

# GWYNEDD COUNCIL CABINET



## Report to a meeting of the Cabinet

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| <b>Date of meeting:</b> | <b>15 September 2020</b>                                       |
| <b>Report by:</b>       | <b>Dyfrig Siencyn, Leader and Dafydd Meurig, Deputy Leader</b> |
| <b>Contact Officer</b>  | <b>Dilwyn Williams, Chief Executive</b>                        |
| <b>Title of Item:</b>   | <b>Covid-19 - Recovery</b>                                     |

### Decision Sought

To note the update on work being undertaken to stabilise and re-build as a result of the Covid-19 emergency.

### Background

1. In order to plan for what needed attention when moving forward from the Covid-19 crisis, in May, the Cabinet commissioned the Regeneration Board and the Supporting People Board to consider the fields that should be prioritised in terms of what matters to the people of Gwynedd for the period of stabilising and rebuilding that we are facing.
2. The boards were asked to consider the matter as they were already looking at the transformational changes that would build on the work of ensuring that we do the right things for the people of Gwynedd.
3. The Management Group was also commissioned to consider what corporate issues require consideration in the short and medium term as we move forwards to the "new normal" and to report back to the Cabinet if the need arises for a decision, as relevant.
4. The purpose of this report is to update the Cabinet on what has happened to date. In doing so, the Cabinet is given an opportunity to observe any element; any missing element and/or provide relevant instruction.
5. As part of the legislative arrangements for responding to the crisis, a Regional Recovery Coordination Group has been established to coordinate the efforts of the various public agencies as society moves away from responding to the crisis to stabilising and rebuilding.

6. Under the umbrella of that group, the Economic Ambition Board was asked to look at matters relating to recovering the economy across the region; and the Regional Partnership Board was asked to consider matters relating to care and health.
7. The Public Services Boards will also be expected to address those matters that relate to community resilience, accepting of course that everything is almost an integral part of that resilience.
8. There will be a need to ensure that we are in a position to be able to influence and feed in our needs here in Gwynedd into these work streams.
9. With this in mind, we outline below what the Boards have been considering to date.
10. It is intended to hold a collective workshop with all Cabinet members and Heads on 10 September in case anything has been omitted. We can report on any issues that arise verbally at the meeting.

### **The Council's Working Arrangements**

11. Obviously, the first step in any stabilising process is to ensure that the Council's usual services are available as soon as possible, however, when restarting, there is a strong argument in favour of taking advantage of any lessons learnt during the lockdown period and to incorporate these when restarting.
12. Welsh Government continues to advise people to work from home unless they are unable to do so.
13. We have carried out an assessment in relation to which officers are unable to work from home, but due to the Council's technological ability - there are very few in reality, and the intention is to bring those officers back into the office. We have also identified those where they need to return to the office in order to be able to recover any specific service. Again, we anticipate that these are very restricted numbers also.
14. Considerable work has been done to establish arrangements within the offices that will make them as safe as possible, but this means that the capacity within the offices will be considerably lower. This is not going to be problematic in terms of the numbers we are currently talking about.

15. We anticipate that any broader change will be subject to any change in the Government's policy, but accepting the above capacity restrictions regardless of the policy.
16. All of this will happen over the coming month or two, with a view to have all those services that can be recovered and brought back onto their feet. At the time of writing this report, the departments' note that most of the services are operating as normal or with adjustments to take account of the virus whilst the remaining services are unable to operate fully due to the social distancing rules where there is no easy answer to overcome that basic obstruction.
17. In terms of the political arrangements, virtual committee meetings are already being held with the Cabinet and Planning, Licensing, Pensions and Audit Committees already meeting. Over the next fortnight, the Chairs and Vice-chairs of the scrutiny committees will meet the cabinet members and relevant heads in order to consider the amended scrutiny programme for future scrutiny committees.
18. Arrangements are also afoot to hold a virtual meeting of the Council on 1 October.
19. In terms of the working arrangements within the Council, one of the lessons learnt during the period is that advantage can be taken of the technology in order to avoid travelling to meetings which releases officers' time and provides substantial benefits in terms of the Council's carbon footprint and the attempt to do more in terms of the climate change agenda. A protocol on holding meetings is being drawn up for officers at present and it is intended to create a parallel one for members.
20. Similarly, recent experiences have shown that there are advantages to have from extending the concept of working from home more permanently to some. Whilst there are arguments in favour and against the Council in doing so, on the whole, the scales are tipped more towards the argument of being more flexible in terms of giving staff a choice, particularly as obvious advantages have been highlighted by a number of staff in terms of their carbon footprint, their effectiveness and work/life balance.
21. We are currently drawing up a framework to note how this would look, with a view to conduct a staff survey to see whether they would be interested in making the arrangement of working from home a permanent one.
22. Considerable work is needed on this to ensure that the case for doing so is clear and we will report back to the Cabinet on this in due course.

## Regeneration Board

23. Before the lockdown period struck, the Regeneration Board was already investigating the concept of creating a regeneration plan for the various areas in Gwynedd with a view to create these plans by establishing what matters to the local community.
24. As a first step in that process, 13 areas were identified as a foundation for creating those plans.
25. The intention is for these plans to identify what matters as well as what can be practically done to work on this and who will achieve this. The hope is to have local ownership and implementation on those matters.
26. The crisis has not changed that aspiration but we are now starting from a different place, particularly considering the economic and social side-effects deriving from the crisis.
27. As part of this work, in July, a series of virtual meetings were held with members of the Council for the individual areas in order to explain the concept. Advantage was also taken of the opportunity to ask what the Council should be doing in the short-term to assist the communities to begin rebuilding.
28. The proposed direction was generally welcomed and the next step will be to commence a programme to hold the relevant conversations in the various communities. It will be impossible to do so for the 13 areas at the same time, and the intention is to establish a rolling programme to achieve that. We will report on this rolling programme to the Programme Board in due course.
29. When considering the fields that require attention, the Regeneration Board has established various work fields that have highlighted themselves as ones that require attention as follows and each field has a working group of officers to investigate what can be done to implement in those fields.
30. The fields in question are -
  - **Supporting Businesses** - to date, activities in this field have been focusing on providing short-term support to businesses by ensuring payments to eligible enterprises to Welsh Government's Business Grant Scheme and dealing with other enquiries and requests for Support from businesses. A campaign is being held under the umbrella of the Economic Ambition Board to obtain information about how Covid-19 has affected businesses in Gwynedd and to provide practical Support

for businesses as they attempt to implement and comply with the rules that exist in order to do so.

Work will now evolve to analyse the effects of Covid-19 on businesses and to consider the further interventions that the Council need to take in order to help businesses within the county.

- **Town Centres** - again, efforts to date have focused on the short-term efforts required in order to establish a structure on our streets to remind people to keep to social distancing rules and to offer solutions in those places where doing so would be a greater challenge. Efforts were also made to respond to local requests to change street arrangements in order to attempt to assist traders.

As we have so many different locations and the unusual pressures of higher than usual visitor numbers (and the need to keep them apart), it has been very difficult to cope with the situation. Our town centres were already facing challenges and a period of change, and it is likely that the consequential effects of Covid-19 will accelerate some of these changes. Attention will now turn to the medium term vision of how we can support and facilitate the regeneration of our individual town centres and we will need to consider whether we will create that vision as part of the area Regeneration Plans noted above or via any other procedure.

- **Tourism** - The Cabinet had already commenced the work of having an extensive conversation in an attempt to define what we mean by wanting sustainable tourism. The lockdown period halted that work, however, the experiences over the period has highlighted that we need to be clear regarding what we want to see happening in Gwynedd in the future in terms of sustainable tourism. Work is afoot to obtain the views of business people themselves before establishing the principles to be considered by the Cabinet.
- **Buy Local** - The Council's Corporate Plan already noted that we wanted to look to ensure that as much as possible of the Council's spending stays local. The crisis has highlighted that this is as important as ever if we are to assist Gwynedd's economy, and this work has now been recommenced. The officer working group is also considering how we can build on the tendency seen by some during the lockdown period to purchase locally and assist to tie this in with the reality that a number have also moved to purchase on-line. Thus, in the short term, there will be further efforts to encourage and promote local buying; with work in the medium term considering the opportunities to develop the Council's sustainable purchasing policies and operating arrangements.

## Supporting People Board

31. In the same way, the Supporting People Board has established work streams that are looking at the following fields -

- **Front-end Model** - one of the lessons learnt during the lockdown period was that many individuals needed assistance with their lives; that the nature of that support was different, in reality, in each case, and that it did not always fall under the definition of what authorities traditionally undertook. An army of volunteers were of course available to the Council during the period to achieve various things for individuals, but in terms of the Council's arrangements, we introduced arrangements where anyone could phone the Council and the first question was to try and identify an individual's problem rather than refer them straight away to someone else - in an attempt to solve that problem immediately. This new team was given free-rein to respond as needed to solve the issues in question.

In reality, these are the Ffordd Gwynedd principles at work in their purest form. The question is whether we should continue with a system of this type. A working group is looking at the lessons in depth in order to consider whether we should continue with a similar structure in the future and how we can do so, hand in hand with supporting the community effort if it is critical to it.

Arrangements for offering information, advice and assistance are included in the arrangements of the adults department and children's department and therefore we will need to carefully consider any change in terms of attempting to ensure that our arrangements are simple and effective.

- **Homelessness** - Over the lockdown period, substantial resources were received from Government to ensure that nobody was sleeping on the street and as a result of that investment, it is fair to say that we have tackled homelessness almost overnight by throwing resources at it. It is very unlikely that this level of resources will continue and we have a number of structural obstructions that need to be resolved if we are to be able to ensure that we do not slip back. The work in this field is developing a number of plans in order to address that.
- **Disadvantaged / Vulnerable Children's wellbeing and education** - obviously during the lockdown period, there was a genuine risk to the wellbeing of some children and where there could be a risk that they would fall behind with their educational development to fall behind even further. The Education Department is working with individual

schools to ensure that a system is in place to identify and act to assist anyone who falls within this category.

Another aspect of this work stream is to consider the experience that a number of families has had from spending more time together. In many examples, families have reported that the time together has been positive and that relationships are better. Consideration will be given to this to see how we can incorporate this learning into our arrangements when moving forward.

- **Financial poverty** - during the lockdown period, we know that 28% of the county's workers have been on the Government's furlough scheme and that a substantial increase has been seen in the number of Universal Credit claimants. We currently have plans that are evolving to respond to the increasing challenges faced in respect of employment and work is happening within this Working Group to consider whether there are risks for these schemes to end (as grants end) and whether the schemes we have respond to the actual need in the best way.

Financial poverty has also led to a number of households being dependent upon and using local food banks and schemes. We are looking at our current schemes to see if there are opportunities to divert resources to this area. Another aspect of financial poverty is the fact that more and more people are dependent upon benefits and easy access to financial advice and so, with our partners, we will look at any opportunities to rearrange ourselves so that we genuinely consider issues through the eyes of the citizen, rather than the nature of the intervention of specific functions.

- **Unpaid Carers** - over the lockdown period, the burden on unpaid carers will have been greater than ever. The working group is considering whether any further activity is needed on behalf of the Council in response, and if so, what should be done.
- **People who are shielding** - Over the lockdown period, with assistance from volunteers, the Council was very successful in ensuring that those who were shielding, but who did not have their own support network, were not left without Support or food. From 16 August, "shielding rules" have been eased but this does not mean that this cohort is less vulnerable. The working group is looking to see whether these individuals can suddenly look after themselves or whether there is a need for some kind of post-provision.

- **Digital Inclusion** - one of the things that happened over the lockdown period is that almost everything went on-line. This outlined the importance of digital competency and there are various aspects to this - the affordability of the equipment, the infrastructure to be able to gain access and the skills to use the equipment. This group is considering whether our current arrangements for intervening in these fields are sufficient or whether we need to do more.
  - **Equality issues** - obviously, we will consider equality issues as an integral part of everything associated with supporting people, but we are eager to consider whether there are any lessons to learn in terms of how we have been able to support people with specific needs over the lockdown period. Specifically, we are looking to see whether there are any issues in terms of the availability of information to our citizens that require further attention.
32. The above provides a taster of the activities that are taking place in response to those issues where we believe that consideration needs to be given to whether our response to the fields in question is sufficient or whether more needs to be done.
33. As the discussions evolve, I anticipate that the two Boards will consider those proposals and make relevant recommendations for the Cabinet's consideration.
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## **The Statutory Officers' Observations**

### **Monitoring Officer**

"The report reflects clearly the situation at this time. The remedial plan is undertaken in the context of a crisis which is evolving. Moving forward with the various plans, amendments to the regulations and legislation in relation to the crisis will have to be considered, and there will be a need for legal input and advice at that time."

### **Head of Finance**

"To date, much of the activity to respond to this crisis has been funded by the Welsh Government, e.g. Business Grants, and Homelessness. However, that was one-off money for this year only, and did not address every need. We will present a report to a subsequent Cabinet meeting setting out the unavoidable budget implications. In considering future remedial and improvement plans, the Boards will need to identify the permanent resources needed to take action in the relevant areas".