

Agenda Item	8
Report No	CIA/13/21

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: City of Inverness Area Committee

Date: 27 May 2021

Report Title: Use of City Wards Covid Response Funds

Report By: Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 Following on from the decisions made at Highland Council on 7 January 2021 which broadened the use of discretionary ward Covid funding and devolved decision-making on play areas to Area Committees, Members from 5 City Wards had requested that a portion of their Ward's remaining Covid-19 Ward Discretionary funds be used to purchase bark in order to enable local play areas to come back into use following health and safety inspections. In keeping with governance requirements, apportioning ward funding in this way requires a decision in public and approval at Area Committee.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:
- i. Agree the decision to allocate funding from Covid- 19 Ward Discretionary funds to support the provision of play park bark in the 5 City Wards as outlined at paragraph 6.1.

3. Implications

- 3.1 **Legal implications:** Whilst the Council has no legal duty to provide playparks, the Council does have a legal duty in relation to the Health and Safety of playparks under its ownership. This means that checks must be undertaken regularly.
- 3.2 The Management of Health and Safety at Work Act 1992 requires a regular risk assessment of play areas. This entails examination of the equipment, the site and the

surrounding area for any/all potential hazards that may be encountered by the playground user. This involves checking site layout, access points and all equipment meeting current standards. High risk safety defects must be actioned to maintain the site safe for use. Any maintenance costs or replacing end of life items must be met from the existing service budget or alternative sources identified.

- 3.3 **Resource implications:** the report asks Members to agree the decision to allocate a portion of the remaining Covid-19 Ward Discretionary Budget for 5 City Wards on play park bark for existing sites within the Wards to enable them to re-open. This is in line with the Council decision on 7 January 2021, enabling Members to decide to set aside existing covid monies for spend on projects to assist children and adults post covid, such as contributing to play parks and the decision to devolve decision-making on play parks to Area Committees. In these particular circumstances, and responding to the urgency to reopen closed play parks, the advance purchase of bark was undertaken as Members agreed to report the matter for agreement at this Committee meeting.
- 3.4 **Community impacts (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island):** Reallocating covid Ward funds will result in a reduced sum being available to support vulnerable communities within the Ward on other resilience related support. The use of Covid Ward funds in this way will however help local families to enjoy good quality play equipment. Wider engagement with communities on play park provision is planned for the months ahead in order to better understand community priorities and different ways in which to deliver play provision across the City. This will include consideration of wider impacts including any potential barriers for people protected under the equality act, for example children and families affected by disability.
- 3.5 **Risk implications:** There is a risk that allocating Covid-19 funds at this point for other purposes may result in the Ward running out of budget to support other local resilience activity, depending upon how long the pandemic and response lasts for.
- 3.6 As reported to the Council meeting in January, Service maintenance budgets are no longer sufficient to provide preventative maintenance or to maintain and retain the number of play areas currently in use. In keeping with the Council's decision in January 2021 work is underway with Members to explore how best to support play provision in the future including other sources of funding and local community priorities.
- 3.5 **Climate Change / Gaelic implications:** There are no implications

4. Background

- 4.1 It was agreed at a meeting of the Highland Council on 7 January 2021 that Wards with unspent covid-19 funds could spend this on projects to assist children and adults post covid, especially within deprived areas. This was to include contributing to play park equipment and a process was agreed for progressing this. Should Members within a Ward wish to set aside a portion of their remaining Covid-19 Ward Discretionary fund for

other purposes than originally intended, then this would be agreed at a meeting of the appropriate Area Committee.

- 4.2 The January Council meeting also agreed to devolve decision-making on play areas to Area Committees. To take this forward there were to be discussions in Ward meetings on play areas and at least the first round of these meetings has taken place, resulting in the decisions to invest in play grade bark.
- 4.3 This report seeks agreement of the decision to set aside a proportion of covid ward funds in 5 City wards for spend on play areas and specifically for the provision of play grade bark. Whilst the funding allocation rests at a ward level and individual wards will identify how they wish to allocate funding for their ward, the governance arrangements require the decision making on allocation of funding to be made at the Area Committee.

5. Current Covid-19 Ward Discretionary Budget Position

- 5.1 All wards across Highland were awarded a sum of £16,000 in April 2020 to support covid resilience activity. This was augmented by £10,000 in 20 covid-vulnerable communities across the area. This meant that some wards across Highland had up to £36,000 to support covid resilience activity whilst others between £16,000 and £36,000. In addition, because the additional £10,000 for covid vulnerability was awarded on a community basis, Crown and Haugh and Hilton communities were specifically allocated £10,000.
- 5.2 In January 2021, it was agreed by the Council to equalise these funds across all Wards in Highland, therefore resulting in a total covid allocation of £36,000 per ward.¹ It was also agreed at Council on 7 January 2021 that to increase flexibility, there was no requirement to spend the additional monies on the covid-vulnerable communities originally identified and that the sums available per ward could be deployed across the area as appropriate. It was also agreed that any covid funds remaining at the end of the financial year 2020/21 could be carried forward.
- 5.3 In addition to unspent covid funding carried forward from 2020/21, wards also have access to £100,000 place-based investment funding for 2021/22 and an additional £10,000 for 2021/22 for the main ward discretionary budget. A summary of this funding can be found at appendix 1.

6. City Wards Members Decisions

- 6.1 During March and early April 2021, a number of play parks across the City required to be temporarily closed as a result of health and safety faults identified in inspections. The specific need was to replace the bark play surface however after budget reductions there were no funds remaining within the service budget. Following discussions at Ward Business Meetings, 5 City Wards requested to allocate some of

¹ https://www.highland.gov.uk/download/meetings/id/77563/item_18_proposals_for_covid-19_ward_funds_and_investing_in_play_areas

their remaining covid ward funds to enable the affected play areas to reopen. This was from the following wards:

- Ward 12 - £19,687.50
- Ward 13 - £875
- Ward 15 - £700
- Ward 17 - £2,100
- Ward 19 - £1,750

6.2 In recognition of the urgency of reopening sites, and at the request of Members within the 5 affected City Wards, officers proceeded to order replacement bark under delegated powers and reopen the affected play parks. The decision to spend these funds in this manner now requires to be formally agreed at CIAC.

6.3 As agreed at the Council meeting in January, the budget and decision making on play areas has been devolved to Area Committees to support a place-based approach to developing a sustainable approach to the play estate. Work is ongoing across Highland to review play park provision and as part of this, wider engagement with communities on play park provision is planned for the months ahead in order to better understand community priorities and different ways in which to deliver play provision across the City.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Communities and Places

Date: 12 May 2021

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Summary of Ward Funding Available 2021/22

Funding Stream	Total Fund (per Ward)	Governance	Comment
Covid Ward Funds	£36,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ward Manager delegated decision making under £10,000 • Can be reallocated for other priorities but allocation to be agreed at Area Committee 	<p>Agreed in April 2020 and equalised at Highland Council in January 2021.</p> <p>Also agreed that any unspent funds can be carried forward to 21/22</p>
Ward Fund 2021/22	£26,000 (Additional £10k for 2021/22)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ward Manager delegated decision making under £10,000 • Over £10,000 to committee 	
2021/22 Place Based Investment Fund	£100,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocations (or specific sums) on spend to be agreed at Area Committee. 	<p>Agreed at Highland Council on 4 March 2021.</p> <p>Funding to be committed during 2021/22</p>