

The Highland Council

**Skye, Ross and Cromarty Area Committee –
4 February 2015**

Agenda Item	9
Report No	SRC-012-15

Council Emergency Response to recent Storms and Electricity Outage

Report by Head of Policy and Reform

Summary

This report provides information on the Council's involvement and reaction to the recent storm and power outages affecting large areas across Skye, Ross and Cromarty.

1. Background

- 1.1 Highland Council along with other responders forms part of a Highland and Islands Local Resilience Partnership. This in turn is broken down into 5 Emergency Liaison Groups (ELG). Ward 11 (Skye) sits within the Skye and Lochaber ELG while wards 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 sit within the Ross and Cromarty ELG ie Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh; Cromarty Firth, Tain and Easter Ross; Dingwall and Seaforth and the Black Isle. The ELGs are chaired by Police Scotland with representation from other emergency services such as Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS), NHS, Scottish Ambulance Service (SAS) and other organisations as appropriate to the circumstances, such as Red Cross, Scottish and Southern Electricity (SSE), Marine and Coastguard Agency, Mountain Rescue etc.
- 1.2 On Thursday 8 January 2015 severe weather warnings were received and SSE indicated that there was potential for a significant number of power outages. As a result, initial ELGs were called on the Thursday to determine extent of potential problem and to ensure all necessary actions were implemented at an early stage. These were led by the local Police Scotland Inspector and included attendance from Highland Council (with several services represented), SEPA, SSE, SAS, NHS and SFRS. Each of the ELG meetings ensures a comprehensive and shared understanding, that all relevant personnel are available and are appraised of the current situation in readiness.
- 1.3 In addition, the Highland Council Chief Executive called a multi-service meeting to ensure that relevant services were aware of the situation and had the required response available. This grouping continued to meet 2-3 times per day from Friday – Sunday and predominantly involved officers from Community Services, Care and Learning and Chief Executive's.

2. Emergency Response

2.1 As predicted storms swept through the Highlands from Thursday throughout most of the weekend and caused a large number of power outages across Highland. Wider impacts of the storm are summarised as follows:

- large areas of Highland were left without power or telephony (both mobile and landline);
- some areas suffered from water supply difficulties;
- numerous Council and trunk roads blocked by fallen trees making it difficult for SSE engineers to access power lines;
- several Council facilities including County Buildings in Dingwall and Tigh na Sgìre in Portree suffered loss of power (although the latter has a back-up generator) and loss of telephony;
- sustained bridge closures hampered repairs by SSE and provision of generators / catering units to Skye;
- the Bealach na Ba road and Moy Bridge were closed on a number of occasions due to drifting snow and flooding respectively;
- the aftermath of some storm damage is still being rectified including the B9163 Newhall Bridge near Balblair on the Black Isle which was badly damaged by a falling tree and is still closed to vehicular traffic (planned to install a new temporary bridge within the next 2 weeks to allow the road to reopen). There was also extensive damage to Fodderty Cemetery due to fallen trees. Tidy-up work is ongoing and likely to take some time

Further poor weather from 10 – 16 January exacerbated the situation with rising temperatures leading to extensive flooding (caused by a combination of rainfall and snow melt) making numerous roads impassable and leading to flooding concerns at many properties.

2.2 A swift multi-agency response to these impacts was mobilised. The activity outlined below highlights some of the major response but does not do justice to the huge efforts made by a wide range of partners and by the small army of community volunteers which mobilised across all the affected areas:

- key staff mobilised to attend ELG meetings either by phone where available or decanted to a suitable building which had power eg Dingwall Police Station;
- communication with the Council workforce was maintained through the Airwave system;
- additional Service Centre staff were drafted in and worked extended hours to manage the high volume of calls generated;
- due to a power failure at the Service Centre in Alness, staff were relocated to the Emergency Bunker on the Saturday to ensure continuity of service;
- Community Services squads were deployed to remove trees and debris from roads, clear drains, provide sandbags and deal with

other problems as they arose – they also continued to provide a full gritting and snow clearing service, in many cases continuing right through the day;

- throughout the period, duty staff (manual and office based workers) worked throughout the night on several occasions to deal with emergency situations, with other staff working extended hours to deal with the volume of incoming calls.
- staff involved in direct work with sheltered tenants organised phone call checks, home visits, delivered flasks of hot water, food, blankets and carried out welfare checks;
- housing staff volunteered to be available out of normal working hours to support activity/attend emergency centres if required;
- in addition to the engineering response to the outages, SSE provided catering units in Kyle, Dunvegan and Uig over the weekend to deal with the loss of power
- representatives from Community Councils helped to identify individuals who may welcome support
- local businesses provided hot food and other supplies as necessary
- reception centres opened at Dunvegan and Fortrose and staffed by a mixture of Council and Red Cross volunteers
- NHS and the Children and Families teams were able to identify most vulnerable people and were able to maintain checks to ensure they were coping with the conditions;
- the Red Cross delivered an exceptional support service to the agencies and communities and were able to help staff reception centres, check on vulnerable people etc.
- access to free shower facilities at Highlife Highland premises was very welcome

2.3 By the end of the weekend, most houses across Skye, Ross and Cromarty had been reconnected to the mains power although small groups of houses across the north west remained without power until Tuesday night. However, the recovery phase can take some time and potentially can have a knock-on effect in terms of delivering 'business as usual' particularly for resource intensive matters such as snow, ice and flooding.

3. Issues raised during the incident

3.1 Officers and affected residents raised a number of issues that affected them over the period of the power outage.

- The main issue during the incident was the ability to communicate with affected residents. Mobile phone signals were down for a period and any individual who did not have a standard phone also had difficulty in communicating. Highland Council and its partners in the ELG used a variety of methods including Twitter and Facebook feeds, website updates, and the SSE help desk to deliver information regarding hot food and community support reception centres. News releases were also issued frequently but this was of limited benefit as both Radio

Scotland and MFR news desks run limited operations over weekend periods. However, it was noted that although some community radio stations were off air due to power and transmitter faults, others were able to provide good local information to listeners.

- ELG members had issues regarding accessing e-mail due to VPN issues around the mobile phone signals. However the use of BT Meet me facilities over landline ensured that the ELG members could meet when required.
- With most houses now having some sort of central heating many households no longer have access to portable gas heaters or other independent heating devices. This provided many households with difficulty in keeping warm.
- It was recognised that a key area of activity is in identifying vulnerable people at an early stage and also recognising that people can become vulnerable at different stages. A resilient community can help considerably in this area where individuals not known to agencies may still be known to the community and can therefore receive the appropriate support.

4. Conclusions and lessons learned

4.1 At this time the Council and its ELG partners have still to undertake a cold debrief which will cover many of the issues faced across Skye, Ross and Cromarty as well as the other areas of Highland. Interim measures have been put in place with staff ensuring circulation of lists of all staff who possess access to BT Meet me accounts (or are piloting the Lync system) has been provided to ensure ELG members have the widest access to meeting facilities whether at home or elsewhere.

Without doubt the greatest challenge is how best to communicate with communities when there is a loss of power and telecoms and the solution could differ in each area. This will be a key point for review by each of the ELGs.

However, it is apparent that Council staff (and those of other agencies), third sector charities, businesses and community volunteers demonstrated incredible commitment and should be applauded for their energy, enthusiasm and resilience.

Recommendation

1. Members are invited to comment on the Emergency Response during the power outage.
2. Members are asked to consider how best to communicate issues and services to affected communities during future incidents.

Date: 22 January 2015
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