

Dear Colleague,

Thank you to everyone that joined the Digital Cwtch last Friday. It was great to have so many of you engaged in the conversation. If you couldn't make it, you can view a recording of the session on the link below;

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f3CL5bbyASM&t=12s>

As we weren't able to get through all of the questions you submitted during the session, I have responded to each one and they are detailed below.

The next Digital Cwtch is scheduled for September and I am considering whether we should create a themed session, for example an education themed meeting in September. I would welcome your thoughts on this approach, as I said in the Cwtch, I will be guided by staff about how you want these sessions to run. It is important for us to engage and connect with one another across as many platforms as possible. If I don't hear from you, I will give the themed session a go and we can review it from there.

So, onto the questions:

#### **Question**

*We talk about being open and honest and regaining trust, but why was no statement released about Cllr. Poole, why did we have to find out from the Caerphilly Observer again.*

#### **Answer**

Following Cllr. Poole's decision to step down as leader of the council, after referring himself to the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales, as well as the council's own Standards Committee for further investigation, an email was sent out from myself to all staff the same day. Further updates were issued thereafter, when Cllr. Barbara Jones stepped into the position of Interim Leader. I am sure you will appreciate the seriousness of the matter and the pending ongoing independent investigations taking place, so it would not be for the organisation or indeed myself, to offer any comment regarding the Ombudsman's ongoing investigation, at this time. This does not stop the media running stories on such matters, as they see fit. As you know I strive to keep everyone as updated as I possibly can but sometimes I am limited as to how much I can share, as sometimes investigations, legal requirements, etc. require that matters remain confidential. My understanding of the latest Caerphilly Observer article is that it did not offer any new information that staff were not already aware of.

#### **Question**

*How many people or proportion of the workforce will benefit from agile working?*

#### **Answer**

Agile working is a very broad term, it doesn't just mean home working, and it certainly isn't a one size fits all approach, as I fully appreciate that some services need a base and as such are not able to work remotely. However, working closely with managers we are able to offer a more flexible approach in many cases, and

different patterns and approaches to service delivery can be developed. As I mentioned last week, it is another tool in our box we can use to manage how we deliver services whilst managing our home/work life balance.

**Question**

*I purchased my own chair will I be compensated?*

**Answer**

I have been clear in my messages that should staff have the necessary equipment to undertake their role. If you discuss this matter with your manager, this can be worked through.

**Question**

*What plans are in place to ensure children have the technology to continue home learning?*

**Answer**

Welsh Government dedicated a fund of £3m across Wales to support those digitally excluded learners. These are considered to be students who do not have access to an appropriate internet connected device. Schools directly contacted parents to check what equipment was needed to continue home or blended learning and this was addressed at a local level.

**Question**

*After Mark's comments about money what does this mean for future budgets and staffing levels across the authority.*

**Answer**

To add some context to this question for those who weren't able to join the session, Mark's comments referring to money was in response to someone asking about the barriers we face when creating the 'ultimate dream Caerphilly'. Before the pandemic, as an authority, we were in a very strong position financially, thanks to robust financial management and planning. However, it is clear that not just as an authority but as a country and nation we will suffer the financial impact that the Coronavirus has brought. It is an extremely difficult and pressured time at the moment and the last thing I would want is for staff to be worrying unduly. We are in a strong financial position, and we are developing a medium term financial plan which will set out our future path. This will require us to focus on every penny we have, which is what we have been doing for many years already. As we develop the plan, I will update you along the way.

**Question**

*The Volunteering scheme is drawing to a close, how is Caerphilly gearing up to respond to the challenged posed by our most vulnerable communities.*

**Answer**

This is an interesting question, as many of you will know the Volunteering scheme has been a huge logistical operation that has supported our most vulnerable at their time of greatest need to access shopping and medical supplies. That support has continued throughout the last few months and I am so proud of the Team Caerphilly

effort. A report has recently been submitted detailing how the support will continue and reshaped working with partner organisations. You can find the full report here: <https://democracy.caerphilly.gov.uk/documents/s500003090/Ymateb%20cymunedol%20-%20Cysylltur%20Gymuned%20-%20cynllun%20cyfeillion.pdf?LLL=0>

### **Question**

*Are there plans to unlock the digital world for some of the more vulnerable residents of the borough now libraries have closed (no access to Wifi Spark) Some don't have a device, don't have internet or if they do, they don't always know how to use it or use it safely. This would help them if we have a second lockdown to do online shopping etc.*

### **Answer**

This is another good question and one that has been posed at Welsh Government level. There will be a budget allocated to support those residents but then it becomes a challenge at a more local level about how best to deliver that funding. We have a proven track record of supporting the digitally excluded through a range of initiatives like Digital Friday's hosted within our libraries, when they were operational, and when they reopen, this service will resume. I have no doubt that we will adapt our service to suit the new landscape. I don't have the specific answer to this one at the moment, but I can assure you it is on our radar. Furthermore, if you have any ideas, I'd certainly welcome them.

### **Question**

*Will there be reviews of how the authority can restructure certain sections where services have not been able to be offered during this time and are they going to be needed in the future or done in different ways?*

### **Answer**

As you have heard me say so many times, constantly reviewing what and how we do it is a key requirement for us to strengthen our authority. Whilst we had already made great strides to implement our transformation strategy over the past few years, we have accelerated so many of those aims and objectives over the past few months alone. We were forced to react and adapt to continue to deliver frontline service and that's exactly what we did. We are working on a "lessons learned" piece of work with each department and managers are already looking at how they can operate their service over the next few months. We have also recently sought approval for the Cabinet to undertake a series of corporate reviews, which over time will reshape our Council to meet the new demands and challenges we face. As this develops there will be lots of communication to keep you updated and engaged throughout.

### **Question**

*Hello, with schools not running breakfast clubs and after school clubs not being available (for now anyway) has this been considered in relation to those staff with children how they manage work/family life etc.?*

### **Answer**

We do not yet know whether these services will be operating in a matter of weeks or months. The situation changes so rapidly, we didn't think schools would return until after summer but they did so. However, as you say for now they are not running, but

I think over the past few months both staff and the Council as an employer have shown a great deal of flexibility when balancing work, childcare and other caring responsibilities. So please do speak with your manager about your specific needs, as I'm sure we can work them through together.

**Question**

*Will we mark this historic time with a time capsule for future generations?*

**Answer**

I think this is a great idea! I think I would like to task the Youth Forum with this - leave that one with me!

**Question**

*My section is not permitted to use flexi. We are told 7.24 no exceptions, even though managers know we are working longer hours and we have been told by our managers flexi is probably going. Other sections in the council are allowed to accrue flexi. There is no uniform approach and it is breeding animosity.*

**Answer**

I want to make this clear, as I know many staff are concerned around the flexi position. There is no change to the flexi system. All I have put in place, is a requirement to speak with your manager, if you are going to be working additional hours, as I want this managed and balanced, to ensure your overall health and wellbeing is not compromised. Ongoing contact and conversations between employees and managers is essential to properly support agile working. I cannot and will not have officers, working themselves into the ground, during these difficult times, so this is one of the measures I am putting in place to manage this. Flexi is not gone and there are no plans to remove it. What I will be doing over the next few months, is taking a look at how the flexi system can work alongside an agile working model. This review may suggest some changes and if this is the case, this will be communicated with you and appropriate consultation will take place at that time, which will of course include the Trade Unions. Further to your comments about it is not permitted within your team. The needs of the service must come first and your manager has a responsibility to ensure the appropriate systems and processes are in place. If you feel there is animosity within the team, I would urge you to discuss this with your manager and Head of Service in the first instance. If then you still have concerns, please contact the Head of People Services.

Take Care  
Christina