2020).

In relation to inclusion and wellbeing, it was stated that support was given to pupils throughout lockdown; this was continued with the help of the Councils IT service, who put provisions in place very quickly and provided the teams with the essential equipment to allow them to be able to continue their service to the vulnerable children in Neath Port Talbot.

Officers highlighted that the inclusive service had worked closely with Social Services to develop the vulnerable learners register and staff had worked collaboratively as part of a multi-agency group, to discuss provision, address issues and ensure the register was updated on a weekly basis. It was added that this work was very important due to the concerns that staff had with vulnerable children at home; the register incorporated a RAG (Red, Amber, Green) basis of the children's risks and what support they were receiving on a weekly basis, so that staff were able to put sufficient support in place where it was needed.

A discussion took place in regards to leisure facilities which included libraries, Margam Park and Celtic Leisure. It was noted that staff had taken a very cautious approach in the re-opening of libraries and Margam Park and had at all times, followed guidance from Welsh Government. Officers highlighted the re-opening programme for libraries which was detailed in the presentation, as well as mentioning the re-opening arrangements of Margam Park, which was dealt with in stages.

In regards to Celtic Leisure, it was mentioned that on 17 March 2020, Members had agreed for a procurement process to be undertaken which consisted of finalising an invitation to tender for the provision of leisure services in Neath Port Talbot in line with the current specification of service and to embark on a tender process as detailed in the report; it was noted that the process was still ongoing and there had been a series of meetings with the consultant, which had been challenging to do remotely. It was added that 95% of the documentation was ready and that it was proposed to go to the market in September 2020, for a procurement to secure a new provider, with the intention of going back to Members in January 2021 for a final decision.

Due to the crisis, it was stated that putting plans in place to re-open facilities was very difficult as circumstances could change, however Officers stated that they had understanding that the First Minister would be announcing shortly that leisure facilities could re-open from 10 August 2020. Members were informed that Officers had asked Celtic Leisure for an opening plan, which would be split into phases and contain the necessary risk assessments; it was added that if the announcement takes place then the major urban facilities would open first and within a week, the valley and community facilities would be expected to re-open.

Cleaning and catering were highlighted to be key services in ensuring that there was confidence in re-opening schools safely and hygienically. It was mentioned that the processes would continue going into the autumn term, particularly in regards to PPE.

Members asked how staff established which pupils needed extra equipment during lockdown, in particular the Chromebooks and laptops. It was explained that schools had a great understanding of pupils needs, therefore had been making the decisions in regards to where the provision of the equipment was needed. It was mentioned that the additional investment, available through Welsh Government grant aid, meant that hundreds of laptops and Chromebooks had gone out to children. Officers highlighted that there were currently 1,500 laptops, iPads and Chromebooks in store, which would be provided to schools and there was a plan in place to order £1.3million worth of IT equipment from the same grant source. It was noted that discussions were taking place with schools to decide what equipment was needed, with secondary schools hoping to provide all children with a Chromebook to enable them to plan for continuous learning, however Officers mentioned that the cost of this would need to be established before this could be confirmed. In regards to primary schools, discussions were surrounding what level of provisions each key stage would need and it had been recognised that there was currently no need for all children to have their own piece of equipment.

Officers were asked if schools were in a position to cope with any new sudden changes of direction and whether they were expected to accommodate more blended learning, and if so could this be done with a quick turnaround. It was explained that the current expectation was that by 14 September 2020, all schools would have opened to all pupils, from nursery through to the end of key stage 5. Officers

highlighted that schools had recently opened the past few weeks, and attendance was around 55-60% of the pupil population; it was noted that the worrying aspect of this was that pupils entitled to FSM were not attending at the same rate as the pupils who were not entitled to FSM and from September onwards, assessments of needs for those children would need to take place. In relation to blended learning, Officers stated that what matters most is that technology is used as a platform to allow effective teaching to take place, and it should always relate back to the core principles of good learning which include strong engagement between pupils and the teacher, good feedback in terms of ensuring progress of learning and making sure next steps are planned based on the understanding of each individual pupil. It was added that these principles should be in place regardless of the method of how the teaching is delivered.

It was asked whether a date had been set for the reopening of the valley and community libraries, in particular for the access to their internet facilities. Officers clarified that a date had not been set at the moment, as previously mentioned a cautious approach was being taken in the re-opening of services and there were limitations around staffing due to some staff receiving shielding letters. It was agreed that Andrew Thomas, Head of Transformation, would find out further information in relation to the re-opening of the valley libraries and confirm with Councillor Del Morgan.

Members asked if there were any plans in place to re-open theatres in Neath Port Talbot. It was confirmed that there were currently no plans to open theatres, however there were plans to re-open the Gwyn Hall as a cinema facility on 17 August 2020. It was stated that it would not be financially viable to re-open theatres with current social distancing measures in place. Following on from this, it was asked whether there were any options to open facilities, such as Pontardawe Arts Centre, that could be used as community centres instead. Officers clarified that there was capacity to do this and it could be planned over time with significant risk assessments in place; however, all the staff at Pontardawe Arts Centre had been redeployed to the Test, Track and Protect service, which was a crucial service to support. It was mentioned that new staff were currently being recruited for this service, and as this was taking place re-deployed staff could start to return to their original jobs.

Officers were asked who facilitates the Aberavon Aqua Splash and were there plans for it to re-open this year. It was noted that Celtic

Leisure facilitates the splash park and had no plans to open it at the moment due to the time it takes for it to be commissioned (around three weeks), and the fact that the splash park closes for the autumn/winter in the middle of September. Officers highlighted that they had asked for re-opening plans from Celtic Leisure for all facilities and that a view would be taken when Officers were presented with these plans.

The high take up of the summer provision was discussed. It was noted that the first provision was targeted to around 150 children, based on the vulnerable learners register, who were most at risk according to the joint assessment. Officers explained that the provision was split into three sections, with the first being the most intensive which would include phone calls from Social Services and being brought out of the home on a daily basis and the third being targeted at those who would only need to be brought out of the home perhaps once a week and take part in more specific activities. It was noted that the summer enrichment programme targets year 5 and 6 pupils of the primary sector, with the potential to involve around 900 children. Members were informed registration for the programme was ongoing, however the take up was not as high as Officers had hoped, with the take up currently at around 50%. It was confirmed that Officers would be liaising with schools to contact the families of children to try and increase the take up, as the registration process would be closing at the end of the week; however, if the numbers had not changed significantly, the deadline could be extended to be able to target a broader range of pupils.

Members asked for further information on the current situation and future focus for Communities For Work (CFW) and the Rural Development Programme (RDP). Officers stated that they were very concerned of the impact of the crisis on youth unemployment and disengagement. It was noted that last year, there were 43 young people who were Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET), and Officers believed that this figure could increase by 300%. It was mentioned that Officers were concerned about a number of issues including the fact the young people hadn't been in school since the end of March 2020, would not be sitting their exams and would be receiving their grades based on teacher assessments. It was highlighted that grade inflation could have an impact on some pupils progressing into further education, as the WJEC and Qualifications Wales put an algorithm in place that looks at past performance of each school over the past three years, and if they believe that grade

inflation had taken place, they will deflate the grades. Officers also mentioned that the re-sitting of exams was not going to be as extensive as it had been in the past, as it was only going to apply to the core subjects and not the broader subject areas. Another concern was stated to be with the young people who would be seeking employment and/or apprenticeships in the labour market, as it was currently a very challenged market and young people weren't likely to get the same range of choice as they would have previously. However, Members were informed that Officers were working with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to set up a youth forum for the Local Authority, which will bring together the youth service, colleges and departments within the Council to try and maximise learning and employment opportunities for young people. It was added that they were also looking to maximise apprenticeship opportunities for young people including within the Police and Health sector.

Following scrutiny, it was agreed that the report be noted.

The Committee thanked the Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning service for all their hard work during the COVID 19 crisis.

CHAIRPERSON

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