

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET

25 JUNE 2020

**SAFER PLACES – SOCIAL DISTANCING IN TOWN CENTRES AND
PUBLIC PLACES DURING CORONAVIRUS**

**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR FOR PROSPERITY AND DEVELOPMENT IN
DISCUSSION WITH THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL (COUNCILLOR A
MORGAN) & THE CABINET MEMBER FOR ENTERPRISE,
DEVELOPMENT & HOUSING (COUNCILLOR R BEVAN)**

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to update Cabinet on the action taken to assist our community to maintain safe social distancing when visiting our town centres and parks during the current COVID 19 pandemic.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Cabinet:

- 2.1 Considers the information provided and notes the action taken to date in response to the COVID 19 pandemic.
- 2.2 Request that the Group Director for Prosperity, Development & Frontline Services monitors the situation on a regular basis to ensure our town centres and public spaces are suitably safe, and in consultation with the relevant Cabinet Member(s), introduces additional measures and/or enforces measures where necessary in order to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 To provide a summary for Cabinet of the action taken since the COVID 19 restrictions were imposed by the UK and Welsh Governments and to prepare for the future re-opening of non-essential supplies and services, in particular within town centres.
- 3.2 To ensure that the Group Director for Prosperity, Development & Frontline Services, in consultation with the relevant Cabinet Member, expediently responds to introduce, change and/or enforce measures in town centres and public spaces where necessary in order to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 On 23rd March, the UK government announced unprecedented lockdown measures to stop the spread of the COVID 19 virus between households, changing the way in which everyone in the UK lives their daily lives. This resulted in an initial three week lockdown of the movement of people, forcing people to remain at home, other than key workers. More recently, some of these initial measures have been eased and there is an expectation that further restrictions will be lifted as the response to the pandemic is reviewed by the Welsh Government on a three weekly basis.
- 4.2 At the start of the lockdown there was a significant drop in the number of people visiting our main town centres but over recent weeks there has been a gradual increase.
- 4.3 In discussing the latest review of the lockdown measures, the First Minister has given a clear indication to town centres that they need to be prepared for the re-opening of 'non-essential' shops potentially as early as the next 3 week review, on June 15th.
- 4.4 For Members' information, officers have been supporting town centre business throughout the coronavirus pandemic through the distribution of government grants and through dedicated business support. The services of our 'Stay Well @ Work' team have been made available to the numerous small business to offer support in these difficult times. Dedicated pages have been developed for our website providing a 'toolkit' for shops to support the safe reopening of our town centres.
- 4.5 Our parks have continued to be in use during the lockdown period and have been used by our communities as part of their daily exercise regime. Members will also be aware that Ynysangharad Park reopened to the public on 27 May 2020 following the completion of repair works necessitated by the Storm Dennis floods in February.
- 4.6 This report sets out the measures the Council is introducing in order to enable increased numbers of visitors to return to our towns and parks whilst still maintaining social distancing to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The measures take account of the guidance issued by UK Government - *Coronavirus (COVID-19): Safer Public Places – Urban Centres and Green Spaces* last updated on 13 May 2020.

5. PROGRESS UPDATE

- 5.1 The advice from public health bodies remains that staying 2 metres apart reduces the risk of transmission of Coronavirus. The measures introduced in our town centres and parks enable the public to visit them in a way where social distancing can be maintained. Where the achievement of 2 metre social distancing is simply not possible, the

measures introduced do all that can reasonably be undertaken to reduce the risk.

5.2 The interventions have been planned on the basis of a ‘signs and lines’ approach and significant physical interventions and the closure of areas have been avoided wherever possible. The measures are designed to enable visitors to town centres and parks to exercise social distancing rather than to force it to happen and the continued cooperation of our communities in exercising social distancing will be critical in the success of the measures proposed.

5.3 The general principles of the ‘signs and lines’ approach is as follows:

Large banners at the entrance to our main town centres reminding of the need to stay two metres apart and alerting visitors that social distancing measures are in operation in the town (the signs are designed to demonstrate 2m width)



Posters in all available shop windows reinforcing social distancing



Posters stuck to litter bins and bus shelters reinforcing social distancing



Signs applied to the pavement, 2 metres apart, to delineate safe queuing distances where significant queuing is anticipated.



Priority to oncoming pedestrians applied to pinch points in town centres and parks where otherwise social distancing cannot be achieved



Also under consideration:

Where street width allows, lines and arrows applied to the footway setting out one way walking lanes to minimise pedestrians brushing past each other.

Where footway width allows, lines applied to the pavement separating space for the free flow of pedestrians from the space available immediately adjacent to shops to allow for safe queuing

- 5.4 None of our town centres are the same and each presents their own individual issues in terms of observing social distancing due to their size, configuration, role, traffic and parking and levels of footfall. As such not all of the measures set out above have been introduced in all of the main town centres
- 5.5 That said, consistent advice has been deployed across all our main town centres in the form of banners, shop window posters and stickers on street furniture and further examples are shown below:



- 5.6 Benches within town centres have the potential to attract groups of people in conflict with the principles of social distancing. The benches in our centres are not of a uniform design with different styles and sizes depending on the area they are situated. Some are sited on their own, whilst others are in groups or even back to back, each of these configurations presents its own considerations in terms of social distancing conflicts.



- 5.7 There have already been examples where people have been gathering in large numbers on and around groups of benches at the expense of social distancing.



- 5.8 It is recognised that benches present an opportunity for the elderly or less able to have a short rest when they are visiting our town centres. However, at present the overriding need remains the health and safety of the whole community and as a Council we must do what we can to prevent the spread of the virus through enabling and promoting social distancing.
- 5.9 As such, the decision was made to remove some of these benches in order to prevent people gathering in close proximity to each other. However, as can be seen in the example below, to mitigate the effect that this decision will have, we are now leaving some benches open in areas of our Town Centres and are placing a 1 person/seat signs, which will allow residents to use these facilities when required, whilst still maintaining social distancing.



- 5.10 There is continued dialogue between officers and our main town centre contacts such as the BIDs and Chambers of Trade around the measures that have been introduced. Any issues arising and updates have been sent to all businesses in the main town centres. Officers are also engaging with organisations such as RNIB that represent those in our community that are most affected by the removal of benches and the introduction of social distancing measures.
- 5.11 The operation and effectiveness of the measures will be kept under constant review and if and where it is evident that social distancing is not being observed then additional measures will be considered and where necessary deployed. Alternatively, where lockdown restrictions are relaxed in the future and the risk of the spread of the virus can be managed, consideration will be given to the removal of some of the measures and the reinstatement of benches.
- 5.12 In terms of our bus stops and bus stations we have introduced signage and are developing proposals to increase the pedestrian access and waiting areas at Aberdare and Pontypridd bus stations to enable bus users to maintain social distancing whilst waiting, boarding or alighting buses and moving through the bus station area. The public toilets in both these bus stations re-opened on 8 June.
- 5.13 There is a specific issue at the Catherine Street Bus stops in Pontypridd and measures will be implemented over coming Sundays to re-assign road space to widen the footway to allow queuing and through movement of pedestrians to take place. These bus stops will be promoted for journeys out of Pontypridd to reduce pressure on the bus station itself. Consideration is being given to introducing similar measures at Porth.
- 5.14 In terms of our parks, play equipment has been fenced off as a means of restricting the spread of the virus but the remainder of the wider areas of the parks are open. The larger parks such as Ynysangharad and Aberdare which attract greater numbers of visitors have been assessed and predominantly are being managed through the 'signs and lines' approach.

5.15 Social distancing awareness posters are being displayed extensively throughout Ynysangharad Park and also placed in the other large parks such as Aberdare and Dare Valley (see examples below). Social distancing awareness signs are also being displayed at the entrance to all other parks.



5.16 Benches in our parks tend to be in ones and distant from the nearest next bench, and as such, there is little need to remove them to maintain social distancing. However, in Ynysangharad Park; there is potential for gatherings on the numerous benches around the bandstand. The bandstand area is easily cordoned off and it was therefore considered that this is the best way to maintain social distancing. There are a small number of picnic benches in the park and these have been removed to promote social distancing.

5.17 Enforcement Officers from Frontline Services were on hand to monitor the reopening of Ynysangharad Park in case it became the subject of large gatherings but other than a small minority, visitors to the park maintained the principles of social distancing.

5.18 As outlined in 5.2 significant physical interventions and the closure of areas have been avoided wherever possible. However, as visitor numbers to our town centres increase there are some issues and areas that need careful consideration with a view to introducing additional measures where necessary.

5.19 For example, all of our main town centres currently have traffic flows and parking through the main streets which does have the effect of compromising the ability of pedestrians to maintain social distancing. One option is to reallocate some of the vehicle carriageway and/or parking bays to allow for a wider space for pedestrians to move through the towns. Similarly, pedestrian crossings could become areas where pedestrians gather in close proximity as they wait to safely cross the road. It is possible to reprogramme the light sequences to give

pedestrians more priority (and therefore reduce groups queuing) at the expense of creating more queues of vehicle traffic. This will be addressed on a case by case basis.

- 5.20 The current view is that these measures should not be introduced yet but the issues should be closely monitored and then targeted interventions only used where there is a demonstrable need to protect the ability for visitors to our towns to safely socially distance.
- 5.21 One other issue that will need to be assessed when pubs and cafes are allowed to reopen is open air tables and chairs. On the one hand sitting outdoors may be the safest way for customers to use such premises, however tables and chairs in the street have the potential to take away space that would otherwise allow pedestrians to maintain a safe distance.
- 5.22 At this time it is not considered that a blanket policy for all of RCT would be appropriate as street furniture could work in some cases where street width allowed but be wholly inappropriate in others. Members may be aware that a street furniture licencing scheme is in operation in Pontypridd and it is recommended that licences to deploy tables and chairs in the street is suspended for the time being and instead the operators of the premises will be required to demonstrate how they propose to safely reintroduce street furniture before they are allowed to do so. Officers will work with traders in the other main towns to develop a system where street tables and chairs are only introduced where it is safe to do so.
- 5.23 Officers are also exploring opportunities where open space can be dedicated as an area where visitors to towns can consume food and drinks they have ordered from cafes and coffee shops as an alternative to using tables and chairs directly outside the premises.
- 5.24 Welsh Government has invited Expressions of Interest for Emergency Funding to deal with social distancing, particularly around re-assigning road space to accommodate pedestrians and cyclists, and other complimentary measures. The Council has submitted a bid for over £2M of funding to introduce a number of potential measures;
- Implementing wide ranging 20mph limits across all town centres to make these areas safer for pedestrians and cyclists.
 - Implementing wide ranging 20mph limits outside up to 20 schools, which will extend into surrounding communities to make these areas safer, and to enable more pupils to walk, cycle or scoot safely to school.
 - Piloting the closing of roads to traffic outside 6 schools in the county borough to reduce congestion at schools, enable social distancing and to limit the attractiveness of the car as an option for school travel.

- Introducing real-time passenger information at our two busiest bus stations to enable passengers to have more information and assurance regarding their journeys.
- Introducing facilities to enable social distancing at our two busiest bus stations, and at two other busy interchanges, to enable bus users to access public transport safely and minimise car use.
- Introducing enhancements to a range of cycle routes to encourage cycle use.

5.25 Subject to funding being made available, a number of these initiatives could be implemented relatively quickly.

6. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

6.1 An EIA was carried out to support the decision to remove town centre benches. The considerations are summarised in 5.6 – 5.9 above. Officers are engaging with relevant access groups to assist in keeping the measures under review so that they remain proportionate to the overriding need to protect the whole community against the spread of coronavirus.

7. CONSULTATION

7.1 There has been continued engagement with town centre business groups. Overall feedback has been positive and the groups have welcomed the early engagement from the Council. Where specific issues have been raised this has been used to inform the ongoing deployment of the social distancing measures.

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1 Additional funding has been necessary to develop and introduce the measures. This over and above expenditure will form part of our wider claim to Welsh Government for reimbursement of COVID related costs.

9. LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

9.1 The measures have been deployed in consideration of the Coronavirus Legislation and guidance and the relevant highways legislation.

10. LINKS TO THE CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT

10.1 This is an information report on progress in responding to the COVID 19 pandemic. No decisions are being taken in this report.

11. CONCLUSION

11.1 This report has set out the actions taken to develop and deliver of a range measures to enable increased numbers of visitors to our parks



and town centres to remain safe through social distancing whilst we remain in the current COVID 19 national emergency.

Other Information:-

Relevant Scrutiny Committee –



LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

AS AMENDED BY

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

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Officer to contact: