

Agenda Item	12(a)
Report No	HC/15/20

## THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

**Committee:** Highland Council

**Date:** 30 July 2020

**Report Title:** Review of Covid-19 services: Humanitarian assistance and food supply

**Report By:** Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place

### 1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Council has a statutory role to provide humanitarian assistance during an emergency response. This report describes how that has been discharged, the number of people supported, and the methods used.
- 1.2 The scale of the task has been considerable. By 10 July 1,234 shielding people have been supported to access Scottish Government food boxes, a further 1,024 households have been supported to access our food support, just over 6,000 bags of emergency food have been distributed, medicines have been delivered to 438 people, 174 people have been referred for welfare support and over 200 for social support. We have received over 6,100 calls for support, advice and guidance and made outward calls to over 5,000 to understand their needs and check in on their well-being as well as face to face contact through deliveries. We have borrowed over 120 staff from across Council services, engaged over 120 volunteers from HLH, Eden Court and worked directly with over 110 community bodies. We have redeployed our fleet and made alternative use of council buildings.
- 1.3 At the Council meeting in June Members agreed to review all additional Covid response services, unless directly funded by government, at the end of July. The Government has made a grant offer to the Council of £651k and services are being redesigned to enable support to be in place for those who need it going forward. The report describes the approach being designed which enables a new way of working with hundreds of community bodies and their kindness shown to people in their communities.
- 1.4 Member views have influenced this approach based on their feedback on local response, discussion at Area Committees so far and they will continue to be part of the evolution of the new approach. Further discussion is planned with Area Chairs prior to the Council meeting arranged by the Leader. Listening sessions with third sector groups have begun in presentations to Area Committees and in separate meetings with the Leader and Chair of the Communities and Place Committee.

These will inform the evolution of the model and joint working with community bodies from July 2020.

## **2. Recommendations**

### **2.1 Members are asked to:**

- i. note the scale and reach of the Council's humanitarian assistance to date and the important contribution made by community bodies;
- ii. note that the Scottish Government has made an offer of grant of £651k to enable ongoing support;
- iii. agree that there needs to be a managed withdrawal of key staff from current arrangements and a move to a more sustainable model of assistance designed around the principles of: targeting support to those who need it most; supporting our place-based approach; and helping people to help each other and helping people to do more;
- iv. note the new arrangements set out in paragraph 6.9 and that these will be reviewed towards the end of September when there should be clarity on any further Government funding and the Council's budget position; and
- v. note the ongoing engagement and involvement planned with community bodies, third sector representatives and community planning partners.

## **3. Implications**

### **3.1 Resource**

3.1.1 The approach in the report does not place any new pressure on the Council's revenue budget as costs will be contained within the Government grant offer of £651k (part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> tranche of the Food Fund). The grant is to be claimed monthly in arrears from end of July. The grant claim will reflect operating costs in July with a move to the new arrangements as soon as possible and reviewed before the grant period ends in September. A further Government announcement on funding to support Test and Protect helpline spikes is expected.

3.1.2 The agility and willingness of staff to support the Council's humanitarian assistance are welcome and staff feedback of their experience is positive. Trade Unions have supported the temporary deployment of staff into different roles. Where new temporary roles are proposed these provide opportunities for staff development as well as scope to bring fresh talent into the Council. Discussion with Trade Unions will take place in weekly meetings arranged.

3.1.3 Local community hubs have moved from, or are moving from, schools in use in preparation for return to schools in August. Alternative arrangements include other Council offices and community facilities in each of the ten local Committee areas.

3.1.4 Fleet requirements will be adjusted as needed to support the new model of community support. Car club cars can be used by volunteers, with appropriate checks in place, and community bodies can apply for ward discretionary grant to help with travel costs.

### **3.2 Legal**

Humanitarian assistance is a legal requirement of our resilience response under the Civil Contingencies legislation. The Community Empowerment Act places duties on the Council to support more community action and to target resources with community planning partners to reduce inequalities.

### **3.3 Community (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island)**

3.3.1 The approach has been place-based around 10 local community hubs and this is proposed to continue and be reinforced by community support co-ordinators in the Ward Management team. Improved data and knowledge now exist around need and poverty in our communities and this will be used to help us target services better, supported by retaining a data analyst role. We will monitor need based on reasons for support and with any data we have on protected characteristic groups to inform service reviews.

3.3.2 Community involvement and empowerment is one of the work streams within the Council's Recovery Plan. Our approach will be inclusive. It will be considered at the Recovery Board workshop at the end of July and in a report to the Communities and Place Committee in August. An early action in the recovery plan is to develop a sustainable service delivery model for humanitarian assistance including support and coordination of community action (with groups and TSIs). Engagement with community bodies is underway on the lessons from our Covid response and how to work even better together going forward. Themes arising from that include shared concerns on food insecurity and over provision, the need for better targeting of support, issues around supporting people experiencing social isolation and joint approaches to improve mental wellbeing. Links with welfare services, a range of social services and community development need to be strengthened.

### **3.4 Climate Change**

Food and medicines distribution involve travel and there are carbon emissions associated with that. These will be reported as part of our corporate climate change / carbon management reporting. Travel was much reduced in lockdown and the impacts should be relatively positive. During the Covid response community groups have worked hard to avoid food waste with many local initiatives developed such as community fridges. Sustaining and supporting these arrangements can be an important part of our waste strategy under development.

### **3.5 Risk**

Covid-19 brings health, poverty and economic risks to individuals and communities. Humanitarian assistance is one way of mitigating risk, but our current model of service delivery while effective in response, is not sustainable, as staff are required to return to core duties or be assigned to new tasks. A managed withdrawal of key staff is required. Community resilience has been demonstrated with the scale of volunteering formally and informally. There are risks of volunteer fatigue and of under-using the offers of assistance. Co-ordination of support is required as well as support for the third sector. There are also risks that food support is not always targeted to those in greatest need and that dependency maybe be developing that is difficult to withdraw. Improved data analysis will ensure better targeting of support.

### **3.6 Gaelic**

There are none associated with this report.

## **4. Humanitarian assistance required and provided**

4.1 Humanitarian Assistance Centres (HACs) are an established part of any emergency response where co-ordinated support for people affected by an emergency is provided. HACs provide community assistance for as long as they are needed. The guidance for HACs dates from 2009 and is written more to be a physical location for people in need of support to attend. This had to be adapted for responding to Covid-19 as people are required to self-isolate rather than congregate.

- 4.2 The Council, along with all local authorities, was required by the Scottish Government to quickly set up HACs at the end of March as part of the national Covid-19 response. Their initial purpose was to help people to self-isolate for 12 weeks where they received NHS letters requiring them to shield from the virus. However, there was also a need to support vulnerable individuals and people with no friends or family support networks to help them access supplies. Those people in the 'shielding group' were identified by Doctors because their health conditions make them extremely vulnerable to Covid-19 and included patients in seven clinical categories of need.
- 4.3 The shielding group has been required to self-isolate until the end of July, with some relaxation on the restrictions placed on them and their families from recent Government announcements. Current indications are that shielding will be paused at the end of July, along with central Government support. Shielding people are being directed to Local Authorities for ongoing support should this be required.
- 4.4 At the time of writing there are 8076 people in Highland required to shield. Our assistance to them has involved:
1. setting up dedicated helplines for them and linking in with the national helpline established supported by up to 30 staff from teams across the Council;
  2. reaching out to them by telephone to understand what support they need to self-isolate, including recording where no support is required;
  3. supporting them to access food parcels arranged by the Scottish Government delivered directly to their homes and access priority supermarket delivery slots;
  4. support to access priority supermarket delivery slots;
  5. supplementing national food support by providing and delivering emergency food supplies and specific dietary needs;  
This has involved:
    - a. setting up a food distribution centre in Inverness;
    - b. running 10 local community hubs across the region, aligned with our local committee areas and based mostly in schools;
    - c. redeploying fleet to hubs and collecting nationally sourced food supplies from Aberdeen;
    - d. procuring frozen ready meals with hardship funding; and
    - e. creating a virtual hub to connect requests for help to local hubs and the food distribution centre;
  6. providing other emergency supplies from hubs e.g. fuel/power and sanitary products;
  7. running a medicines collection and delivery service where they have no other support, with a protocol in place agreed with the Director of Pharmacy at NHS Highland and following national guidance;
  8. referring people to other support services provided by the Council (e.g. welfare support);
  9. encouraging community groups to register their support with us and setting up a Covid ward discretionary budget for them to apply for small grants to support vulnerable people in their community;
  10. where the primary need is shopping, putting local community groups in touch with people self-isolating to offer informal support including shopping and telephone befriending;
  11. weekly check-ins with some people to ensure they have all the support in need and a weekly social contact;
  12. helping individual volunteers to be matched to community groups to assist working with HTSI;

13. coordinating local emergency liaison groups and feeding back issues to weekly resilience partnership meetings for the North of Scotland on shielding and discussing guidance and other Government requirements;
14. weekly reporting to the Scottish Government on contact numbers, requests for help by type, and confirmation of the number confirming they do not need Council support. This data is also collated for Cosla; and
15. having an auditable system so that everyone's request for support, and how that has been actioned, can be traced.

4.5 Our assistance has reached further than the shielding group and includes other people vulnerable because of health, age, or experiencing food and/or fuel poverty.

4.6 The scale and range of support provided has been considerable as described below.

1. We have received just over 6,100 calls since the beginning of April from people seeking support, advice or guidance and made outgoing calls of over 5,000 to shielding individuals.
2. We have arranged for 1,234 people to access Scottish Government food parcels. These are usually delivered weekly or fortnightly. They are in addition to the number of people requesting these directly through the SMS text service (around 1000 people according to Government data).
3. We have supported 438 people access pharmacy deliveries.
4. We have supported 1,024 households to access food support due to changes in financial circumstances or people needing to self-isolate (this does not reflect the frequency of support).
5. We have distributed just over 6,000 bags of food (1 bag is for 1 person) which is the equivalent of just under 60 tonnes of food.
6. 174 people have been referred for welfare support.
7. Just over 200 people are being supported with other social support, some through local groups and some through weekly call backs from the hubs.

4.7 This support is in addition to free school meals provided and supported by the Government's Food Fund. It is also in addition to the informal support offered by individuals and many groups not registered with us. This includes the activity of many elected Members involved in food resilience and other support locally. Members will be aware of the scale of informal support provided locally, from friends, neighbours and community bodies.

4.8 Local information on the assistance provided has been presented to Area Committee meetings since the end of June. This has also involved contributions from the third sector and its local humanitarian response.

## **5. Ongoing requirements for humanitarian assistance**

5.1 It is expected that there will be a continuing need to support people with food and other essentials. This will include:

- those at risk of Covid-19, including those required to self-isolate or undertake stringent physical distancing and others self-isolating through the Test and Protect programme should local outbreaks occur;
- financially at risk households, and this number may grow depending on economic recovery;
- marginalised households; and
- people unable to access food and/or essentials due to other barriers.

While need is difficult to forecast, staff working in the food distribution centre have already noticed that more people out with the shielding group are seeking food support. Community bodies have also noted their concern around increasing need for food support as we move through recovery.

- 5.2 On 1 July the Government made a grant offer to Councils to continue to provide support for people at risk, including those in the Test and Protect programme. The offer for Highland Council is £651k and covers the period July to September 2020. It includes the support required to the groups identified above and eligible costs included are: food delivery; coordination with community organisations; helplines; and food supplies, vouchers and other payments.
- 5.3 The first month's claim is due at the end of July and current operating costs are being quantified for inclusion in the claim.

## 6. Redesigning humanitarian assistance

- 6.1 Across the helpline support, virtual hub, 10 community hubs and the distribution hub in Inverness, there have been up to 120 Council staff and a further 120 High Life Highland staff supporting the response efforts. The current arrangements have worked well in terms of providing the assistance required and doing that at pace; however, they are not sustainable as staff are required to return to core duties. Even for the Ward Management Team, which has a core role in co-ordinating a local emergency response, the current arrangements cannot be prolonged indefinitely as other work, including local committee support arises. Many staff have worked long hours during the emergency period and with very little, if any, leave taken since Christmas and we have agreed with Trade Unions that staff should have 10 days of their leave entitlement by the end of August. New arrangements are therefore needed alongside a managed withdrawal of key Council staff to core duties.
- 6.2 In considering a more sustainable model we have listened to feedback from Members on community action in their area. This has been heard in the Member briefings and especially the last briefing in mid-June and in Area Committees held since the end of June. Other Members have shared their ideas too. The Council Leader is leading on community engagement as part of the Council's Recovery Plan and along with the Chair of the Communities and Place Committee has begun to hear further from Third sector representatives and community groups themselves on how we can work differently to support more community action, learning from our Covid experience. This will include conversations on an area basis and involve Area Chairs for these conversations to continue locally.
- 6.3 Working with our Highland Third Sector Interface Partners, a register of community support organisations has been created. The registered groups can be viewed on the Council's [interactive map](#). To date, 339 groups have registered indicating that they are providing some form of Covid-19 support to their community. Many of the groups are established community or third sector organisations but there are many newly established grass-route organisations which have emerged specifically to support the emergency response. 29 of the 339 groups are Community Councils. We are currently working with 110 of these groups and the local network of TSI organisations.
- 6.4 It is worth noting that over £2m of external grant funding has been attracted by community groups in Highland. This is detailed by area and source in **Appendix 1**.

The local breakdown has been presented at Area Committees. A briefing on the grant funding was circulated to Members on 20 July 2020.

6.5 The approach to redesigning humanitarian assistance draws on the following principles:

1. Targeting support to those who need it most;
2. Supporting our place-based approach; and
3. Helping people to help each other and helping people to do more.

It moves the Council further towards an enabling role, empowering local communities to do more, drawing on the kindness and care people have demonstrated in their communities and the third sector networks across the region.

6.6 Earlier engagement with community bodies through the Council's Redesign Board tells us that community-run services:

- make a big difference locally – fill a gap, sustain services locally, address local needs, can provide a better or enhanced service, provide local employment as well as volunteering opportunities;
- can reach people and places public bodies can't. They are flexible, have good connections and working relations locally and use local resources well; and
- still need support from public bodies – knowing who to contact, funding, advice and looking for a mix of practical support and change in attitudes.

6.7 Earlier feedback also told us that for community action to thrive it needs:

- the right supports in place;
- motivated, caring, skilled and willing people in communities;
- trusting relationships and helpful behaviours across public bodies and community bodies; and
- shifting the balance of power to enable communities to have real influence over the range of public services and being more involved in decisions affecting them.

6.8 Having heard from community groups at Area Committees from end June, the Leader and Chair of the Communities and Place Committee held their first listening session on 21<sup>st</sup> July to understand how we can work even better with community groups to support people in communities. Common themes arising included: good joint working with the ward management team in response; the need for public bodies to trust community groups to do more; devolving more powers to assist locally; concern about the over-provision of food as well as the scale of previously hidden need and the importance of targeting support better going forward; tackling social isolation and mental wellbeing together and with partners; making food poverty and insecurity a priority for community partnerships; targeting community development to areas in greatest need; and supporting volunteering and improving coordination with the third sector. Local listening sessions are planned with community groups over the summer and with the involvement of Area Chairs to understand local priorities for humanitarian assistance and community development and action.

6.9 The service going forward needs to involve:

- continuing the helpline with support from our service centre, with staffing requirement reviewed according to contact levels;
- using the new information we have gathered on need in our communities to target our support better to those who need it most. This will help to develop anti-poverty approaches in the Council and with our community planning partners. This includes retaining a borrowed member of staff in a data analysis role which will include supporting Scottish Government reporting

requirements and continuing local discussions with third sector and community planning partners;

- building on the new friendships and relationships built locally through the a response across staff, members, partners and communities to find local solutions and support people, this includes identifying how to make community partnerships even more effective;
- support new volunteers to connect locally with groups and individuals to provide support needed;
- work with and develop the network of food resilience groups, understanding their challenges and helping them work well;
- co-ordinating requests for support received via the helpline through our key partner community bodies locally. This requires 10 community support coordinator posts, with a named contact in each local committee area and with support deployed flexibly and to areas of greatest need within the three Ward Management Teams (CSER, INBS and RSL), with support through business support. This will start to build the community development role in the Council alongside the small policy team currently supporting asset transfers, engagement and equalities. These posts require community development skills and offer new opportunities for staff development as well as some fresh thinking coming into the organisation;
- logistical support for the food distribution centre by retaining some staff currently involved and support from our fleet and stores teams; and
- reviewing property use for food distribution and relocating from schools used as local community hubs.

6.10 Individuals deployed into these new roles can begin soon and this will be reviewed towards the end of September. By then we will be clearer on whether further Government grant will be available and on the Council's budget position more generally. Given the anticipated financial impact still facing communities and individuals as furlough ends, the Council will be working through COSLA to urge funding beyond the end of September in order to continue to provide humanitarian support to our communities.

Designation: Executive Officer Communities and Place.

Date: 21 July 2020

Authors: Carron McDiarmid, Executive Officer Communities and Place  
Alison Clark Head of Policy.



COVID-19 Grant Awards Appendix 1

Wards	Total No. of Orgs	Total ££ Awarded	COVID Ward Discretionary		HTSI Wellbeing Fund		Response, Recovery and Resilience		SSEN Resilient Communities Fund		Supporting Communities (HIE)		Wellbeing Fund	
			No. of Orgs	££ Awarded	No. of Orgs	££ Awarded	No. of Orgs	££ Awarded	No. of Orgs	££ Awarded	No. of Orgs	££ Awarded	No. of Orgs	££ Awarded
1. North West & Central Sutherland	31	£169,160	15	£5,441	1	£2,000	3	£12,500	4	£6,200	6	£125,579	2	£17,440
2. Thurso & Northwest Caithness	14	£71,587	8	£3,909	1	£2,000	2	£4,500	1	£1,550	2	£59,628		
3. Wick and East Caithness	12	£48,781	9	£4,253							3	£44,528		
4. East Sutherland and Edderton	26	£140,330	11	£5,125			6	£19,554	3	£3,550	6	£112,101		
5. Wester Ross Strathpeffer & Lochalsh	30	£207,808	13	£5,172	3	£6,000	3	£14,650	2	£3,100	7	£167,812	2	£11,074
6. Cromarty Firth	22	£93,270	17	£8,480			1	£5,000	1	£1,550	1	£33,000	2	£45,240
7. Tain and Easter Ross	28	£90,917	16	£7,763			2	£6,017	6	£8,250	2	£48,000	2	£20,887
8. Dingwall and Seaforth	17	£92,625	11	£5,500			3	£11,875	1	£1,550	2	£73,700		
9. Black Isle	12	£7,389	11	£5,889					1	£1,500				
10. Eilean a' Cheo	48	£198,902	29	£15,950	3	£6,000	3	£14,322	2	£3,100	8	£130,517	3	£29,013
11. Caol and Mallaig	15	£82,029	9	£8,309							5	£56,751	1	£16,969
12. Aird and Loch Ness	15	£108,563	8	£3,453					2	£4,650	5	£100,460		
13. Inverness West	13	£160,371	12	£3,642							1	£156,729		
14. Inverness Central	28	£77,946	19	£6,159	2	£4,000	2	£5,379	1	£1,550	1	£24,380	3	£36,478
15. Inverness Ness-side	8	£3,667	8	£3,667										
16. Inverness Millburn	8	£4,834	7	£2,834	1	£2,000								
17. Culloden and Ardersier	4	£6,100	3	£1,100			1	£5,000						
18. Nairn	7	£4,906	6	£2,906	1	£2,000								
19. Inverness South	3	£24,400	2	£800							1	£23,600		
20. Badenoch and Strathspey	9	£143,015	4	£1,767			1	£4,000	2	£2,100	1	£123,420	1	£11,728
21. Fort William & Ardnamurchan	18	£121,344	7	£3,500			3	£4,210	1	£1,310	7	£112,324		
Highland wide	19	£182,405			9	£18,000	2	£7,695					8	£156,710
Caithness Wards	6	£39,579	1	£500	1	£2,000	3	£9,158			1	£27,921		
Inverness Wards	8	£117,186			4	£8,000	2	£6,500					2	£102,686
Lochaber wards	3	£28,035			1	£2,000	1	£1,856					1	£24,179
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>404</b>	<b>£2,225,149</b>	<b>226</b>	<b>£106,119</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>£54,000</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>£132,216</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>£39,960</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>£1,420,450</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>£472,404</b>