

Agenda Item	6
Report No	CP/03/21

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: Communities and Place

Date: 24 February 2021

Report Title: Progress report on the Framework for Community Participation and Involvement

Report By: Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 One of the Council's core strategic commitments is to improve our working with communities and encourage greater involvement in service design, priority setting and delivery. This is also reflected in the Council's Recovery Plan, with Community Empowerment a key priority. As part of the Recovery Plan, this Committee agreed a [framework for engagement and involvement](#) with our communities in August 2020. The aim was to help us to better understand the impact of covid on our communities and individual groups; to understand the learning from the response efforts; to understand need and actions required to mitigate impacts on specific groups and to serve as a basis for establishing priorities for communities moving forwards.
- 1.2 An update on the progress of this and key learning from early engagement was considered by the committee in November 2020. Since then, there has been a significant shift in the trajectory of the pandemic and a return to full humanitarian response from both the Council and its third sector partners. Inevitably, the intended framework – and recovery plan actions - require to be adjusted in order to reflect the immediate focus which is support for individuals and communities. It is also important to reflect that this latest period of lockdown and response will also lead to different challenges and issues for our communities that must be captured and considered going forward. This report outlines the proposed adjustments to this timetable.
- 1.3 In addition to the above, a motion was agreed at Council on 7 January 2021, which focused on support to communities and community groups during this latest period of lockdown. This report provides an update on the actions already under way and taken to implement this motion.

2.

Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

- note the engagement and support for third sector groups since then end of last year, including a weekly written briefing to over 400 community bodies, setting up 6 new local resilience networks, a new resource pack for information and signposting on mental health and wellbeing support, ongoing support and information to help people experiencing food and fuel poverty and the additional Covid ward funding availability designed to be even more accessible;
- note the action underway by the Highland Third Sector Interface (HTSI) to understand the impacts of covid on volunteering as recently reported to the Highland Community Planning Partnership;
- note how the motion agreed at Council will be progressed as outlined in section 6 of the report and in appendix 1, with the new action on a weekly virtual briefing commencing week beginning 15th February and reviewed after 3 months;
- note the update on the progress against the participation and engagement framework including the shift in timescales due to the latest lockdown period;
- agree to the revised timescales proposed for the Recovery Plan actions outlined in 7.5 and note that further actions will be developed based on the learning from this latest period and brought to this next committee for consideration.

3. Implications

3.1 Resource: Most engagement work outlined within the framework will be undertaken internally or in partnership with our Third Sector or Community Planning Partners. Wherever possible, this will be incorporated into existing work with service users and groups. It is important that engagement work of this nature is embedded within all service structures across the organisation going forward. Some external support is likely to be needed for specific communities of interest where expertise in engagement is required. The costs of this will be met from within existing resources.

3.2 Legal: This work will contribute to developing our next set of Equality Outcomes currently due in April 2021 which will support our compliance with legal equality duties and community empowerment legislation.

3.3 Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural): The Equality and Human Rights Commission continues to remind public bodies of their ongoing statutory duties when making decisions during and regarding the pandemic to take account of the Public Sector Duty to consider eliminating discrimination, advancing equality and fostering good relations. Additionally, the Fairer Scotland Duty requires the Council to take socio-economic disadvantage into account when making strategic decisions. An important outcome of this engagement therefore is that the feedback will help inform the Equality Impact Assessment and Fairer Scotland Duty Assessment of the Council's Recovery Plan. Engagement with equalities groups will also help to inform individual priorities of the recovery plan and the review of the Council's Equalities Outcomes, due April 2021.

3.4 Climate Change / Carbon Clever and Gaelic - There are not considered to be any implications. Engagement is currently undertaken virtually or by telephone and without the need for staff travel.

3.5 Risk: There have been delays in progressing some areas of work due to the changing nature of the pandemic and the need to refocus on resilience activity and support for resilience groups. In addition, other new and additional work undertaken by the Policy and Ward Management Teams needs to be accommodated. This is included in the separate report to this Committee on Service Covid impacts and adjustments. The framework therefore requires to be reprioritised to take account on this but also build in the learning from this latest period of lockdown. There may be some challenges in engaging with particularly vulnerable groups. It is therefore proposed to work with trusted third parties or seek external support in order to mitigate this risk.

4. Background

4.1 One of the Council's key strategic priorities within its Corporate Plan is to:

Work to invigorate local democracy and put our communities at the heart of the design and delivery of services at a local level. We will also develop the capacity of communities to decide and deliver their local priorities.

The empowerment theme of the Council's Recovery Plan focuses on developing this priority further but within the context of the ongoing pandemic and with a view to recovery and renewal. This focuses on taking forward our placed based approach to planning, designing and delivering services which would include: new ways of working with communities, including whether there are new ways of running services locally; new ways of supporting community groups and bodies; and greater involvement of communities in service design, priority setting and delivery.

4.2 An engagement framework to support this overall approach was agreed at the July Recovery Board and subsequently at this Committee in August. The framework will support the aim of better understanding the experience and impacts of covid-19 on our communities and individuals. It will also help gather learning from the response efforts, understand needs and potential areas for action in order to mitigate the impacts of the virus and the associated measures introduced to restrict its spread.

4.3 An update on progress against the framework was provided to the November Committee which detailed the progress and key learning messages from initial engagement, particularly with community groups. Inevitably, progress against the framework has been disrupted as the direction of the pandemic has changed and with the return to lockdown and refocused resilience activity from both the Council and the community.

4.4 The report provides Members with an update on current resilience activity and engagement with community groups. It also provides Members with an update on the actions taken to take forward the motion agreed at Council on 7 January that focused on support for community groups and their resilience activity through this latest lockdown period. The final section of the report outlines progress against the engagement framework and seeks Member approval for readjusting the Recovery Plan

actions which this framework underpins, in recognition of the return to lockdown and refocused resilience activity. It should be noted that it is anticipated new actions will be brought forward following the learning from this latest period of lockdown and the issues which will emerge from this.

5. Community Resilience Group Support Update

- 5.1 With the changing picture of the pandemic in the week prior to Christmas, and the return to complete lockdown on 4 January 2021, the Council's and community resilience efforts stepped up to support the increased number of requests being received from individuals requiring to self-isolate, from individuals struggling financially and from people previously shielding who were concerned about going out and had no other supports in place.
- 5.2 In addition to the increased humanitarian support, there was a review of the feedback received from community groups during the 14 community conversations held in the Autumn. This was to ensure that the Council was responding and supporting groups effectively. Key areas for development highlighted from these sessions and reported to committee in November included:
- Building on community networks – building on the strength of community support/peer networks in place as a place to work better together and facilitating the development of networks in areas whether these are not currently in place.
 - Improving communication of key messages and information to groups and the wider community sector but also sources of information on where to access key supports for supporting communities e.g. social care, mental wellbeing.
 - Addressing the increasing challenge and issues related to mental health and wellbeing. – to ensure that groups have access to key information and sources of support to be able to signpost individuals and seek support and advice.
 - Addressing food insecurity, food poverty and fuel poverty. Ongoing joint work to support individuals and families is crucial and to ensure groups are aware of the range of support systems in place and available for individuals facing financial insecurity and have access to supplies to continue resilience support.
- 5.3 In light of the changing picture and with the learning in place from phase 1 lockdown, the following actions have taken place in order to support groups:
- 5.3.1
- Weekly email briefing to groups – noting the feedback from groups about the importance of information and good communication, a weekly email briefing to Community Resilience Groups and Community Councils was instigated at the beginning of January, the first going out on 6 January 2021. The weekly emails include a range of points intended to ensure groups have access to key information and ensure awareness of new developments. To date, briefings have included:
 - Fuel Support for Households
 - Food support for groups

- Information on digital support through Ability Net
- Third Sector Funding Routes
- Domestic Abuse advice and support
- Raising awareness of covid scams
- Business Grants
- Additional Covid Ward Funding and a streamlined process for accessing it
- Volunteer fatigue and where to seek support
- The roll out of the vaccination programme in Highland

The briefings also include a directory of helpful links which are added to as the weeks progress.

- 5.3.2
- Resilience networks – building on the success of existing networks in Highland, the Council has set up and is facilitating resilience networks where they didn't previously exist in Highland. These are being led by the Ward Management and Policy team and supported by the Highland Third Sector Interface and other partners as appropriate. A total of 6 new networks have taken place and the frequency going forward will vary depending upon the wish of participants. Feedback to date has been positive; a good opportunity for sharing information, raising issues and collaboration.

- 5.3.3
- Mental Health and Wellbeing – a resource pack was developed prior to Christmas outlining key sources of information and signposting routes for groups. This included key contact numbers for adult concern. The weekly email briefing also provides updates on key contacts and information. The briefing of 5-2-21 included a feature on Time to Talk Day and the range of groups and services able to support people not just at the crisis end of support but in social and befriending ways. Work is also ongoing from the Partnership Mental Health and Wellbeing Delivery Group to:

- Develop common messages for mental health and wellbeing
- Promote activities which encourage participation, social inclusion and purpose all support improved mental wellbeing
- Review and develop appropriate resources to increase confidence of staff and volunteers to support people with their mental wellbeing
- Consider the impact of Covid-19 on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people and scope opportunities for developing mental health and wellbeing promotion with youth work services

The partnership approach to mental health and wellbeing is crucial to addressing the challenges going forward.

- 5.3.4
- Tackling Food Insecurity, Food and Fuel Poverty – the Council's Welfare Support Team continue to provide direct support to individuals to maximise incomes and, as reported to Members in weekly briefings, have seen a significant increase in claimants. The new Fuel Payment Grant was announced in January to address some of the challenges being experienced in relation to fuel poverty. In excess of 300 applicants have already opted for an energy check to be undertaken by Citizens Advice. Work is ongoing to raise awareness across our communities of

the supports available and is being progressed as a key propriety of the Partnership Poverty Reduction Delivery Group. Information is being provided to groups through the weekly email briefing and resilience networks of the different welfare supports available for them to direct and advise client groups, in particularly with regards welfare and fuel and energy advice. The Council's community hubs continue to support individuals within the community with food and there has been a push to broaden food support direct to groups for onward distribution to communities either to individuals or through the growth of community fridges or food tables. The Council is co-ordinating activities directly with Fareshare in order to broaden the reach of this support and ensure all groups who require support receive it. So far this year, 14 groups have been supported and 5.36 tonnes of food or 1,218 bags have been distributed to groups.

6. Resilience Group Support Programme January 2021

6.1 At a meeting of the Council on 7 January 2021, a motion was agreed which included two elements related to supporting community resilience:

1. Prepare a Resilience Group Support Programme to provide practical support for local resilience groups as we identify funding support that can be provided or diverted.
2. Introduce a weekly virtual briefing for Resilience Groups and Community Councils convened by the Chief Executive (or appropriate ECO) and the Leader of the Council (or senior administration councillor).

6.2 Resilience Group Support Programme

As outlined above, significant work has already begun to take forward this aspect of the motion, building on the feedback received from groups in the Autumn. There has been a particular focus on ensuring improved communication to groups through both the weekly email briefing but also the resilience networks. There has also been a focus on key areas of concern or issue for groups, particularly in relation to mental health and wellbeing supports, and ensuring food support is available direct to groups.

6.3 *Volunteer fatigue*

A further area of potential concern from some groups, and noted during January's Council debate, is the concern regarding volunteer fatigue. There has been direct engagement with the Highland Third Sector Interface who lead on volunteer support across Highland about ways in which to raise awareness and address the concerns related to volunteer fatigue. The HTSI have a range of resources available to groups on their website but also a direct community group helpline to support queries and questions, provide guidance and arrange ongoing support for groups. This has been promoted across Highland through the weekly email briefings to resilience groups and across third sector networks. Awareness has also been drawn that HTSI still retain a database of volunteers of those that came forward during the national call for volunteers last year, which could provide additional support in areas. This has been promoted to groups and volunteer fatigue has been raised and discussed at the resilience networks.

6.4 HTSI have also undertaken a survey of groups and volunteers in order to understand the impacts of covid on volunteering. This was reported to the last [Community Planning Board](#). A key finding was although immediate volunteer fatigue was important, a key consideration was the impact covid has had on volunteering opportunities generally and whether people will return to roles originally held. There was therefore a key focus on what can be done to support volunteering and volunteering opportunities in the longer term. Organisations are to consider the findings in advance of the next board meeting alongside potential areas for action.

6.5 *Funding*

A further area highlighted by Members were concerns about funding of the sector and the importance of groups being aware and able to access the funding available. Whilst community resilience groups raised this as a concern in the autumn, this has not come up as an issue in most areas through the latest engagement with groups. Work has been undertaken to support groups in a number of ways:

- A review of the Council's covid-19 ward discretionary funds led to a number of changes being agreed by the Council on 7 January, most significantly to increase the funding available by £240,000 but also to increase the maximum amount that groups were able to access at any one time to £1,500. This was to increase flexibility to groups.
- There remain a number of national funds available for groups to apply to and these have been promoted to groups through the weekly email briefing. It should be noted that these are not as flexible as previous and are more focused on established groups who have had a loss of income or had to change normal delivery mechanisms. A funding hub is also available through the SCVO website, which has been promoted to groups across Highland.

An issue has been identified by a small number of groups who received funding to employ Development Officers (*mainly through Supporting Communities Funding (HIE)*) which is due to run out soon and where no alternative source of funding has been identified. The Council will continue to liaise with colleagues at HIE to explore how these organisations can be supported in the future or be considered as part of HIE's Supporting Communities approach.

6.6 More generally however, HTSI have raised concerns regarding the stability of the national funding environment for third sector organisations in the longer term. This includes the impact covid will have had on funding streams but also more general changes to the funding landscape at a national level.

6.7 It is important to recognise that the *Resilience Group Support Programme* as agreed by Council in January, requires to be an evolving programme that reflects the issues and concerns raised by groups. Processes have been established to ensure that there is ongoing feedback from groups throughout this latest lockdown period in order to identify and enable the Council and partners to address any matters arising. The initial *Programme* reflects the work outlined in section 4 and above and is set out at appendix 1.

6.8 [Weekly Virtual Briefing for Resilience Groups](#)

The other strand of the motion particularly relevant in this context, is the weekly virtual briefing for resilience groups. As noted in section 5, a weekly email briefing has already been established however the virtual briefing will augment this and provide groups with further information. This will include some of the statistical information available for Members as part of their briefings and any updates on the vaccination programme.

6.9 The weekly virtual briefing will be trialled commencing the week beginning 15 February. It will be led by the Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place and will involve Members and other officers as required. The virtual briefing will not be a live briefing but one that is recorded and made available to groups to access when convenient to them. This reflects the importance of being responsive to group needs, and reflecting the standards of community engagement, which means we should engage with our communities when convenient to them. It would not be possible to do this for all groups across Highland, therefore a recorded weekly briefing would best fit this need. This action has also been captured in the *Resilience Group Support Programme* found at appendix 1. Groups will be asked for feedback and a review after three months is planned.

7. Engagement Framework Update and Refocus

7.1 Since the last update to this committee in November 2020, a number of actions have been progressed. This includes:

- Survey of recipients of support through the Council's helpline and hub teams has been completed. This includes taking feedback from a number of people who had been shielding and received support through our services. Analysis of this is almost complete.
- Focus groups with staff providing humanitarian response have been completed. This is planned to be repeated following this latest lockdown period.
- Engagement with disabled people on experiences of covid through a local survey led by Inclusion Scotland Highland and through Inclusion Scotland Highland's annual conference where the Council and NHS were key partners. Follow up work is planned in partnership with Inclusion Scotland and NHS Highland utilising a digital platform to explore some of the issues raised in the survey in more detail. This will help to inform the Council's equalities outcomes to be considered at the next meeting of this committee as well as recovery priorities for the Council.

7.2 Not all the engagement planned has been able to progress. This is a combination of staff being diverted onto other covid focused activity, the resumption and increase of other priority work (as noted at item 8 on the agenda) and that engagement at the current time would not be possible. Further work is therefore still required in the following areas:

- Feedback from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities including Highland's refugee community.
- Engagement with youth workers and youth forums

- As part of ongoing engagement with the Gypsy Traveller community on site development, understanding of specific impacts and experience of covid.
- As part of existing engagement with homeless support providers and housing staff, understanding of client experience and impacts of covid.

7.3 It is also recognised, and picking up on a point highlighted at the last meeting of this committee, that this latest period of lockdown will have brought different challenges, issues and experiences, along with other new work for the team. It is therefore important to adjust the engagement framework to take account of this learning and build in further work, particularly with community resilience groups, in the months ahead. Some of this learning will come from engagement with groups through the resilience networks but also through a survey of community resilience groups which has been postponed until the end of this current lockdown period in order to take account and capture the perspective from this period.

7.4 Whilst the engagement framework had no specific timescales set against it, although it had been the intention to report findings across the different strands to this committee along with actions to address some of the issues raised, the Recovery Plan which this framework underpins, does. In light of the latest lockdown period, there is a need to adjust some of the timescales against actions in this plan and potentially add additional actions to reflect the latest learning. As the Committee responsible for this theme in the Recovery Plan, the report seeks permission to adjust the timescales against the following actions as follows:

7.5

Priority Area	Action	Original and Revised Timescale	Update
Sustainable Service Delivery – Humanitarian Assistance	To develop and a programme of community development and skills training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Original timescale – Dec 2020 • New timescale – Aug 2021 	CPP led and not currently prioritised due to ongoing covid resilience response. Opportunity to inform development through new resilience networks and work of HTSI in longer term resilience network planning. Development officer now in place.
Impact of Covid on Recovery	Develop shared local priorities focused on recovery and ‘people’ resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Original timescale – Dec 2020 • New timescale: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Initial priorities – May 2021 ○ Full plan – Aug 2021 	Ongoing, current focus on resilience activity and learning required from latest lockdown to inform direction going forward.
Greater Community and business involvement	Consider mechanisms to involve groups in local networks/decision making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Original timescale - Dec 2020 • New timescale – Aug 2021 	Ongoing work with local groups and support for resilience networks will help inform way forward. Further work required with Members on how local areas wish to take forward

			involvement of groups in local decision making process
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8. Next Steps

- 8.1 Moving forward, Members will recall that the engagement framework and plan is intended to be just the start of improving our participation and involvement with communities across Highland. Work with community resilience groups establishing good relationships and communication is the beginning and there is a need to consider how we progress this, based on the learning to date, across the organisation. This should include consideration of how we take forward our place-based approach to planning, designing and delivering services including new ways of working with communities; new ways of supporting community groups and bodies; and greater involvement of communities in service design, priority setting and delivery.

- 8.2 A meeting of Area Chairs on 19 February, led by the Leader and the Chair of this committee, will initially reflect on some of the learning to date and consider how we want this to look as an organisation going forward. This will inevitably reflect on potentially different approaches within our different communities. Further engagement with Members at area committee level will be progressed following this in the weeks ahead.

- 8.3 An update on the *Resilience Group Support Programme* alongside progress on the engagement framework will be presented to the next meeting of this committee.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place

Date: 1-2-21

Author: Alison Clark, Head of Policy

Resilience Group Support Programme

Priority Area	Actions	Update
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish weekly email briefing to community groups 	Commenced 6-1-21
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish weekly virtual briefing to community groups 	Commenced week beginning 15 February 2021, review after 3 months
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish resilience networks where they do not currently exist to increase communication and collaboration 	6 new networks established. First meetings all held by 26 January
Mental Health and Wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness raising of supports to resilience groups 	Resource Pack prior to Christmas Ongoing awareness raising through weekly briefings
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identification of issues or challenges through CPP and resilience networks 	To inform partnership actions
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote activities which encourage participation, social inclusion and purpose all support improved mental wellbeing 	Partnership action led by Partnership Mental Health and Wellbeing Delivery Group. Also promotion through weekly briefings to resilience networks
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review and develop appropriate resources to increase confidence of staff and volunteers to support people with their mental wellbeing 	Partnership action led by Partnership Mental Health and Wellbeing Delivery Group
Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revised Covid Ward funding criteria 	Agreed at Council on 7 January and promoted to groups
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funding sources and avenues promoted with groups 	Ongoing as any new funds emerge
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identification of funding issues or challenges 	

Priority Area	Actions	Update
Volunteering Fatigue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promotion of HTSI helpline and support for groups 	Ongoing, through weekly briefings and resilience networks
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identification of volunteering fatigue challenges 	Ongoing, through resilience networks
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consideration on long term impacts of covid on volunteering 	CPP partners to identify potential actions and report to next CPP Board 31-3-21
Food and Fuel Insecurity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promotion of benefit entitlements and sources of financial and fuel support 	Awareness raising through resilience groups, in weekly briefings and network meeting but further work required and to be progressed through Partnership Poverty Reduction Delivery Plan
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Direct food support provision to groups 	Promotion of support through weekly briefings, Council networks and Third Sector networks. Work with Fareshare to improve collaboration and reach.
