

Dear colleague,

I hope you've had a good week and you are all settling into 2021, although the pace and pressure doesn't seem to be letting up at all!

Most of my updates over the past 12 months have primarily been focused upon our Covid response and it can be easy to lose sight of everything else that is going on in terms of our 'normal' service delivery. Despite all the pressures and challenges of the ongoing pandemic, we continue to provide a diverse range of services to our residents and this is something you should all be very proud of.

I wanted to use today's message to provide you all with an update on a number of issues that are 'hot topics' at the moment. As you know, one of the most important things we must do each year is to set a budget and I'm pleased to report that Cabinet approved the 2021/22 draft budget proposals at its meeting this week. The headline news from the report is that there are no new cuts planned for the next financial year, which is a welcome change to the difficult savings decisions that we have been forced to make over recent years. The draft budget was debated at an 'all Council' scrutiny committee last night. This was the first time that we have held an 'all Council' scrutiny meeting, as previous draft budgets have been considered via the various separate scrutiny committees. The scrutiny committee last night was held on a virtual platform too! I'm pleased to say that overall it went well and it is something that I will certainly consider using again, for cross cutting topics.

The Leader, Cllr Philippa Marsden, stated that she is proud of the way we manage our budget and expressed her thanks to staff at all levels across the organisation for the part you play in this process. More information about the budget proposals can be found here:

<https://www.caerphilly.gov.uk/News/News-Bulletin/January-2021/%E2%80%8BCaerphilly-council-unveils-%E2%80%98cut-free%E2%80%99-budget-prop>

The Cabinet also agreed a number of changes to current car parking arrangements, including the removal of charges at our beautiful country parks across the area. We recognise the importance of encouraging residents to use our parks for health and wellbeing, so once the current restrictions are lifted it will be great to see parking at these facilities free of charge in the future.

<https://www.caerphilly.gov.uk/News/News-Bulletin/January-2021/%E2%80%8BCaerphilly%E2%80%99s-Cabinet-scrap-country-park-car-parki>

Next week, brings the beginning of an inquest by the Coroner's Office into a number of deaths that occurred in a care home within our area a number of years back. The subsequent police investigation, entitled "Operation Jasmine", focused on events that happened some 15 years ago and the Coroner will hear evidence from a number of agencies. As you will appreciate this is a very sensitive matter but it is so important that the families of the bereaved have the opportunity to seek closure on these tragic events. The inquest is expected to last a number of months and I wish to remind you not to discuss any aspects of this matter if you are approached by the media. If you are indeed approached by the media, please refer them directly to Steve Pugh, Head of Communications. We, along with a number of other statutory

agencies, are fully co-operating with the inquest and acknowledge that families have waited a long time for these proceedings. I will keep you updated as this matter progresses.

Some other key areas of activity include:

- The next consultation stage of our 21st century schools programme for Trinity Fields and Cwm Gwyddon
- Some exciting progress being made on the development of the contaminated brownfield site at “Ness Tar” Caerphilly
- The development of our new Housing strategy
- The beginning of the next Local Development Plan (always a controversial matter!) – subject to the agreement of Council on 19th January.

The next scheduled ‘**Cwtch**’ is in the diary for next week and once again I would encourage as many of you as possible to join the Teams session at **12noon on Monday 18th January**. This will be a Wellbeing themed session and we will be joined by a guest speaker from Chrysalis Mindset Coaching who will provide us with some useful insights and advice. [Click here to join](#)

Finally, I wanted to reflect on the very positive exposure that we have received this week thanks to our amazing Free School Meal provision. I’m sure many of you would have seen photographs posted on social media showing the meagre offering provided to families in some parts of the UK. These have been contrasted against the generous meal packs that we have been providing since the start of lockdown and we have received widespread praise for our efforts. I know I have said it many times before, but the effort of everyone involved in the distribution of our free school meal service is outstanding and it’s so pleasing to see this thanks being echoed at a national level over recent days. It’s just one of the many examples shown over recent months that we are a Council that really cares.

So keep up the great work and please stay safe.

Take Care
Christina