

Agenda Item	5.
Report No	CP/07/20

## THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

**Committee:** Communities and Place Committee

**Date:** 19<sup>th</sup> August 2020

**Report Title:** Communities and Place Service Response to Covid-19

**Report By:** ECO Communities and Place

### 1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report describes the scale of the service response during Covid-19. The service is responsible for leading on and supporting key Covid projects and is dealing with Covid-related pressures. Service disruption and service adjustments have been, and continue to be, made.
- 1.2 Learning points so far have been identified for service delivery and development. These will inform service change and we will continue to learn as we work through the phases of lockdown release.
- 1.3 The phases of lockdown release are creating new requirements on the service. We will continue to adjust as required and contribute to the Council's Recovery Plan. Further disruption is possible from any local outbreaks that may arise.

### 2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to scrutinise and note:
  - i. the covid projects led in the service on running helplines, humanitarian assistance, working with community bodies, additional deaths planning, advice and support to business on complying with coronavirus regulations; and the Test and Protect programme;
  - ii. covid pressures experienced in the service relating to resources, logistical support and uncontrolled camping;
  - iii. the service disruption and adjustments made so far affecting the registrar service, service points and the service centre, ground's maintenance, bereavement services, public conveniences, waste and street cleaning services, environmental health services, stores and logistics and fleet;

- iv. the positive and challenging aspects of our covid response fed back from staff and the learning points for service design and development;
- v. the service's contribution to the Council's Recovery Plan with two separate reports on the Committee agenda for the community engagement workstream. Work is underway on the workforce planning and service redesign workstreams and this will include the lessons so far from our covid response.

### **3. Implications**

#### **3.1 Resource implications**

There are considerable financial implications of our covid response. This includes the cost and opportunity costs of running new covid projects. To date Government funding of £651k for humanitarian assistance is offered and subject to grant claims from July to September 2020. A request for financial assistance to deal with uncontrolled camping pressures is also made. Other costs, including the cost of providing additional fleet, temporary mortuaries and PPE are quantified for the Colsa return and as reported to Council and Resources Committee. Costs will continue to be quantified, including for example the additional costs associated with enhanced waste services required from additional visitor numbers and wild camping.

3.2 Significant disruption to service income has been experienced during lockdown including from commercial and household waste collections, environmental health services, ground's maintenance, registrar services and public conveniences. As the service has become more dependent on generating income from these sources the disruption this year is contributing to the Council's budget gap.

3.3 Our covid response has also disrupted our plans to achieve budget savings agreed by the Council and to take forward service redesign. Adjustments to our Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs) should help recover this for two of our savings agreed; savings of £40k are required by reducing opening hours and savings of £150k are required from limiting vehicles (later amended to permit double axle trailers) and limit construction and demolition waste.

3.4 The workforce has been affected during our covid response. This includes initially between 30% and 35% of the manual workforce following national guidance and self-isolating at home, the majority due to general vulnerabilities but a small number shielding. Operational managers coped with this absence by borrowing staff from other teams and making service adjustments. With lockdown preventing some services from continuing, many staff volunteered for deployment onto other tasks. As guidance on self-isolation was amended, the service was the first to bring staff back into the work place safely from the beginning of June. Only a small number of staff required to shield were prevented from a return to manual work.

3.5 The service has worked with Trade Union and Health and Safety representatives to ensure we have covid compliant practices for staff safety at work. This includes undertaking risk assessments and mitigating risks for return to the workplace. Mitigation includes arrangements for social distancing among staff and with service users, using additional fleet, staggering start and finish time times, avoiding congregating in depots and arranging support for staff affected by the emotional impact of their roles (especially in bereavement services). Staff have also been supported to work from home and as this is likely to continue we need to consider what further adjustments are needed to make that safe and effective.

- 3.6 Many staff had annual leave cancelled during our covid response and they require to rest. We have agreed with the Trade Unions that all staff should take 10 days leave by end August to ensure our duty of care to them and to avoid having significant absence later in the year.
- 3.7 Legal implications  
The council has legal resilience and contingency duties to respond in a pandemic. Further specific responsibilities arose from Coronavirus legislation. We also have legal responsibilities and a duty of care towards staff.
- 3.8 Community implications (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island)  
The report summarises our humanitarian assistance and the learning from that around being more connected to communities and understanding community needs better. This is shaping our approach to community support coordination and poverty reduction and it will inform how we reach out to people who would normally benefit from our face to face contact in service points. Emerging research tells us that many of our equalities groups will have experienced a disproportionate impact as a result of covid and the engagement work planned through the engagement framework will help us better understand this and consider what measures may be required to mitigate against impacts but also how we respond to any future lockdown arrangement.
- 3.9 Climate Change / Carbon Clever implications  
During lock down travel reduced among our staff and our customers. The exception to this is around the increased use of fleet to support waste collections and food and medicines distribution. Overall carbon emissions should have reduced. With offices closed, less energy was used. Corporate reporting on carbon emissions will report on the reduction.
- 3.10 Risk implications  
There is a risk of further service disruption from any local outbreaks of coronavirus. Service experience of lockdown has built resilience among staff in coping with further disruption. Risk assessments are now routinely carried out for return to work and there is good support and liaison with Trade Union and Health and Safety representatives to make these assessments robust. The service is contributing to the Council's Recovery Plan to reduce and avoid further risk to the Council and the region.
- 3.11 Gaelic implications  
There are no Gaelic implications arising from this report.
- 4. Covid projects and pressures**
- 4.1 Given the service's responsibilities it led on several Covid projects. These are described below.
- 4.2 New helplines  
We established new helplines at a pace with the shielding line supported by our call handling and travel desk teams and the COVID line by volunteers from the performance and audit team, business grants team, housing team, education team, ICT telephony team and from across the Council. There was also support from Eden Court staff volunteers on the COVID helpline in the early weeks of the response. The helplines assisted people shielding and other vulnerable people, people seeking to volunteer, businesses especially in relation to business grants and people enquiring about adult social care and education.

- 4.3 Overall since the start of the helpline services in March 2020 there have been over 7,200 calls handled by the COVID helpline and over 5,800 by the shielding helpline. Supporting vulnerable people including those shielding, those offering support and business grants were particularly busy strands for the helplines.
- 4.4 Experienced call handlers and service point staff also contacted all those on the shielding list not in touch with us to understand if they had any need for support to self-isolate. This involved phoning over 5000 people and staff undertaking these calls have fed back how appreciated these calls were from people self-isolating, even from those who did not require food/medicine support but had little external contact. Staff working in these roles are naturally helpful and caring and many have spoken about how they valued the opportunity to provide contact and company to people otherwise extremely isolated.
- 4.5 Humanitarian assistance  
The Council's Ward Management team has a core role to coordinate any local emergency response. With all Councils required to provide humanitarian assistance, the service led on responding to people required to shield and other vulnerable people self-isolating or in need of food support and other supplies. This was reported to Council on 30<sup>th</sup> July 2020<sup>1</sup> and the subject of presentations at Area Committees.
- 4.6 The scale of humanitarian assistance required considerable logistical support, with over 120 Council staff borrowed from across services, plus 120 HLH volunteers and connecting with over 100 community bodies. Council fleet and buildings were reassigned. Links with the Council's welfare and family teams were established and food safety and nutritional advice was provided by the Environmental Health Team and catering staff to support packaging of food parcels. Weekly performance reports and meetings continue to take place. As reported to Council over 1200 people were assisted to access Government food boxes, over 1000 people accessed food support from the council with over 6000 food bags distributed (the equivalent of 60 tonnes of food), medicines were delivered to over 400 people and over 170 people were referred to our welfare team for support and over 200 for social support. A network of 10 local community hubs, a food distribution centre and a virtual hub were all established.
- 4.7 Connecting with third sector and community bodies  
A sustainable model of community support coordination is under development at the time of writing to target support to those in need. It recognises the huge voluntary and community effort involved in the covid response and how that can be supported going forward. Members have been briefed on the scale of community bodies registering their support with the Council. Over 300 community bodies are mapped by the policy team and research officer. Ward Managers have administered ward discretionary grants. The team has also collated information on over £2m of external funding attracted by community bodies in their response. The scale of community support is far greater than that registered with the Council. Ongoing engagement with community groups is part of the recovery plan, and reported separately to this Committee meeting, and this will help us to learn together from our experience and develop local solutions going forward.

#### 4.8 Additional deaths planning

Planning for mass fatalities is required for some emergency situations and for responding to a pandemic. The service established a cross-service coordinating group led by Environmental Health and involved staff from Bereavement Services, Amenities (grounds maintenance), the Registrar Service, Business Support and the Resilience Team. It also worked with the local resilience partnership including health, police, NHSH, the military and Island authorities and it set up regular meetings with Funeral Directors across the region.

4.9 The group put arrangements in place to ensure bereaved families would not suffer any delay in their funeral arrangements. Their work has included: monitoring additional deaths modelling; the Registrar Service moving to a 7-day death registration service, remote death registration and new reporting requirements; advance preparation of lairs and training further staff in Crematorium operations; the temporary suspension of some burial ground services; and the provision of temporary mortuary facilities where required. From April to July 2020, 53 deaths were registered in Highland where covid was included on the death certificate.

4.10 The group stood down at the end of June but can be reconvened if required. Death registration processes have returned to a 5-day weekly service in July with emergency cover at weekends if required. An update on bereavement services is provided separately to this meeting of the Committee; however notable new processes to continue from the work of the group include:

- developing closer working relationships with Funeral Directors;
- streamlining and digitising the administrative process for burials; and
- arrangements to introduce live streaming and recordings of funeral services at the Crematorium given the ongoing restrictions on the number of people attending funerals.

4.11 Advice and support to business on complying with coronavirus regulations  
The environmental Health Team has regulatory and support roles for private business. A working group was quickly established with colleagues in Trading Standards and Police Scotland to ensure consistent enforcement and share best practice. The team have responded to around 400 queries and complaints specifically related to Coronavirus legislation. The legislation introduced specific duties around compliance and the team has had to implement these along with the Government's guidance on the phased approach to coming out of lockdown.

The types of activity include providing advice and enforcing compliance with:

1. legal requirements to close business premises;
2. restrictions on business and essential travel in lockdown;
3. restrictions on gatherings;
4. health and safety precautions for business return to work (RTW), personal protective equipment (PPE) and social distancing;
5. restrictions on shops and licensed premises including queues, customer contact details and capacity. Close working with Police Scotland on this including joint patrols in a number of areas.
6. additional food safety compliance work for new take-away services;
7. public health controls enforced at airports and ports in Highland; and
8. the Test and Protect programme (described below).

#### 4.12 The Test and Protect Programme

The Test & Protect programme is key in tackling coronavirus. Test and Protect is Scotland's way of putting into practice the test, trace, isolate, support strategy. It works

by identifying who has the virus and who they have had close, recent contact with to break chains of infection and stop the spread. The council has a role in supporting the Test and Protect programme to contain any local outbreaks of coronavirus.

- 4.13 The Environmental Health team has a role to work with NHS public health colleagues to support any local contact tracing required and to assist businesses to comply with requirements on them e.g. restaurants to record contact details of people dining with them. In recent Covid-19 clusters and outbreaks such as Aberdeen, Environmental Health have participated in the Incident Management Teams co-ordinating the investigation and undertaken inspections of businesses premises connected to the cases. Government guidance has also been issued requiring the Council to gather contact information of people attending funerals.
- 4.14 Should anyone be required to self-isolate through the Test and Protect programme they will be directed to the Council for any humanitarian support required in liaison with colleagues from public health. Those affected are expected to fund their own accommodation and travel costs if they arise, however individual circumstances and level of assessed risk would be taken into account by the Incident Management Team (IMT).
- 4.15 Further information is available at these links:  
Test & Protect information <https://www.gov.scot/coronavirus-covid-19/>  
Role of Environmental health in outbreaks - <https://www.hps.scot.nhs.uk/web-resources-container/management-of-public-health-incidents-guidance-on-the-roles-and-responsibilities-of-nhs-led-incident-management-teams/>
- 4.16 Covid pressures: Logistical support: fleet and stores  
All fleet and stores requirements are provided corporately by the logistics team in the service. It has responded to covid pressures to:
- provide additional fleet to support social distancing within the waste team, with an additional vehicle required to support bin crews;
  - deploy fleet to support the 10 community hubs and for food collection and distribution to support humanitarian assistance;
  - source large refrigerated vehicles and drivers to collect food from distribution centres outwith Highland; and
  - enable more time for cleaning vehicles inside and out prior to maintenance.
- 4.17 PPE provision has been challenging since the beginning of lockdown with many organisations panic buying, and a number of items being prioritised for NHS only. This created supply chain problems for hand sanitisers, wipes, and some types of gloves, for example. A new streamlined internal PPE ordering process was put in place, to ensure all items were distributed evenly across services and the local community hubs. Risk assessments had to be adapted to consider alternatives to the PPE that would routinely have been available.
- 4.18 Covid pressures: uncontrolled camping  
In July with relaxation on travel restrictions and the opening of tourist business permitted from 15th July, many Highland communities and beauty spots have experienced high visitor numbers. A combination of more people 'staycationing', the absence of festivals this year and some camp sites not re-opening this season has created new covid related pressures which are keenly felt where infrastructure is limited and where irresponsible camping has occurred. Environmental damage from littering, camp fires and wild toileting is being experienced. These behaviours are affecting local communities, spoiling tourism

experiences and placing more pressure on public bodies to respond quickly. This subject was debated at Council on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2020.

- 4.19 Within the service, demand for enhanced services is found for:
- litter collections – larger bins and more frequent collections and this has been arranged;
  - improved public toilet provision (several comfort schemes remain closed and new infrastructure planned will not be ready for this season); and
  - speedier solutions to dealing with camper van waste (this is challenging where public toilets do not have suitable facilities, particularly where they use septic tanks and are not connected to mains sewers). Through the HI LRP, Environmental Health have worked with Police Scotland and SEPA on taking a multi-agency approach to report of fly-tipping associated with uncontrolled camping and the illegal disposal of toilet waste from campervans and caravans. All agencies will follow up reports from witnesses and will consider issuing fixed penalty notices if sufficient evidence is available to identify offenders. Fixed penalty notices can be served on the person in control of a vehicle and if served are for £200. A press release to publicise the approach was issued on 7 August.

[https://www.highland.gov.uk/news/article/12721/visiting the highlands and islands %E2%80%93 leave no waste or action will be taken warns public partners \)](https://www.highland.gov.uk/news/article/12721/visiting-the-highlands-and-islands-%E2%80%93-leave-no-waste-or-action-will-be-taken-warns-public-partners)

- 4.20 Other Council services under pressure include:
- those working to enable access rights to the countryside, with a need for rights to be balanced with responsibilities and enforcement;
  - roads teams with demand from some to make greater use of traffic orders;
  - licensing with requests from some areas for bye laws to ban the drinking of alcohol in public places;
  - the small tourism team coordinating bids for the next phase of the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund (RTIF); and.
  - the corporate communications team has issued further advice on responsible camping and tourism including press releases and social media postings.
- 4.21 The service coordinated an approach to the Scottish Government for funding temporary tourist infrastructure for this season. At the time of writing no Government funding has been notified.

## **5. Service disruption and adjustments**

5.1 Several services were suspended during lockdown and most continue to be disrupted and adjusted. This is described below.

### **5.2 Registrar service**

Birth registration and wedding ceremonies were suspended nationally and initially all attention was focused on death registrations. This included moving to a 7day service, conducting death registration remotely rather than face to face and suspending the death registration review process (audit for accuracy). Death registration has resumed as a 5-day service but remains a remote service using telephone calls and electronic documents. While there was initial concern among staff about this way of operating, some positive feedback has been received especially from bereaved families in Skye.

5.3 Many couples with weddings booked were understandably disappointed by the cancellation of wedding ceremonies. 340 were affected and staff are working to reschedule these weddings. Weddings were initially permitted to take place outdoors

only, with limited numbers attending and with social distancing in place from 29<sup>th</sup> June, and since 15<sup>th</sup> July weddings are permitted indoors, again with limited numbers attending and with social distancing in place. By the end of August around 160 will have been conducted.

5.4 Nationally birth registration resumed on 29<sup>th</sup> June. It is partially conducted face to face and by appointment only for signing the register, but other work is done remotely by telephone call and by documents emailed. Risk assessments for enabling appointments to take place safely have been carried out. Staff are working to register births in date order since March.

5.5 Staff in the service have responded well to the changes required, often coming with very little notice. Adjustments to wedding ceremonies and birth registrations have their challenges including ensuring safe ways of working face to face with the public.

#### 5.6 Service points and service centre

Our 23 Service Points were the last buildings to close to the public. Registrars continued to work from their offices to administer the registration of deaths. The service has continued by telephony and signposting people to on-line forms. The service centre re-prioritised telephony support and arranged automated messaging to direct people to information they required. Current Government guidance (30<sup>th</sup> July 2020) has stated that non-essential offices are expected to remain closed until at least 14<sup>th</sup> September and that:

“Even then, working from home and working flexibly will remain the default position...By staying at home, office workers and employers are playing a vital role in helping suppress the virus, and ensuring our transport network remains safe.”

Where service points are used for registrar services, they are opened by appointment for the element of birth registrations that must be under taken face to face. We will continue to follow national guidance and use risk assessments to identify the adjustments needed for any safe re-opening.

#### 5.7 Ground's maintenance

The disruption to the ground's maintenance service has been particularly challenging and this will continue for the rest of this year. A full briefing was circulated to Members on 13<sup>th</sup> July 2020. Disruption occurred as:

- new Government restrictions on the movement of people and new definitions of essential service were enforced (from 23<sup>rd</sup> March);
- all 336 play parks were required to close and inspection regimes suspended. This was not lifted until 29<sup>th</sup> June and work is still underway to inspect all play parks and make them safe for re-opening. This has been a challenging task for the small number of staff we have qualified to undertake this work;
- around 35% of grounds staff followed guidance to be absent from the work place because of vulnerability to covid. After guidance changed we brought staff back into the workplace safely from the start of June;
- until early May the grounds maintenance team remaining at work focused on preparations at burial grounds, trained several more staff to operate the Crematorium and supported statutory waste kerbside collections;
- by 30<sup>th</sup> April, 6 weeks after the normal season start, we had approval to undertake a limited grass cutting service only, negotiated with our Environmental Heath Team and Police Scotland as essential works and approved at the political Gold Group meeting on 30<sup>th</sup> April. The limited service meant we would undertake only:

- essential maintenance on the roadside, roundabouts and verges where it can be demonstrated it is required for road safety;
- some level of grass cutting in parks to enable individual exercise and otherwise they would be costly to recover;
- some level of grass cutting in burial grounds to allow lairs to be identified more easily, excavated more easily and cause less distress for bereaved families attending burials;
- some level of grass cutting in Council housing estates to help with local amenity;
- grass cutting would be limited to mowed grass; and
- school grounds would not be maintained for as long as they remain closed and would have less priority than the sites above.
- the partial ban on using glyphosate for weedkilling was lifted on 14<sup>th</sup> May (outwith play areas) as agreed by majority vote at the political Gold group and reinstated following the Council meeting on 25<sup>th</sup> June. Amenities review work to identify, and quantify the cost of, alternatives have stalled during covid response and this can be resumed after this season.

5.8 To reinstate a limited service we had to have arrangements in place to ensure staff and workforce practice complied with social distancing and enhanced hygiene. This required adjustments to fleet and machinery use, start and finish times and attendance at depots.

5.9 The limited service meant the following non-essential grounds maintenance would not be re-introduced to comply with lock down and because of staff absence:

- strimming activities. This work can take up more than 50% of staff time, so efforts need to be concentrated on maintaining mowed grass areas;
- maintenance of any rough-cut areas;
- strimming back of daffodil beds;
- maintenance of shrub & flower beds;
- maintenance of old burial grounds which are no longer used for burials;
- maintenance of older unused sections of the burial grounds which no longer will be used for burials; and
- grass cutting of roadside verges out with the Roads teams.

This was communicated to the public through press release and social media.

5.10 While we have moved through other phases of lockdown release, and brought back nearly all staff to the workplace, we have only half the number of seasonal staff employed this year (42/80). Recruitment was disrupted during lockdown and budget difficulties have made it unaffordable to recruit more staff. Some approved overtime is now in place to deal with pressing grounds maintenance at high amenity sites, burial grounds and for play park re-opening, but the service will continue to be disrupted this year.

5.11 As noted in paragraph 4.6 above significant community activity has made a big difference locally in covid response. Many offers of help with ground's maintenance have been received from individuals and community groups and providing they adhered to social distancing and assessed risk we were grateful to receive these offers. The role of voluntary maintenance of burial grounds in Caithness is presented separately to this Committee and Members will be aware of support provided in their Wards.

- 5.12 Normally in working with a community group the local Amenity Officer/Foreperson would undertake a site visit and once work is agreed, we would offer support for risk assessments, Hand and Arm Vibration Syndrome (HAVS) monitoring, collection of any debris and then finally checking the work completed is to the agreed standard. We have not been able so far to offer this but hope to resume as soon as possible and create a new package of supports going forward.
- 5.13 Bereavement services  
The following activities were initially suspended early in lockdown: memorial maintenance (unless for health and safety reasons); laying foundations for head stones; advance purchase of lairs; Saturday additional charges; and the organist service at the Crematorium. All attention was focused on preparations for additional funerals including Saturday funerals and increased availability for direct cremations. Most of these suspensions were lifted in June. Government advice is that communal singing should be avoided so the organist service has not yet been reinstated. This is being kept under review.
- 5.14 Government guidance means continued restrictions on the number of people attending funerals. New requirements on the service include supporting the Test and Protect programme by gathering contact details for those attending funerals.
- 5.15 Staff in the service have observed the additional grief experienced by bereaved families with restrictions in place. Some staff members been affected by this and staff are being advised of the support available and managers will arrange this where required with HR support.
- 5.16 Public conveniences  
The Council's 74 public conveniences closed initially alongside the restrictions on the movement of people. They partially re-opened focused on routes supporting the food distribution network and staff welfare needs and where we had staff available to clean them as over 30% of the workforce followed guidance to self-isolate at home. A phased approach to re-opening led to nearly all public conveniences being open by 15<sup>th</sup> June 2020. The few remaining closed require repairs or are in the process for asset transfer. Where charges were applied they were suspended until later in July.
- 5.17 We have 36 comfort schemes in place and 14 remained open during lockdown. A further 16 have re-opened and 6 remain closed (1 of these is opening on the 10<sup>th</sup> of August). Our Environmental Health Team is offering support and guidance to all businesses in safe and compliant re-opening.
- 5.18 Waste and street cleaning services  
Statutory kerbside collections were the only waste service that continued without disruption to customers since the end of March. The team managed to sustain assisted kerbside collections for elderly people or people with care needs. This was possible only with the support of staff borrowed from other teams as overnight 35% of staff followed guidance and self-isolated at home. It also required adjustments to fleet and crews with the need to provide another driver and vehicle for each route (around 30 additional vehicles) to support greater social distancing. During lockdown messages of appreciation and drawings from children were given to waste crews on their rounds. Staff were grateful for this kindness.

5.19 With remaining waste and street cleaning staff focused on statutory kerbside collections and restrictions on the movement of people other services were disrupted as follows:

- the street cleaning service was significantly reduced to emptying of waste bins and limited litter collection and in July moved to support the amenities team in the opening of play parks. The service resumed by mid-July and with some enhancements to deal with tourism related pressures;
- garden waste collections were suspended for 6-7 weeks until staff could be brought back safely to the work place or borrowed from other teams. Collections resumed on 11<sup>th</sup> May. To compensate householders for 3 or 4 missed collections, the current year collection permits were extended by a period of 8 weeks beyond the expiry at the end of June. The new collection year will start on 31<sup>st</sup> August. Renewals of the annual permits for the service were also delayed until 15<sup>th</sup> June and to ensure continuity of service customers are required to pay before 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2020;
- the bulky uplift service was suspended until early July. This also disrupted service income;
- all Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs) in Scotland closed initially at the end of March. A national approach to coordinating re-opening in a planned and risk assessed way led to 16/21 centres re-opening in the first phase and by 1<sup>st</sup> June and the Portree Centre opened on 15<sup>th</sup> June with the additional control of a booking system. Plans for others were developed and discussed with local Members. These all have site restrictions, licensing compliance or other staffing issues to resolve. Lairg HWRC re-opened on the 6<sup>th</sup> July and Bonar Bridge is scheduled to re-open on the 10<sup>th</sup> August. Staffed community skips in Sutherland will open the week beginning 10<sup>th</sup> August. Remaining sites will all re-open by 24<sup>th</sup> August. To manage the surge in waste expected at HWRCs risk assessments agreed with Trade Unions and Police Scotland identified risks to manage associated with social distancing requirements, traffic management and potential abusive behaviour towards staff. Mitigation has included:
  - introduction of at least one extra member of staff on site to control access at the gate whilst also ensuring adequate supervision of waste being deposited;
  - control of vehicles queueing to enter site to ensure queues did not impede the road network;
  - reducing opening hours to ensure that suitable staffing levels could be maintained within the available staffing budget;
  - individual site risk assessments, resulting in site layouts being amended to facilitate social distancing. new signage hand sanitisation stations installed;
  - staff are not permitted to assist site users to load waste into containers to ensure social distancing controls were maintained; and
  - prioritising the types of waste to be deposited for efficient and safe throughput. This meant prioritising highest-need use (excess black bag waste), restricting the quantity of waste delivered (small loads delivered in cars only) to reduce time spent on site on site by individual users and increase the number of users that were able to access the service and limits on the number of users on site at any one time to maintain social distancing;
- at the time of writing the range of material accepted at the larger HWRC's includes: general waste, cardboard, garden waste, scrap metals, wood and electrical items;
- we are working to enable vans/trailers containing household waste to access centres from 24<sup>th</sup> August and at our larger sites an on-line booking system will

be in place. This will be confirmed through public communications and messaging;

- with an agreed budget saving to make from HWRCs opening hours, our centre opening hours will remain adjusted. Restrictions on construction and demolition waste agreed in November 2019 will be implemented from 24<sup>th</sup> August as well;
- some contracts for waste haulage and treatment were suspended. They have since been reinstated. The waste team has worked with the procurement service to negotiate the extension of some service contracts within the resources agreed for operations; and
- demand reduced from commercial premises for waste collections as business closed during lockdown. The team is focused on resuming this service and recovering income.

#### 5.20 Environmental Health Services

All proactive environmental health statutory work was suspended affecting inspection programmes. This included statutory duties in relation to food safety; animal health and welfare; health & safety at work and monitoring of private water supplies. All on-site reactive environmental health work was initially suspended including responding to complaints, enquiries and pest control unless significant public health risks were identified.

5.21 The environmental health team continued to respond to demand for reactive work that did not require on site work. This included work on export health certificates, imported fish certificates, food safety, shellfish movement documents, work on planning applications and funding bids to the Government for air quality and private water supply grants.

5.22 As the relaxation of the lock-down has progressed, the environmental health team have resumed statutory duties where permitted and possible given Covid restrictions. On-site inspections are being undertaken both to external sites and to commercial and domestic premises, with pre-notification where appropriate.

5.23 The team are entering a challenging period over the next few months with new priorities related to Covid19 and new duties related to Brexit being managed alongside the resumption of existing statutory functions. The team are reviewing available resources and statutory demands to plan and prioritise for this period. Key priorities will include:

- Supporting businesses to comply with Covid restrictions and responding to cases where guidance is not being followed;
- Undertaking investigations of Covid clusters and outbreaks in conjunction with NHS Highland's Health Protection team;
- Supporting food businesses in the Brexit transition to meet requirements for export and to supply export health certification;
- Follow up on other significant public health issues e.g. food hygiene complaints, private water supply failures, port health issues, non-covid19 infectious disease outbreaks, serious accidents at work, serious noise cases, wild camping issues, serious private sector housing complaints;
- Maintain key services such as animal health & welfare investigations, dog control, licensing of animal establishments, air quality monitoring, contaminated land, HMO inspections, investigation of litter, fly-tipping and abandoned vehicles;
- Continue improvements in bereavement services.

#### 5.24 Fleet

Vehicle workshops continued to operate throughout lockdown supporting our key functions to be delivered. Nationally, MOTs were suspended for HGVs; however, the fleet team introduced an additional peer checking process to provide assurance on vehicle safety for HGVs. As noted in paragraph 4.15 arrangements for fleet were adjusted to support waste collections, humanitarian assistance and covid compliant practice on social distancing and hygiene.

## **6. Learning points for service delivery, development and any further disruption**

6.1 Staff feedback in team discussions identified positive aspects of our Covid response so far. These included:

- adaptability to keep delivering and developing new services during lockdown and often without guidance;
- switching to on-line business quickly, home working, effective telephony messaging and automated payments and customers coping with that;
- a collective effort with support from other teams to borrow staff, redeploy fleet, problem solve together and turnaround public communications on service adjustments quickly
- feeling closer to communities and community groups by working together;
- improved partnership working:
  - with Trade Unions;
  - with NHS e.g. on shielding and supporting the community pharmacy network;
  - with Police Scotland on enforcement of Covid regulations; and
  - with weekly contact with Funeral Directors through additional deaths planning.
- recognition and feeling valued as key workers, delivering essential services;
- ability to work flexibly and with a range of colleagues from across the organisation and partners in order to deliver essential services; and
- routinely and confidently carrying our risk assessments for return to work.

With this experience teams can feel more confident about their resilience to further disruption.

6.2 Team discussions also acknowledged what had been difficult. This included:

- delays in some guidance nationally (e.g. Registrar changes)
- anxiety among some staff – for some this was around exposure to coronavirus in the work place, for others about home working and missing social interaction with colleagues or having child care responsibilities while working;
- manager workloads increased around managing absence, supporting staff, training staff borrowed from other teams, making service changes, long working hours and annual leave cancelled, concern about the lack of capacity to take forward service redesign and additional costs being incurred or income being lost;
- general workload concerns - coping with an increase in public enquiries as services reduced, fears of a back log of work building up (e.g. Environmental Health Team), the need to ensure manual workforce training qualifications are being updated and some teams feeling demoralised because they can see deterioration of service (ground's maintenance); and
- IT difficulties early on in lockdown (with significant progress made since then as reported to the Corporate Resources Committee on 12<sup>th</sup> August 2020).

Our approach to involving staff in risk assessments for their return to work and our agreement with Trade Unions to enable all staff to take 10 days of their annual leave by the end of August should help address some of these concerns.

6.3 Learning from our experience can help us plan service delivery and development. Aspects identified so far include:

- improved connections with communities and understanding local needs and assets which are helping to design our approach to community support co-ordination;
- reviewing the impact of a much-reduced ground's maintenance service this year and how we can work more with community groups going forward and as part of a re-launch of the amenities review;
- improved understanding of vulnerabilities within communities and the development of food poverty related programmes to help support and target our poverty work;
- the need to focus on recovering lost or disrupted income and further income generation;
- identifying how to provide an enhanced seasonal service to support communities affected by tourism better and to improve visitor experience;
- a review of our public convenience provision to improve it and make it more sustainable;
- streamlining our burials administration process and implementing the recommendations of the lean review (being reported to the redesign Board and Audit and Scrutiny Committee in September 2020);
- pressing on with the lean review planned for food safety inspections;
- taking the learning from the corporate approach to procuring personal protective equipment (PPE) into the planned stores review
- our workforce planning needs to consider:
  - vulnerability in our workforce, whether from age or ill health. This includes considering other skills that manual workers have or could be trained in and how we can support them to stay well and productive at work;
  - promoting the supports in place to help staff deal with difficult or upsetting work situations (e.g. staff involved with bereavement services);
  - more opportunities for cross team working and joint problem solving; and
  - the likelihood of more home working with a need to review of core hours and flexible working, new protocols around support at home, staff wellbeing, keeping in touch and managing performance.

6.4 One of the commercial learning points was around our inability to respond quickly to new demand for garden waste collections as recycling centres were closed. Two actions are now being pursued:

- improving our technology and processes to sell permits to new customers. While all resource is focused on retaining nearly around 30,000 customers in the scheme for another year we have a delay in accepting new customers. We have now identified a new IT solution to make it easier for customers to buy into the scheme. We are working with ICT to get this established;
- we are keen to expand the garden waste service to other areas. This is limited by the existing vehicle and collection staff resource. From September 2020, the service will be able to expand the collections to an additional 1030 householders within Dornoch. Ideally, we would expand the service where there are significant housing completions around Inverness and Nairn. The service is carrying out a route optimisation project for this area to identify the additional staff and fleet resources required and whether the charge paid would cover these costs.

## **7. Contributing to the Council's Recovery Plan**

- 7.1 The Council's Recovery Plan is reported to the Recovery Board and to each meeting of the Council. One workstream is led by the service on community engagement. There are two separate reports being considered on the agenda for this meeting relating to this workstream: the framework for involvement and participation and the approach to developing and improving customer contact and citizen relationships.
- 7.2 Other workstreams affecting all services include:
- Workforce Planning – the Redesign Board is overseeing the approach. Work is underway in the service to map and base-line our workforce.
  - Service Redesign – this was stalled for the new service during lockdown and work is underway to identify changes needed. This will include our learning from our Covid response.
- 7.3 All services are working to conclude these tasks by the end of September. Proposals for change will then have to reflect our budget position and Council priorities.

Date: 10.8.20

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