Agenda Item	**5**
Report No	**CP/12/21**

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee:	**Communities and Place**

Date:	12 May 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   Updates on progress against this framework are provided at each meeting of this Committee. The updates recognise the iterative and evolving nature of the framework and the need to respond to emerging circumstances. A Resilience Group Support Programme to monitor the ongoing support to resilience groups through this latest period of lockdown, was outlined and reported to the February meeting of this committee. This has continued to be a focus through the months of February to April and a further update is provided as part of this report.

1.3   The report also provides an update on the engagement work undertaken to date, the work intended to be progressed as lockdown eases and updates on the new posts of Community Support Co-ordinators and how they will support the work of the participation and involvement framework.

2.   Recommendations

2.1   Members are asked to:
- consider the update against the Resilience Group Support Programme which includes the ongoing weekly written and virtual briefings, the community resilience networks and the ongoing food support to community groups;

- note the priorities identified in relation to developing sustainable models of food support in communities and the mental health and wellbeing resources under development to support individuals and community organisations;
- note the update on the progress against the participation and engagement framework including the shift in timescales due to the latest lockdown period, with a renewed focus for engaging with equality groups as lockdown lifts;
- note the recruitment of 10 Community Support Co-ordinators and the role these posts will have in supporting a better understanding of our communities and assisting in the identification of local priorities;
- note action underway on mental health and wellbeing supports including new signposting of resources, training and other tools for community groups and that a Member seminar with NHSH is programmed for June 2021 with invites to be issued; and
- note an update will be reported to the August meeting of this Committee.

3.   Implications

3.1   Resource implications
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. As priorities begin to emerge, some may require additional funding to progress whilst others can be supported from within existing resources or new developments such as the Community Support Co-ordinators (funded by Covid grant). Where funding is required to support priorities, consideration will be required by the Council or wider partnership on how best to action.

3.2   Legal implications
The Council has a legal duty to meet the terms of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act. This includes duties to better empower and involve communities. The Council has a legal duty to publish Equality Outcomes. The new proposed set of outcomes can be found at item 6 on the agenda. This includes a specific priority to improve engagement and involvement with individuals with protected characteristics. As we move forward, it is crucial that the evolving engagement framework considers how to include and embed the views of equality groups.

3.3   Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural) implications
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.

3.4   One of the proposed Equality Outcomes includes a specific priority to improve engagement and involvement with individuals with protected characteristics. As we move forward, it is crucial that the evolving engagement framework considers how to include and embed the views of equality groups.

3.5   Climate Change implications
        There are potential opportunities to develop the community approaches to food support including community food growing which has wider positive ecological impacts. Virtual engagement with community and equality groups during the Covid period has been effective and removes the need to travel for engagement, therefore reducing carbon emissions associated with travel.

3.6   Gaelic implications
        There are not considered to be any implications.

3.7   Risk implications
        There have been delays in progressing some areas of work due to the changing nature of the pandemic and with the 2nd lockdown, the need to refocus on resilience activity and support for resilience groups.

4.   Background
4.1   One of the Council's key strategic priorities within its Corporate Plan is to:
        Deliver meaningful engagement with Highland communities, listening and responding to what we hear and encourage more community activity and community run services (outcome 6.1).
        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   Updates on progress against this framework are provided at each meeting of this committee. The updates recognise the iterative and evolving nature of the framework and the need to respond to emerging circumstances. Accordingly, given the latest lockdown and resilience approach required, the update to the February committee outlined a Resilience Group Support Programme to monitor the ongoing support to resilience groups through this latest period of pandemic. As a result of the latest period of lockdown, focus on participation and engagement has therefore been targeted at the ongoing support to groups.

4.4   An update on the Resilience Group Support Programme is included within this report alongside an update on the engagement framework.

5.   Resilience Group Support Programme Update
5.1   As reported to the February meeting of this committee, the return to lockdown in January saw an increase in humanitarian support and a review of how best to support community groups. A Resilience Group Support Programme pulled together the four

key strands of work based upon the learning from engagement with groups. The following provides an update against each of these strands of work.

5.2 ***Community Group Briefings***
Weekly written and virtual briefings continue to be circulated to community resilience groups and community councils. These briefings have covered a range of topics but regularly include:
- latest covid advice and guidance
- latest covid, vaccination and community testing updates
- NHS updates
- new funding opportunities
- welfare guidance and grants

5.3 Other topics have included information on the Scottish Parliamentary election, the Council's visitor management plan, return to schools and community asset transfer.

5.4 The weekly briefings had been designed to support groups through this latest lockdown period. Informal feedback is that these have been welcomed and appreciated over this period. As lockdown lifts, the intention is to review the briefings with groups in mid-May, to determine how best communication with groups is maintained going forward. This will form part of the next round of engagement with groups outlined at section 6.3.

5.5 ***Community Resilience Networks***
Community resilience networks continue to operate across the area. Some of the new networks have merged following feedback from groups and based upon attendance. It is important that networks reflect the needs of groups and address their needs. Some networks have already begun to look beyond the immediate resilience response building on learning to consider longer term food provision for communities and to other issues facing their communities such as tourism pressures.

5.6 Other issues emerging and being discussed by groups include:
- mental health and wellbeing continues to be a central issue being discussed locally;
- continuity and how groups intend to continue to operate including the future role of anchor organisations;
- merging of the Community Partnership and local resilience network going forward;
- discussions on shared local priorities across the ward and communities;
- focus on food share and food growing;
- employment and employability issues;
- tourism pressures and infrastructure;
- continued engagement and communication with communities e.g. one area is developing a local website; and
- funding and different funding opportunities to support local work.

5.7 ***Food and Fuel Insecurity***
The new Fuel Payment Grant was announced in January to address some of the challenges being experienced in relation to fuel poverty. The fund was extended to provide support to families for February, March and April, at £60 per month. This fund has been promoted to and through community resilience groups in email and virtual briefings and has reached 10,856 households with payments to the value of £1.9m made.

5.8 The Council continues to provide food support to individuals struggling financially and to those who have been asked to self-isolate as part of the Test and Protect system. Support for the Test and Protect system has been extended by Scottish Government until the end of June. Food support is also still being provided direct to community groups in order to continue food provision within their communities. Since last reported to this committee, 25 different groups have been supported between the beginning of February and 23 April, with 37.83 tonnes of food or 8,405 bags of food provided. Some community groups continue to provide direct food or shopping support locally whilst others have developed food tables or food fridges.

5.9 Sustainable food support and provision has emerged as a key priority for partner organisations in Highland. A strong partnership with Fareshare has developed through the pandemic and there is an opportunity to build on this as we move forwards. Food initiatives such as food tables or fridges which incorporate choice and self-preparation are considered to be less stigmatising and a number of groups have already set these up whilst others have indicated a desire to do so. There is a need for partner bodies to consider where some communities may require support to do this. There is potentially a role for the new Community Support Co-ordinators (see 7.2) in developing this approach but also wider links to the new Community Food Growing Co-ordinator and linking the opportunities for communities to develop local food growing schemes to support food initiatives within their area. This is a priority area going forwards.

5.9 Work has also been undertaken, led by NHS Highland, Highland Council, the Trussell Trust and Social Security Scotland, to roll out Money Count Sessions across Highland. These have been targeted at any organisation or group who is in a position to have a conversation with someone with money worries and aims to promote understanding of support services for money matters and confidence to have a conversation with someone about money worries. 7 sessions have been held during March and April.

5.10 *Mental Health and Wellbeing Support*
Mental health and wellbeing continues to be a key priority across Highland. This is across the spectrum of support from isolation, loneliness and anxiety through to crisis intervention. The Partnership Mental Health and Wellbeing Delivery Group has updated its action plan to reflect the emerging needs of individuals and communities. This has included:
- developing a signposting resource for people seeking support with their mental health and wellbeing. This is being finalised and will be shared with community resilience groups and other networks across Highland.
- revision of mental health training and development of online and virtual training for mental health and suicide prevention leading to the development of a joint training plan for mental health and wellbeing.
- to review and develop resources and support, including training for community groups to increase confidence to support people with their mental health.

5.11 This latter point is particularly important and has been identified by groups as a gap and a key need going forward. There are already good models of this in place in Highland and the Partnership will seek to build on this learning when developing the new training resource.

5.12 In light of the range of questions raised about mental health at the February Committee, and the additional resources targeted at mental health supports, a Member seminar will be held on mental health and wellbeing in early June. This will update Members on the range of work currently underway within the Council and NHS

Highland, together as a partnership and within our communities. Invitations for this session will be circulated shortly.

5.13   An update of the Resilience Groups Support Programme is attached at Appendix 1.

6.   Engagement Framework Update

6.1   As reported to the February meeting of this committee, 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. With restrictions beginning to ease from the end of April, it is hoped work to progress some of the intended work strands can begin. This will include:

- 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.

6.2   Further work is also planned in partnership with Inclusion Scotland and NHS Highland utilising a digital platform to explore some of the issues raised in an earlier joint survey in more detail.

6.3   A key area of work is the follow-up work with resilience groups. It is intended to survey groups in order to understand their experiences of the latest period of lockdown but this will also include questions to explore with groups whether they intend to continue and their aims for the future. As noted at 5.6, some groups have already begun these conversations. This will help us better understand how we as an organisation can support groups and may assist in directing the work of our new Community Support Co-ordinators (see section 7.2). It will also be important to review with groups the weekly community briefing approach and what communication channels groups would find helpful in the weeks ahead. The initial survey will be followed up by discussions through the resilience networks.

7.   Next Steps

7.1   The engagement framework is to help support developing and improving our involvement and relationships with community groups across Highland and their involvement with the way the Council operates. It will help support 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.

7.2   ***Community Support Co-ordinators***
As noted at previous committees, the intention has been to develop the role of Community Support Co-ordinators (CSCs). Funding for these has now been identified through Government covid-funding. There are 10 posts, one for each committee area, although they will work as part of the broader area Community Support and Ward Management team. The posts are temporary for 12 months and have recently been advertised. It is hoped to have them in post by mid-June.

7.3   Emerging from our understanding of the pandemic and the need to support working with communities, the aim of these roles is to co-ordinate and deliver

humanitarian and resilience support, building community capacity and resilience through active engagement with a range of bodies including community and public sector organisations. The posts will support engagement activity related to the implementation of the Community Empowerment Act and the Council's 'Placed Based approach', including developing local relationships and networks with community bodies, encouraging participation and involvement, with an emphasis on addressing poverty and recovery.

7.4   The CSCs will help to support a range of priority areas emerging from our learning of the pandemic. This will include areas noted in the report including:
- supporting communities to develop sustainable models of food support within communities with a link to food growing;
- sustaining engagement and communication with groups; and
- supporting resilience groups to develop next steps and identify how the Council can support their activities

7.5   These roles will also help to support a better understanding of our communities and assist to identify priorities and areas for action. An update on these roles and early work, will be reported to the August meeting of this Committee.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place

Date: 22-4-21

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Resilience Group Support Programme
Update April 2021

Priority Area	Actions	Update
Communication	• Establish weekly email briefing to community groups	Commenced 6-1-21
	• Establish weekly virtual briefing to community groups	Commenced week beginning 15 February 2021, review after 3 months
	• 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
	• Establish Community Support Co-ordinators as point of contact for resilience groups	Posts advertised end April.
Mental Health and Wellbeing	• Awareness raising of supports to resilience groups	Ongoing awareness raising through weekly briefings HOIP Delivery Group Signposting resource being finalised and will be shared with community resilience groups and other networks across Highland
	• Identification of issues or challenges through CPP and resilience networks	To inform partnership actions
	• 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
	• 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 Aim to develop a joint training plan for mental health and wellbeing. Develop resources and support, including training for community groups to increase confidence to support people with their mental health.

Priority Area	Actions	Update
Funding	• Revised Covid Ward funding criteria	Agreed at Council on 7 January and promoted to groups
	• Funding sources and avenues promoted with groups	Ongoing as any new funds emerge
	• Identification of funding issues or challenges	
Volunteering Fatigue	• Promotion of HTSI helpline and support for groups	Ongoing, through weekly briefings and resilience networks
	• Identification of volunteering fatigue challenges	Ongoing, through resilience networks
	• Consideration on long term impacts of covid on volunteering	CPP partners agreed following actions: • Promotion of volunteering app • Commitment to review approach to staff volunteering • Commitment to supporting Volunteering week
Food and Fuel Insecurity	• 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
	• 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. Develop sustainable model of food support with links to food growing and development