

The Highland Council

Caithness & Sutherland Area Committee – 10 February 2015

Agenda Item	4.
Report No	CS/01/15

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 of both Caithness and Sutherland.

1. Background

1.1 Highland Council along with other first responders form part of a Highlands & Islands Emergency Planning Group. This in turn is broken down into 5 Emergency Liaising Groups (ELG). The North ELG covers Caithness and Sutherland. Members of this ELG are Police Scotland, The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, Highland Council, NHS, Scottish Ambulance Service, SEPA.

1.2 Thursday 8 January 2015

Following severe weather warnings and indication from Scottish & Southern Electricity that there was potential for power outages a North ELG was called on the morning. This was led by the local Police Scotland Inspector and included attendance from Highland Council, SEPA, SSE, and NHS. The purpose of this meeting was to ensure all relevant personnel were on call and appraised of the current situation in readiness.

2. Emergency Response

2.1 Friday 9 January 2015

- A North ELG was convened at 9:30am with all the first responders in attendance along with SSE. At this stage it was unclear as to the extent of the power outages and the main issues at that time were fallen trees causing blocked roads. Community Services were stretched for a time but dealt well especially in opening key roads. The NHS through the ELG highlighted issues with renal patients coming to Caithness General due to the blockage at Oldhall. A partial clearance was made allowing ambulances and patient transport.
- A second ELG was held at 2:30pm to update partners on the situation. The extent of power outages was a changing situation but it was clear that some residents would be off line for the rest of that day. SSE confirmed that they had deployed mobile units for hot food to the Lybster and Halkirk areas. Hot food was also being arranged in other locations through local suppliers and hotels. NHS confirmed they had

made contact with vulnerable persons and SSE also made generators available to those identified at risk. In Castletown, three elderly residents had to be moved to respite care in Thurso due to raised concerns about their situation from Housing Officers.

2.2 Saturday 10 January

The North ELG met again in the afternoon and decided it was necessary to open Community Support Centres in both Thurso High School and Dornoch Academy to support areas experiencing some of the most widespread outages. These were to provide short term support and practical assistance to people affected by the emergency but who were able to remain in their own homes.

- In Thurso support took the form of providing hot food and drink supplied by the SSE catering vans, advice, and information. The centre in Thurso was primarily manned by Red Cross volunteers with support from Council and SSE staff. Visitors were also able to recharge mobile phones and other devices.
- The Dornoch Reception Centre was manned by Ward Managers and Highlife Highland Staff on the Saturday with Red Cross assisting on the Sunday. The public attending were signposted to hot food carry out and sit in establishments, with costs recharged to SSE. Similar hot food provision and recharge arrangements were also in place in Golspie, Brora, Lairg, Rhiconich and Tain.
- The centres remained open until 10:00pm on Saturday night. Arrangements were made for the centre at Thurso to re-open at 8:00am next morning for breakfasts.

2.3 Sunday 11 January

The North ELG met at 10:00am in the morning and agreed that both Thurso and Dornoch support centres should remain open until 6:00pm when most households should be reconnected. Showering facilities were also provided at Highland High Life swimming pools throughout the area. By 6:00pm the largest area power outages were now in the John O'Groats area and the SSE catering van was redirected to this location until all of those residents were reconnected. SSE catering vans were redirected in East Sutherland to the Rogart area and were then moved to the Durness area on the Monday following a further ELG meeting.

3. Issues and Feedback received 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, WEB site

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. 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. Air wave communication was used in the Dornoch area due to prolonged mobile signal issues.

- 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. This was one of the main reasons that community reception centres were opened in Thurso and Dornoch.

3.2

- Attendance was variable with only a small number attending at Dornoch but 26 did attend Thurso over the two days. The low level of attendance on both days in Dornoch can in part be attributed to inclement weather also affecting road conditions and thus due to the geography of Sutherland area difficulty/safety in driving the distances involved.
- Many communities showed certain resilience as a natural reaction to weather emergency and outages, local communities “came together” and offered hot refreshment etc. from village halls etc.

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 in Caithness and Sutherland as well as the other areas of Highland. Interim measures have been put in place with staff ensuring home landline numbers were current and not relying on e-mail or mobile reception. Up to date circulation lists of all staff who possess access to BT Meet me accounts has been provided to ensure ELG members have the widest access to meeting facilities whether at home or elsewhere.

Recommendation

The Committee is invited to:

1. comment on the Emergency Response: and.
2. consider and suggest how best to communicate issues and services to affected communities during future incidents.

Designation: Ward Manager, Thurso, Wick & Landward Caithness

Date: 22 January 2015

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