

STATEMENT OF THE LEADER

AGENDA ITEM:

Covid-19 Update

In response to the significant increase in new Covid-19 cases in October 2020 across much of Wales, the Welsh Government decided to replace its local lockdown approach with a nation-wide, 'firebreak' lockdown, which lasted from 23rd October to 9th November 2020. During the firebreak period, the Test, Trace, Protect (TTP) programme in Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan continued to be expanded rapidly in order to respond to the surge in local cases, and the Council renewed its focus on managing the pandemic, delivering essential services and keeping both staff and local residents safe, which marked our initial response to the pandemic earlier this year.

The latest data indicates that the firebreak has begun to have a positive effect, with the rate of transmission on a clear downward path in Cardiff and Wales, although more time will be needed to assess its full impact. As of 18th November 2020, the rate of new cases in Cardiff stands at 161.4 per 100,000 over the last seven days, with the number of positive tests at 13.9%, down from a peak of 330.9 cases per 100,000 and a positive test rate of 20.3% at the end of October 2020. The Council will continue to work closely with its partners across the city to ensure that this progress is maintained as we enter the Christmas period and the potentially challenging winter months, whilst protecting businesses' ability to trade safely and effectively during this crucial time of year for the local economy.

Brexit

Given that any deal between the UK and EU will need to be ratified by both parliaments before the end of the calendar year, the window for both parties to reach an agreement is closing rapidly, with serious implications for Cardiff's export-reliant industries. The Council has therefore escalated work to prepare for any potential risks to service delivery and the local economy.

Businesses' lack of preparation for the impending changes to our relationship with the EU poses a key risk moving forward, which the Council is working to mitigate through a local communications strategy and continued signposting to information and support services for businesses. Additionally, the Council has been maintaining an open dialogue with key businesses and business representative groups, holding structured sessions to help prepare them for the imminent impact that Brexit could have on their competitiveness. From a service delivery perspective, the EU Settlement Scheme has been raised as an area of challenge, and an increased focus has been placed on

identifying and resolving the status of particularly marginalised groups: specifically, Children Looked After and adults who are supported by Social Services. An identification review is currently taking place across Children's and Adult Services, and the Council's EU Settlement Scheme Engagement Plan is also being revised to identify channels for digital engagement, in light of the current Covid-19 environment.

On 18th November 2020, the Resilience Unit hosted a webinar to alert all Silver Officers to the challenges of this winter and actions required moving forward to prepare for Brexit, whilst managing ongoing Covid-19 issues and typical winter pressures, such as severe weather and flu. To ensure that the Council effectively addresses any Brexit-related issues that may arise over the coming weeks, each Directorate has nominated a Brexit Liaison Officer, in addition to 'Duty' Silver Officers, who are on-call for one week at a time. Brexit Liaison Officers will be required to regularly monitor and update the relevant issues and mitigation outlined within the Council's Brexit Issues Register, and from 23rd November 2020, Duty Silver Officers will be responsible for completing a Winter Preparedness Report every day to note any issues. Duty Silver Officers will also be required to use the command and control system already in place, as outlined in the Major Incident Plan, to report real-time disruption requiring an immediate response, which includes contacting the Duty Silver Officer for Emergency Management.

Whilst a high degree of uncertainty will remain until the final outcome of the UK-EU negotiations is revealed, I am confident that the right measures are being introduced across the organisation to protect the Council, the city and our residents against the potential risks associated with Brexit.

Corporate Joint Committees

On 16th November, I attended a WLGA Leaders' meeting with Julie James MS, Minister for Housing and Local Government, where the Minister provided an overview of Corporate Joint Committees (CJCs), which was followed by a presentation from civil servants on their key features and the regulations. Now that the draft regulations for CJCs have been published, several officer and member meetings have been arranged over the coming weeks to explore their implications and work towards shaping the final versions. The consultation period on the draft regulations will last until 4th January 2021, and the Bill is expected to receive Royal Assent early next year.

Living Wage Week

On 9th November, I attended the virtual national launch event for Living Wage Week, which notably saw the introduction of the new real Living Wage rate of £9.50 per hour, an increase on last year's rate of £9.30. I appeared in a Cynnal Cymru video shown at the event, in which I promoted the real Living Wage in Cardiff, and subsequently gave an address on Cardiff's experience as a Living Wage City, the Council's innovative practices in this area and how this work has impacted the foundational economy in the region. In my speech, I also highlighted the Council's ongoing struggle to find a solution for paying the real Living Wage on our social care contracts. While this had already been a clear ambition of my Administration, the pandemic has starkly revealed the vital contribution frontline care workers make to our society, and I believe a real Living Wage pay rise for our care workers is more than well-deserved and long overdue. Unfortunately, the solution lies largely outside of our control at the moment.

On 13th November 2020, I attended a WLGA meeting to agree a joint response to a Care Forum Wales email calling on Local Authorities to introduce the real Living Wage across the social care sector from April 2021. Our response highlighted our total agreement in principle, but also explained that the current budgetary position of Local Authorities following a decade of austerity cuts and the massive losses incurred since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic had made delivering this necessary change impossible in the absence of significant investment from the Welsh Government. Given this reality, I hope that the Council, through the WLGA, will be able to work constructively with Care Forum Wales over the coming months to lobby the Welsh Government for the additional funding needed to resolve this longstanding challenge.

Universal Basic Income

In light of Jack Sargeant MS's recent Senedd motion calling on the Welsh Government to lobby the UK Government for funding to establish a Wales-wide Universal Basic Income (UBI) trial, I have written to the First Minister to open a dialogue and express Cardiff's interest in participating in a potential UBI pilot scheme. Whilst implementing a UBI trial falls outside of the Council's statutory powers, my Administration would be supportive of a UBI trial taking place in Cardiff in the future because bold solutions are needed to respond to the entrenched inequality and economic hardship facing far too many of our residents. Given that the emerging economic crisis risks significantly exacerbating this already precarious situation, the need for new ideas to improve our benefits system has only become more urgent.

Naturally, any UBI pilot scheme in Cardiff would require investment well beyond the Council's budget, meaning that the UK and Welsh Governments would need to contribute the necessary financial resources. In my letter to the First Minister, I therefore asked for clarification of the measures that the Welsh Government could take to progress this issue, such as a feasibility study to examine whether a UBI pilot is possible in Wales, in the first instance. I also confirmed that the Council would welcome any meeting with relevant Welsh Ministers and Government officials to discuss plans for a potential UBI trial in Cardiff.

Councillor Huw Thomas
Leader of the Council
19 November 2020