

(i) Mr A Graham

To the Chair of the Communities & Place Committee

**"What is the current position with the re-opening of Council Service Points?"**

*15 Service Points that provide Registrar services have been open since 29<sup>th</sup> June 2020 with Covid compliance in place for Registrar appointments permitted for aspects of birth registrations, marriages and civil partnerships. In total, with limited face to face contact in 2020 the team registered 1880 births, 2688 deaths, administered 796 marriages undertaking around half of them and 1 civil partnership.*

*Most Service Points have also been open throughout the pandemic period for staff to attend to provide telephony and on-line support and for accessing records held only in hard copy. Customer Services staff have remained busy throughout this time; in 2020/21 they handled 177,432 calls and responded to an increase in email and online chat and an increase in automated payments, amounting to a further 130,000 contacts. In quarter 1 2021/22 Customer Services staff answered 37,451 calls with a further 8,047 contacts through the automated payment service.*

*Service Points would normally provide a location for helping people with housing needs and appointments and it is worth noting that the housing service dealt with 773 homeless presentations from July 2020 to May 2021 without face to face Service Point access. During 2020/21 the Welfare team also responded to 6,166 enquiries using telephony and web services, identifying in excess of £6m in benefit gains.*

*Services have continued throughout the pandemic period with very limited face to face contact. Moving forward, the intention is to improve the service by developing a blended model of service delivery that:*

- continues to use telephony and web services especially where these are preferred by customers;*
- provides face to face services where that is needed, recognising the need to provide more support to vulnerable people; and*
- develops a new outreach service with potential to hold pop up surgeries and deploy our mobile units for clinics (potentially from the autumn as the focus currently on vaccination and community testing support).*

*In re-opening face to face services in Service Points we need to make sure this is done safely. There are four issues to address as noted below.*

- 1. The need to comply with national guidance with physical distancing and hygiene measures required. This includes assessing spacing, ventilation, maximum room capacities, controls in shared areas, avoidance of queues and the use of booked appointments to control access. It is not known at the time of writing if all of these requirements would remain in place when the Highlands may move to Level 0;*
- 2. Making sure property is Covid secure. Property surveys are currently underway. It is the case that some sites will be easier to re-open than others. Reasons for this relate to the size of the buildings, the ability to ensure social distancing and the need to follow ventilation guidance. We also need to assess if interview rooms are usable or whether alternative spaces will be needed. We also need to make any adjustments to the layout (e.g. screens, space marking and hand sanitizer stations). Some service points are shared with HLH and we are linking with them on suitable re-opening. Where other providers are co-located with Service Points, e.g. SDS and DWP, we need to coordinate face to face services and schedule safe appointment space.*

3. *Making sure property is available. Alternative sites are being found for Gairloch and Dornoch as property owners have ended leases. Improvements at the Town House in Inverness are due to complete at the end of July 2021.*
4. *Mitigating risks for staff and customers by undertaking risk assessments with staff and in liaison with Trade Unions. Learning from the experience of Registrars will be helpful for other staff teams providing services from Service Points.*

*The current priority is to prioritise welfare services targeted towards specific areas of customer demand. In all cases where customers request face-to-face meetings these will be accommodated where practical and using an appointment system initially to ensure customer and staff confidence. Welfare appointments can take around 2 hours, so a return to face to face needs to be carefully planned and will only be possible, initially at least, in those sites where there is sufficient ventilation and air flow.*

*Proposed dates for welfare appointments in Service Points able to safely accommodate them are being identified and will be confirmed during June 2021.*