

<b>Agenda Item</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Report No</b>	<b>BIDS/014/20</b>

## **THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL**

**Committee:** **Black Isle, Dingwall and Seaforth Committee**

**Date:** **13 October 2020**

**Report Title:** **Improving Participation and Involvement with Communities**

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

### **1. Purpose/Executive Summary**

- 1.1 The onset of covid-19 has resulted in an overwhelming surge in local community involvement and action which presents an opportunity for all to change how we work together. An Engagement Framework was agreed by the Council's Recovery Board and subsequently at the August meeting of the Communities and Place Committee. This framework aims to gather information about recent experience and impacts of covid on local communities but also to set a framework for going forward on how to improve involvement and participation with our communities – locally and strategically. This report provides Members with an update on the recent community conversation with groups in Black Isle, Dingwall and Seaforth. It also considers next steps for the area, including some of the key areas for shared work and focus that are already established within the community, recent developments and potential next steps for improving involvement between the local Committee and community.

### **2. Recommendations**

- 2.1 Members are asked to:
- Consider and discuss the feedback from the Black Isle, Dingwall and Seaforth community conversation;
  - Agree to a Member workshop to consider how this committee wants to engage and involve communities going forward;
  - Agree to workshop session(s) with community groups from across the area to consider areas for joint work.

### **3. Implications**

- 3.1 Resource: There are no direct resource implications as a result of this report, officer support for ongoing engagement activity and member workshops will be contained within current resources and the prioritisation of tasks.

- 3.2 Legal: There are no legal implications. The approach outlined in this report will help the Council to meet its statutory duties under the Community Empowerment legislation.
- 3.3 Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural): Improving community involvement and participation is a core strategic priority of the Council. Engagement with equalities groups through the Engagement Framework will help to inform individual priorities of the recovery plan.
- 3.4 Climate Change/Carbon Clever: There are no Climate Change implications. The on-line engagement proposed would avoid any carbon emissions associated with travel.
- 3.5 Gaelic: There are no Gaelic implications.

#### **4. Background**

- 4.1 One strand of the Council's Recovery Plan is Community Empowerment and a core area for action within this priority is to better understand the experience and impacts of covid-19 on our communities and individual groups. This also includes understanding the learning from the response efforts, understanding needs and actions required to mitigate impacts on specific groups and to serve as a basis for establishing priorities for communities moving forward.
- 4.2 This Engagement Framework was approved by the Recovery Board on 28 July 2020 and subsequently by the Communities and Place Committee on 19 August 2020. The onset of covid-19 has resulted in an overwhelming surge in local community involvement and action which presents an opportunity for all to change how we work together and how we as an organisation can improve how we involve our communities. The aim is therefore for this to be an ongoing engagement framework which will support one of the Council's core strategic commitments; to improve our working relationship with communities and encourage greater involvement in service design, priority setting and delivery.
- 4.3 This report outlines the feedback from the community conversation held with Black Isle, Dingwall and Seaforth community support groups. The report also considers next steps for the area, including some of the key areas for shared work and focus that are already established within the community, recent developments and potential next steps for improving involvement between the local Committee and community going forward.

#### **5. Community Conversation Feedback**

- 5.1 During late August and September 2020, a series of fourteen Community Conversations were arranged in order to hear from local community groups and organisations who provided support to their communities during and after the Covid lockdown period. Many groups continue to provide support to their community. The sessions were led by the Leader of the Council, Cllr Margaret Davidson and Cllr Allan Henderson, Chair of the Communities and Place Committee along with the relevant local area committee Chair.
- 5.2 The aim of these conversations was to hear and learn from people who have been directly involved in supporting their community and to use this feedback to help inform the Council's Recovery Plan and how we move forward together with local communities. Key areas of investigation were to ask what worked well during the

period and what could have worked better, including the role of the Council; what have the impacts of Covid and the lockdown period been on local communities; and importantly, for groups to share their views on change or what may be a priority for their community going forward.

5.3 The Black Isle, Seaforth and Dingwall conversation was held on 14<sup>th</sup> September. This session was hosted by Cllr Margaret Davidson – (Chair), Leader of HC and Cllr Gordon Adam – Chair of Black Isle, Seaforth and Dingwall Committee. Groups in attendance at the Black Isle, Seaforth and Dingwall conversation included:

- Transition Black Isle
- Dingwall Noticeboard - Food Share
- Cromarty Care Project
- Cromarty Community Council
- Heights Hub
- Kessock Kindness
- Dingwall Community Fridge

#### 5.4 **Key issues**

Several key issues emerged during the discussions which centred on the themes of communications, funding, volunteer capacity and local resilience. Key points on each are outlined below:

##### **Communications:**

- ‘Choke points’ were perceived in the early stages of lockdown regarding advice and support from formal services, including the Council and supermarkets
- Involvement with wider networks such as the Black Isle Partnership, HTSI Response group were beneficial and helped to give a Highland-wide perspective and an opportunity to share information
- Black Isle Partnership played an important role in facilitating relationships between groups and agencies including the Council
- Important for communities to understand local need and what is already available in order to develop timely and practical local information about what services are available and how to access them.

##### **Funding:**

- Finding a place to store funding was problematic for start-up groups – there is a need to see how the Council could support this in the future.
- Appreciation of the funding awarded from the Ward Discretionary Budget (£500) to groups.
- Concerns were raised over securing future funding for community groups in order for local support to continue.

##### **Volunteer capacity:**

- Large number of volunteers. There needs co-ordination of where volunteers are required and where there is availability.
- Volunteer fatigue – groups and volunteers need to feel supported and groups need access to a steady supply, or some paid support, if there is a struggle to rely on volunteers.

### **Local resilience:**

- Importance of building relationships between community groups and empowering communities to support and collaborate themselves.
- Need for greater collaboration and planning between the Council and community groups
- Identifying and sharing information on successes, eg Community fridges and Larders
- Need for development officer(s) required to assist with securing funding, to help organise local recovery and act as a local navigator to services and support

### **5.5 Future planning priorities**

The session also considered what groups considered to be areas for development or priority for their community. These included:

- Green recovery – home efficiency, sustainable tourism, need to address fuel poverty with a green recovery in mind
- Unemployment – new opportunities for young people needed e.g. apprentices with Highland Council and NHS Highland as biggest employers. Also, opportunities within the tourism sector, micro entrepreneurs.
- Local empowerment – decisions made more locally, and local resilience plans needed.
- Transition from a pandemic (health) crisis to wider economic and social crisis where mental health and wellbeing services need supported.

## **6. Next Steps**

6.1 Work is ongoing to analyse the feedback from all the various sessions and draw together key messages and learning from across the Highland area. The issues identified from the Black Isle, Dingwall and Seaforth conversation reflect some early themes across many of the conversations such as the importance of local networks, local resilience and concerns over increasing mental health issues, unemployment and poverty. A number of these will be explored in more detail through a survey with all groups but some will also be picked up through our engagement with specific communities of interest e.g. disabled people, care experienced young people, vulnerable families. An update on the themes arising to date from all local sessions was shared in a briefing circulated to all Members on Monday 5<sup>th</sup> October and an updated report will be provided for the Communities and Place Committee in November.

6.2 As noted earlier in this report, the current growth in community action presents an opportunity to establish stronger and improved networks for community involvement and participation in Council service design and priority setting. Recent events also highlight a change in the nature of relationships with communities, working jointly to support communities but also in many places, communities taking the lead on support. Improving local decision making and community involvement within this context continues to be a priority for the Council. Local engagement will also help to provide a focus for taking forward and developing the Council's place-based approach within local areas. This includes developing positive relationships and involvement of partners and communities, understanding our local priorities, understanding our resources, understanding our performance and improving how decisions are made locally.

6.3 Within the Black Isle, Dingwall and Seaforth area, there are already strong networks and partnerships which have provided a focus in recent years and an opportunity to build upon these within the current context. *Wellbeing in the Black Isle*, alongside the Community Partnership has provided a strong focus on mental health, wellbeing and the impacts from suicide. Given the feedback regarding the growth in mental health and wellbeing issues, this partnership is likely to be important moving forward.

The aim of the Mid Ross Community Partnership is to help reduce inequality and improve outcomes for the residents of Mid Ross through engaging with communities to identify the priorities they have and the issues that are affecting them and seeking to help co-produce solutions to them. Following ongoing engagement and developing targeted draft locality plans the key themes coming through for action include:

- Employment and Skills
- Living on a Low Income
- Young People
- Community Safety and Well Being
- Transport

Mid Ross Community Partnership have recognised however the need to review partnership priorities in light of covid and the change in focus and emerging issues facing their communities. These are likely to include a focus on:

- Mental Health and Wellbeing
- Drug and Alcohol
- Employability, volunteering and training
- Digital inclusion
- Food poverty

The Black Isle Partnership, building on recent covid-19 learning, has been developing priorities for their communities with a strong focus on resilience.

6.4 It is important to recognise that resilience response both from both Black Isle and Dingwall and Seaforth communities and the Council continues. Guidance and response to changing regulation and local outbreaks will mean that the nature of this support will vary over the coming months. Support to self-isolate is likely to be required, along with food support to individuals facing food insecurity as changes in personal circumstance emerge. The Council will continue to work with local groups to provide this support to individuals and refer on local requests if permission from individuals is given. As noted in the report to the July Council meeting, the Community Support Co-ordination role continues to be developed. The purpose of these roles is to work with local groups on the co-ordination of continued humanitarian support and targeting of support to those who need it most. The roles will also help to develop our place-based approach by supporting greater involvement and participation between the Council and community and taking an enabling role to support and empower communities who wish to do more.

6.4 Work to focus on priorities for the area must be taken forward in cognisance of the continued resilience approach. However, it is recommended that following on from the community conversation, a Members' workshop is held to consider the emerging themes, the potential priorities and how groups and networks from across the area could be brought together to develop areas for joint work. A wider community workshop could then follow to explore these areas for joint action with local partners.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Community and Place

Date: 5 October 2020

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