

The Highland Council

Lochaber Area Committee – 26 February 2015

Agenda Item	6
Report No	LA 4/15

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 response to the recent storm and power outages affecting Lochaber.

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). Wards 12 (Caol and Mallaig) and 22 (Fort William and Ardnamurchan) sit within the Skye and Lochaber. 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 to determine the extent of the 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 apprised 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);
- around 1100 properties in Lochaber lost power, predominantly in the west including Lochaline to Kilchoan and north to Mallaig and Arisaig but also some pockets between Fort William and Fort Augustus;
- numerous Council and trunk roads blocked by fallen trees making it difficult for SSE engineers to access power lines.

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 (usually held by phone)
- communication with the Council workforce was maintained through the Airwave system;
- 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 working beyond their normal hours;
- staff involved in direct work with sheltered tenants organised phone call checks, home visits and carried out welfare checks;
- throughout the period, duty officers worked long hours to deal with emergency situations;
- representatives from Community Councils helped to identify individuals who may welcome support;
- 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;
- Mackintosh Centre was identified as a reception centre if people needed to go somewhere for heat and sustenance/support;
- in addition to their engineering response to the outages, SSE provided catering units at appropriate locations;
- Arrangements were put in place to open Astley Hall on the Sunday as a reception centre, but power was restored early on Sunday morning meaning this was no longer necessary;
- Highlife Highland offered access to free shower facilities at their premises.

2.3 By the end of the weekend, most houses across Lochaber had been reconnected to the mains power.

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.

2.4 Lochaber has two pilot community resilience groups in the Arisaig and Sunart Community Council areas. These are the only two formal groupings in Highland at this stage, but on the back of the January storms many communities now have an interest in how they operate. These groups have been invaluable in identifying local risks and in providing an effective system to contact people who may be vulnerable, but who may not be on an agency list and could therefore be easily missed.

3. Issues raised during the incident

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

- The main issue during the incident was the inability 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 Radio Scotland offers limited hours for information and Nevis Radio transmitters were affected by the power outages. However, Nevis Radio did sustain the Internet broadcasting service, continuing to provide a valuable source of information. 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 The Council and its ELG partners have recently undertaken a cold debrief of both the January and December storms, covering many of the issues faced across Lochaber 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 has been provided to ensure ELG members have the widest access to meeting facilities whether at home or elsewhere.
- 4.2 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 ELG.
- 4.3 However, it is apparent that Council staff (and those of other agencies and utilities), third sector organisations, 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.

Designation: Head of Policy and Reform

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