

Economy, Residents, Communities and Governance Scrutiny Committee

Meeting Venue
By Teams

Meeting Date
Thursday, 18 June 2020

Meeting Time
3.00 pm



County Hall
Llandrindod Wells
Powys
LD1 5LG

For further information please contact
**Wyn Richards, Scrutiny Manager and
Head of Democratic Services**
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10-06-2020

Mae croeso i chi siarad yn Gymraeg neu yn Saesneg yn y cyfarfod. Rhwch wybod pa iaith rydych am ei defnyddio erbyn hanner dydd, ddau ddiwrnod gwaith cyn y cyfarfod.

You are welcome to speak Welsh or English in the meeting. Please inform us of which language you wish to use by noon, two working days before the meeting.

AGENDA

1.	APOLOGIES
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To receive apologies for absence.

2.	DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST
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To receive any disclose of interests by Members relating to items to be considered at the meeting.

3.	DECLARATION OF PARTY WHIPS
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To receive disclosures of prohibited party whips which a Member has been given in relation to the meeting in accordance with Section 78(3) of the Local Government Measure 2011.

(NB: Members are reminded that under Section 78 Members having been given a prohibited party whip cannot vote on a matter before the Committee.)

4.	SCRUTINY ITEMS
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4.1. **Reopening of Libraries**

(Pages 3 - 8)

4.2. **Grass Cutting**

(Pages 9 - 12)

5.	WORK PROGRAMME
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The next meetings of the Committee will be held as follows:

02/07/2020	14.00 – 15.00	Items:
16/07/2020	14.00 – 15.00	Items:
30/07/2020	14.00 – 15.00	Items:

Potential items for consideration:

- Regulatory Services
- Support for Businesses
- Contact Tracing
- Ongoing work of Homelessness Cell
- Enhanced active travel arrangements (cycle lanes, pedestrianisation of streets, places for people to walk safely)

Update Information arising from previous meeting:

- Valuation Service – valuation of new businesses

4.1

CYNGOR SIR POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL.

CABINET EXECUTIVE

Date 19th May 2020

REPORT AUTHOR: County Councillor Rachel Powell
Portfolio Holder for Young People & Culture

REPORT TITLE: Phased approach to re-opening of libraries in Powys

REPORT FOR: Decision / Discussion

1. Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to outline a phased approach to the safe re-opening of libraries in Powys during the coronavirus pandemic.

2. Background

- 2.1 On Friday 8th May 2020, the First Minister for Wales announced that Councils across Wales can now plan towards the re-opening of libraries and waste recycling centres as a first phase of easing lockdown measures.
- 2.2 Particular concern was expressed around issues of rural and digital isolation, as the reason for including libraries in the first phase.
- 2.3 The Health Protection (Coronavirus restrictions) (Wales) 2020 regulations were amended on 11th May 2020, to permit public libraries to open subject to the requirements to take all reasonable measures to ensure a distance of 2 metres is maintained by persons on the premises and persons waiting to enter the premises. In addition, that visiting a library constitutes a reason for the public to leave their homes, under regulation 8(1).
- 2.4 The reason for this report is to consider ways in which some library services could be re-introduced in Powys in a phased manner, with the safety and wellbeing of staff, volunteers and residents at the heart of the approach.

3. Advice

- 3.1 The service believes that a 4 phased approach could be taken to re-opening libraries in Powys, as follows:
- 3.2 **Phase 1:** click-and-collect/order-and-deliver non-contact model, with public access to designated areas for collection only by appointment (secured foyer). Quarantine periods for handling books built in and social distancing measures, including signage and good hygiene methods, strictly endorsed. To be offered from 6 main libraries across Powys initially (Newtown, y Gaer, Llandrindod, Llanfyllin, Machynlleth and Ystradgynlais). Staff will continue to promote use of the e-resources as the preferred method of accessing books and information. This phase could be introduced in early June 2020, there is no defined timeframe at present as confirmation of quarantine periods for books from Public Health Wales is required. Advice from H&S colleagues has been received. The order and deliver model would aim to tap into the current volunteer structure operational within communities, which could be critical to its implementation.
- 3.3 **Phase 2:** There will be limited access to library buildings by appointment for essential computer use and council enquiries only. Strict social distancing and hygiene protocols will need to be in place. This phase will include a review of building layouts and require furnishing adaptations. Advice and support from Property colleagues and the Property Cell would be essential. No timescales for implementation suggested at this stage as this will require further and careful analysis in view to risk/benefit.
- 3.4 **Phase 3:** introduction of browsing shelves. Numbers entering the library building to be strictly limited, one-way systems introduced, and self-service to be used wherever possible. No timescales for implementation. Strict hygiene principles and clear instructions for the public in view to book loans and returns.
- 3.5 **Phase 4:** full opening and re-introduction of activities and events with an additional awareness of need and reflections on improvement for the benefit of communities as well as partnership working. Future model of delivery to mirror community need. No timescales as the service recognises that constant reviews at every stage will need to be carefully analysed.
- 3.6 Museums Archives and Libraries Division of Welsh Government (MALD) support the phases above across Wales, and some funding is to be made available to support operating costs. MALD would like to see all authorities moving at the same pace for phase 1, with a national communication strategy, but acknowledge that it is a

decision for each local authority dependent on local circumstances and community need.

4. Resource Implications

- 4.1 Any phased reopening of libraries will be subject to the availability of staff, many of whom have been redeployed to other critical work. Phase 1 would require lower numbers and would aim to be implemented with the least disruption possible. However, it may be necessary to request the return of some staff to the service in order to complete this.
- 4.2 Additional cleaning would be required. Phase 2 onwards may require a cleaner on-site during opening hours, therefore, this would need to be carefully understood in view to cost, resource and also the safety of staff and the general public.
- 4.3 Phase 2 onwards would require adaptations to buildings and furniture. For example screens at reception, booths around computers, single-use covers for keyboards and mouse etc. This work would need to be supported by Property colleagues and contractors. This will need to be carefully analysed in view to community need and the preference will always be virtual support, however, it is recognised that some members of the public may not be able to access information independently, through a digital form.
- 4.4 Phases 2 onwards also require cashless solutions for printing and copying payments if possible.
- 4.5 MALD have indicated that some budget will be available to authorities to support re-opening costs, but with no indication of amounts to date.

5. Recommendation

- 5.1 The recommendation is that phase 1 (click & collect/order & deliver) is implemented once the Public Health Wales guidance on quarantine periods for books is confirmed, in order to boost mental health and wellbeing of residents as well as identifying current need.
- 5.2 If approval for Phase 1 is given, the Service aims to work with staff, colleagues and partners to ensure robust procedures are put in place, supported by Risk Assessments and guidance in order to protect staff, community volunteers, as well as the public from Covid 19.
- 5.2 That the library service works towards phase two, and develops clear plans with corresponding implementation costs. Future implementation as well as timeframes to be subject to review, taking into consideration the ongoing situation with regard to Covid19 cases within Powys as well as community need.

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Head of Service: Nina Davies

Corporate Director: Nigel Brinn

CABINET REPORT NEW TEMPLATE VERSION 2

Dear Councillors,

Galw a Chasglu / Call and Collect library services

As a cautious first step to restarting library loan services in Powys, Cabinet has agreed to trial Galw a Chasglu / Call and Collect non-contact book loans. Residents who are unable to use the Borrowbox e-books or e-audio downloads will be able to fill in a webform on the Powys County Council website, or contact the library service on 01597 827460 or library@powys.gov.uk to request a selection of physical books within broad interest areas. Library staff will select books to order, using 6 bases across the county as distribution centres, and the packages of books will be collected and delivered to readers, with quarantine periods, social distancing and hygiene measures in place. The order lines will open on 15th June, with the first collections ready for distribution from 22nd June 2020.

The safety of residents and our staff is paramount in this development, and 72 hour quarantine periods for the books are built into the system, following advice from Public Health Wales and guidelines from the Culture and Sport division of Welsh Government. Similar schemes are being introduced in all library authorities across Wales during June. Library buildings will not be open to the public in any way in this first phase of easing lockdown in Wales.

The library service will be working with Library Friends groups, PAVO and the fantastic community response teams to deliver books to residents, particularly those shielding. We hope that you will also be actively involved in making sure that people in your wards are able to use the service, either personally or by putting the library service in contact with delivery support groups in your areas. Books will be issued for 1 month, then automatically renewed if not returned, so no fines will be charged.

Use of the e-book and e-audio download platform (Borrowbox) remains the best option for new library reading materials, and the library service staff will help with online membership and any set-up issues, through library@powys.gov.uk Welsh Government has made significant investment in extending the range and number of titles available for residents at any time of day or night.

We will be closely monitoring the impact of the Call and Collect service, and if there is any suggestion that it may be contributing to community infection, it will be withdrawn. However, a thorough risk assessment has been carried out, and we believe that the system proposed is safe, and that fresh reading materials will be of great benefit to the health and wellbeing of many of our residents. Priority will be given to the most vulnerable, particularly those clinically shielding.

For further information, please contact kay.thomas@powys.gov.uk

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4.2

ROAD VERGE MANAGEMENT IN POWYS

Road verges and wildflowers - a delicate balancing act

There are approximately 5,500 km of surfaced roads in Powys and road verges, often termed the 'soft estate', form a significant part of the highways network. The soft estate comprises all areas of land lying between the edge of the tarmac road surface and the boundary of neighbouring land, including ditches and drains. Verges provide valuable habitat for many kinds of wildlife and are highly valued both for their sheer diversity of flowering plants and the visual impact they create. Powys County Council as the local highway authority is responsible for their management to ensure the carriageway remains open and safe to use by everyone whilst taking into account their considerable wildlife value. Trunk roads are the responsibility of Welsh Government and are managed by the two Trunk Road Agencies that cover Wales. Powys County Council currently undertakes the management of trunk road verges as instructed by the North and Mid-Wales Trunk Road Agency.

In the good old days...

In the first half of the 20th century, much of the countryside was much less intensively managed and hay meadows were common. As the farmers took an annual hay crop in summer, 'lengthsmen' would also take a crop from the neighbouring verges. Many UK verges were also grazed by livestock. This type of management suits the needs of many wildflower species and the diversity of our meadows and verges flourished.



...the situation today.

Increased emphasis on livestock production in the second half of last century resulted in traditional meadows being replaced with more productive pastures. Today verges often remain as the last vestiges of species-rich grassland and the pressure on their conservation is considerable but their management has also changed. The advent of flail mowers, which are quicker and more cost-effective than hand cutting, mean that the cuttings or 'arisings' are left on site. The resulting mulch suppresses the growth of some native wildflowers leading to a loss in overall plant diversity. Diversity also declines as nutrient levels in the soil increase through runoff from surrounding land and atmospheric deposition. Vigorous, coarser species, such as hogweed, dock and nettle, thrive in these conditions at the expense of many other native wildflowers.



Why can't we go back to the management of 'the good old days'?

Many verges would almost certainly benefit from returning to 'traditional' management, i.e. a summer cut with the arisings removed. However, increased traffic volume and speeds pose a significant safety risk to both those working on verges and road users, for instance when cuttings are being raked off. Prolonged verge working usually requires the use of traffic control resulting in reduced traffic flow and increased congestion. Use of grazing animals is also impractical for the same reasons, in addition to the undesirable presence of vehicle pollution and litter.

It is possible to use large-scale cut-and-collect machinery on some verges but disposal of cuttings is problematic. Currently, the number of appropriately licensed, sustainable composting or other disposal sites is insufficient and there are considerable costs incurred in transporting material to sites, payment for disposal and securing the required environmental standards for use of the final product as compost, agricultural soil improver, etc. Any material used as animal fodder would also have to reach an acceptable quality and be free from potentially harmful substances. All this is potentially achievable but it is unlikely to happen without sufficient time and resources being available for development of a practical, cost-effective scheme.

Why cut road verges at all?

The County Council has to balance the need to conserve remaining species-rich areas (and preferably increase them) with managing fast growing vegetation and preserving safe access and use of the highway itself (including access to ditches, drains and other structures). Vegetation type and growth varies from area to area but generally many verges today have summer vegetation of sufficient height to reduce forward visibility markedly on bends and hills. In certain places vegetation also flops out into the



carriageway, particularly after rain, obscuring the edges of the road and reducing the width of the carriageway. This can be especially problematic for cyclists and pedestrians. Vegetation growing outwards on hedgebanks along narrow lanes can also significantly reduce the accessible width of the carriageway. It's also worth remembering that without some degree of regular cutting on all verges brambles, gorse, bracken and tree saplings soon begin to establish and the grassland habitat is lost as over time it naturally evolves into woodland.

Why not wait until wildflowers have finished flowering?

Plants typically put on most growth during spring and early summer. The precise date that cutting starts depends on the start of the growth season and can vary by two or three weeks between years. The earliest cutting is targeted at areas within the county where spring growth is most vigorous and major roads are targeted first. Delaying cutting in some areas can cause the problems described above meaning that cutting just before or during the flowering period is sometimes unavoidable. This is not a complete disaster for all wildflowers as many meadow plants can flower at a reduced height later in the season. Many meadow plants are also perennial (flowering each year) meaning that as long as a proportion can set seed every few years the population will survive. However, for annual

plants (growing and flowering for one year only) that only grow from seed shed the previous year, a reduction in number over time is likely. Interestingly, recent research also indicates that delaying cutting until very late summer rather than earlier may well result in a decline in plant diversity, which is converse to common conservation practice. Some other implications of delaying cutting include

- Restricting cutting to a much shorter period in the summer requires more machinery and manpower to cover the network, leading to increased costs.
- Later cutting of taller, denser vegetation in late summer takes longer to cut than short grass and so may also have notable cost implications.
- Later cutting results on a coarser mulch on the verge.
- Some very diverse verges also have species of flowers blooming from early spring right through until late summer meaning it's difficult to find a 'right-time' to cut!

What about the bees and butterflies?

While it is not practical to leave all verges uncut until late summer we can identify the flower-rich areas that will benefit a range of pollinating insects and protect these as Road Verge Nature Reserves (RVNRs). We can also try to identify which verges may only require cutting every two or three years because the plant growth rate is very slow and soils are poorer. It's also important to recognise that although road verges play an important part in supporting insects, on their own they cannot compensate for the large-scale loss of flower-rich meadows and grasslands. It isn't feasible to conserve all our verges as the main source for pollinators, particularly given the constraints to suitable management, although they play a significant part. Everyone has a role to play in restoring and creating additional suitable habitat on their own land.

How do we conserve the remaining flower-rich verges?

There will be areas within the county where cutting can be delayed without causing significant visibility and safety concerns. The problem is identifying which parts of the huge road network this applies to! It's unlikely to apply to a single road for its entire length (apart from some upland sites) but to intermittent stretches here and there. Resource constraints mean that prescriptive management is prioritised to verges identified as being botanically important or of a particular value to a local community. Botanically important verges (or those important for other wildlife such as glow-worms) that meet specified criteria and pose no significant visibility or safety concerns are managed as Road Verge Nature Reserves (RVNRs). Locally important verges are those that support protected and nationally and/or locally important plant species and/or support a particularly diverse range of plant species (including grasses, sedges, rushes and ferns). There are currently over 100 RVNRs across Powys managed by the County Council in partnership with the three Powys Wildlife Trusts.



A Road Verge Nature Reserve along a Powys trunk road.

How do I get a road verge near me designated as a Road Verge Nature Reserve?

We keep our system of RVNRs under constant review and are always happy to consider adopting new sites. If you know of a road verge that may qualify as a RVNR you can request a survey (to be done in the spring or summer) by contacting the County Council's Biodiversity Officer (see 'Contact details' below). We also have several RVNRs designated for interesting fungi, mosses and lichens they support. Appropriate surveys for these can also be arranged.

Contact details

General enquiries about verge maintenance	<p><u>Local Environment teams</u> (0845) 602 7035 highways.and.waste@powys.gov.uk</p>
Report a potential Road Verge Nature Reserve or request more information on RVNRs.	<p>County Council Ecologist (01597) 826939 biodiversity@powys.gov.uk</p>
Become a volunteer RVNR warden.	<p>Brecknock Wildlife Trust 01874 625708 enquiries@brecknockwildlifetrust.org.uk</p> <p>Radnorshire Wildlife Trust 01597 823298 info@rwtwales.org</p> <p>Montgomeryshire Wildlife Trust 01938 555654 info@montwt.co.uk</p>