

Agenda Item	7
Report No	ECI/4/21

## HIGHLAND COUNCIL

**Committee:** Economy and Infrastructure

**Date:** 4 February 2021

**Report Title:** Covid related pressures and service prioritisation

**Report By:** Executive Chief Officer, Economy and Infrastructure

### 1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 This report provides the Committee with an assessment of the impacts of the national pandemic, including the additional Covid-related provision that is being delivered by the Service, the affect this is having on staff capacity and service delivery.

### 2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 Members are invited to note:
- i. the additional Covid-related services being delivered by the Service;
  - ii. the pressures that this puts on service delivery;
  - iii. the 4 harms posed to our staff and our customers as a consequence; and
  - iv. the effect on services in a number of areas as set out in Section 5.

### 3. IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 **Resource** - The resource implications set out in this report largely relate to staff capacity. However, it should be noted that the national pandemic has impacted on the ability to generate income across a range of areas and this is reflected in more detail in the revenue budget monitoring report which is being considered separately by the Committee.
- 3.2 **Legal** - The Service has to operate within the nationally imposed legal restrictions and this has impacted on service delivery across a range of functions.
- 3.3 **Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural)** - The Service has a critical role to play in supporting businesses through the pandemic and this in turn has a positive impact on communities and poverty across the Highlands. Reduced capacity to deliver a small number of services will not have a differential impact on rural or island communities or on those with protected characteristics.

- 3.4 **Climate Change/Carbon Clever** - As set out in Section 5 some area-based schemes are currently adversely impacted by Covid but wider climate change activity continues.
- 3.5 **Risk** - The 4 harms of Covid are the direct health impact of the virus, other health impacts, societal impacts, and economic impacts. All pose a significant risk to the Council's overarching strategic objectives; to the delivery of core services; and to the health and wellbeing of our staff and the wider public. Risks also arise from the uncertain trajectory of the pandemic which makes it difficult to plan ahead and requires multiple contingencies to be considered and regularly reviewed. Finally, there are implications for budget management, both in terms of additional pressures and also lost income making it particularly difficult to predict service budget out-turns. It is not possible for all eventualities to be predicted or mitigated fully. However, the Service will continue to adopt a flexible and responsive approach to circumstances as they develop and attempt to mitigate these risks as much as possible. Specific risks arising from the impact on service operations include a reduction in the supervision of construction sites. Minimum staffing levels will be maintained whilst sites are operational to mitigate this risk. There is a risk to Service performance as set out in Section 6.
- 3.6 **Gaelic** - There are no direct impacts as a result of the recommendations in this report.

#### 4. **ADDITIONAL / NEW COVID RELATED PRESSURES AND SERVICES**

- 4.1 As Members are aware, the Service is responsible for the distribution of Business Closure grants. The core team in the Economy and Regeneration Service has been supplemented by the short term secondment of staff from other areas of the Directorate. This has ensured that this essential task has been given priority, and work will continue to ensure that the funding is issued as timeously as possible.
- 4.1 As members are also aware, winter gritting has been an additional challenge during this period, and efforts are being made to supplement gritting routes (particularly pavements) to ensure that the impact on the NHS is reduced as much as possible. Vaccination centres are also receiving additional attention, and this is impacting on the ability of the roads teams to carry out other work.

#### 5. **IMPACT TO SERVICE DELIVERY**

- 5.1 A number service functions have been impacted by the following Covid-related factors:
- restrictions in relation to how normal business is conducted – such as limitations on travel, physical distancing, and new regulations on the operation of certain sectors e.g. and construction sites;
  - the movement of staff to new Covid related activities – such as over 20 staff deployed to the new Covid Emergency Business Support & Grants function as set out in section 4; and
  - staff absence. Where staff absence may impact on statutory duties, staff are being deployed from elsewhere within the Service to ensure these duties are met. In the case of some teams delivering non-statutory duties, performance will be affected by staff absence and more pressing pressures elsewhere in the Service which mean that there are insufficient staff available to cover the shortfall.

5.2 These relate to operational matters which are being managed pragmatically, maintaining adherence to legal requirements, and keeping under regular review. Adjustments will be made as the restrictions and impacts of the pandemic lessen so that services can return to normal or near normal as soon as possible. The areas currently under pressure include:

- Site and laboratory sampling and testing
- Flood risk management
- Watercourse assessments
- Contract administration - tendering/awards
- Bridge assessments
- Tourism services
- Affordable housing development programme
- Commercial portfolio new sales/leases
- Roads operations
- Limited or no site visits, supervision and enforcement
- Progression of design of capital schemes
- Delay Non-urgent road repairs and maintenance
- Reduce parking enforcement
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5.3 The areas of non-statutory service delivery that can be reduced in order to manage these pressures include:

- Reduce ecological and Long Distance route maintenance activities
- Delay to development plans timescales
- Delay roll out of area based energy schemes
- Delay design of capital schemes
- Delay street lighting replacement
- Reduce lease and rent negotiations

## **6. OTHER IMPACTS**

6.1 There may be a reduction in performance as a consequence of the pressures on service delivery as follows:

- Potential to affect the delivery of capital programme - although the restrictions on the construction industry will have the greatest impact in this regard.
- Statutory Performance Indicators that may be adversely affected are particularly acute in the Planning and Building Warrant applications area, given the secondment of staff to assist with Business Grant activity.
- To date, there has been no material increase in the number of complaints due to reductions in service capacity to deliver business as usual functions.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer – Economy and Infrastructure

Date: 22 January 2021

Author: Kate Lackie - Executive Chief Officer – Performance and Governance  
Malcolm Macleod, Executive Chief Officer – Economy and Infrastructure