

Agenda Item	8
Report No	WRSL/023/21

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh Committee

Date: 4 November 2021

Report Title: Use of Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh 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 Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh Ward Members have requested that a portion of the Ward's remaining Covid-19 Ward Discretionary funds be used to support local play areas as outlined in the report. This is in line with the decision taken at a meeting of the Highland Council on 7 January 2021. As this will repurpose the funding, approval at Area Committee is required.

2. Implications

2.1 Resource: The Council agreed in January 2021 that the budget and decision-making for play areas are devolved to Area Committees. The Council also agreed that unspent Covid budget and any place-based investment funds could be allocated to support the four harms of Covid. The current value of the backlog of repairs and replacing play items and surfaces for Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh is £344,415. This report asks Members to consider a proposal to allocate a portion of the remaining covid-19 ward discretionary budget for the WRSL ward on play provision for existing sites within the ward. The proposal will retain a small portion of the covid Ward Budget for direct covid/resilience needs.

2.2 Legal: 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 annually. 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, play surfaces 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 resources available; otherwise items are removed for health and safety compliance. This includes the need to have sufficient play bark in place.

- 2.3 Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural): reallocating covid ward funds will result in a reduced sum being available to support vulnerable communities within the ward on resilience related support. The repurposed Covid ward funds will however support communities in very rural areas and help local families to enjoy good quality play equipment. Proposals for play parks should identify, through screening for impact, if there are any potential barriers for people protected under the equality act, for example children and families affected by disability.
- 2.4 Climate Change / Carbon Clever / Gaelic – no implications
- 2.5 Risk: 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 local resilience activity, depending upon how long the pandemic and response lasts for.
- 2.6 Maintenance budgets are insufficient to inspect, maintain and retain the number of play areas currently in use. Additional new equipment puts further pressure on this budget. The Scottish Government announced a Play Park Renewal Programme with investment for the next four years. The first tranche of funding has been announced for Highland Council and this will be subject to a report to the Communities and Place Committee on 10th November 2021. The funding in year 1 is £5m capital funding nationally, with £234k allocated to Highland Council. The backlog in replacement and repairs reported to the Council in January 2021 was estimated at £3.4m. This programme, supported by local funds will help to reduce risks and provide investment in play areas over the next four years.

3. Recommendations

3.1 Members are asked to:

- i) Consider the proposal to allocate £10,000 from the remaining Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh (WRSL) Covid19 Ward Discretionary funds to support the provision of play equipment in the WRSL Ward in consultation with amenities staff.
- ii) Note that next steps to progress this work will include confirmation of any other funding available, the type of equipment to be installed based on the budget available and consideration of ongoing maintenance associated with any equipment installed. This will involve the amenities team and communities.

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. 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.

This report seeks consideration of a proposal from the Wester Lochalsh, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh Members to set aside a proportion of their covid funds for spend on play areas within their communities.

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. Further equalisation funding across wards was also agreed - the total available covid-19 ward discretionary funds for WRSL was £36,000. It was 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. A summary of the funds available, spent and summarised below:

Area	Budget	Spend to 18-10-21	Balance
Ward wide	£36,000	£24,861.66	£11,138.34

6. Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh Members' Proposal

- 6.1 Following discussion at a Ward Business Meeting on 18 October 2021, WRSL Members agreed to pursue a proposal to set aside a proportion of their covid-19 ward discretionary budget for the purpose of play equipment in the ward. It is proposed:
- To retain £1,138.34 of covid-19 funds to allow for further support around the provision of resilience support including food.
 - To allocate £10,000 to be used to support play equipment across the area, recognising the importance of play to children generally and particularly at the current time.
- 6.2 Discussion has been undertaken with the amenities team and relevant communities to identify how best to take forward the spend of the funds identified.

Designation: Carron McDiarmid, Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place

Date: 20 October 2021

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