

COVID-19: COUNCIL RESPONSE

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Covid-19 pandemic has required an urgent, multi-agency response at national and local government level. Argyll and Bute Council has been working in partnership with community planning partners and other agencies to respond to the pandemic in Argyll and Bute and to maintain critical front line services. Reports providing a high level overview of the response have been provided to the Business Continuity Committee at its meetings on 16th April and 14th May. This report outlines council service activity since then, and covers the transition into the second phase of lockdown which commenced on Friday 29th May.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 The Committee is invited to consider the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic and to note the range of actions that have been taken across council services in response to the pandemic.

3.0 DETAIL

- 3.1 While the urgency, degree of change and intensity demanded by the initial onslaught of Covid-19 has eased to an extent, the Council, partner agencies and communities continue to work together to respond to the challenges of the pandemic. Since the previous report on 14th May there has been an increase in focus to embedding Covid-19 response activity as 'business as usual' wherever appropriate. On 21st May e

All of this activity, in communities all over Argyll and Bute, is supported by the very considerable efforts of volunteers, both individuals and groups. Some community groups were in existence prior to the pandemic and have increased or adapted their services to rise to this particular challenge. Others were started up specifically to respond to the pandemic as communities came together to find ways of coping. The contribution that all volunteers and groups make to the overall response is extremely significant and very much typical of the positive approach to partnership working that is characteristic of Argyll and Bute.

At the time of writing there were 3,179 people registered as shielding within Argyll and Bute – an increase of around 1,000 since the outset. The Scottish Government has confirmed that people currently shielding will require to remain in isolation until the end of July. Council staff are involved in the proactive outreach calls to people who are shielding to ensure that they are able to access the support that they need. This includes offering access to emotional support for anyone who is struggling. There have been more than 300 requests for pharmacy assistance – with staff carrying out nearly 740 medicine deliveries.

Supporting people who are unable to access or afford food supplies has been a significant focus during the lockdown period. Taking a snapshot of the Community Food Project's activity shows that in its ninth week of operation alone, 141 vehicles and drivers delivered food parcels to 1,987 homes across Argyll and Bute's towns and island communities – including deliveries of 602 frozen meals. They were supported by a further 141 people who picked and packed food packages at six distribution sites (this included council employees, staff from other organisations and local volunteers). Week nine saw the team delivering a total of

working with Health and Social Care Partnerships and health boards, will have a role in the 'isolate' and 'support' elements of this programme which will see those with systems tested, those with whom they have been in contact traced, and then isolating, with support. Work is ongoing on this through COSLA and the Council's forward planning will factor this in.

Mindful of the impact of a prolonged lockdown period on people at work and at home, the past few weeks have seen an increased focus on providing regular wellbeing information advice and updates for staff (through the council's HR team) and also of course for the public (through the council's Communications team who share a range of health and wellbeing information through various digital and other channels as part of the overall mix of messages).

3.6 Doing business differently:

The demands of the pandemic inevitably required changes to services for a range of reasons including compliance with national restrictions, direct impact on staff members or the need to direct resources to other areas of activity as part of the response. Some activities have had to be put on hold and, as well as focusing on recovery, the Council is also planning for the restoration of services where these have had to change as well as the reprogramming of other areas of work.

This includes roads maintenance works – as is the case for all councils, these have been impacted not only by the direct demand on resources but by the ability to access materials from external suppliers whose own operations have been affected by Covid-19.

The construction industry has been on hold since the outset and with the publication of the *Route Map Out of Lockdown* setting out a phased approach, plans are being made for the resumption of key projects including outstanding regeneration works and the final phase of the refurbishment of Dunoon Primary School, as well as other smaller maintenance or upgrade jobs in schools and other public buildings. Other, similar planned works originally due to start during the lockdown period can now be planned and programmed.

Plans for recovery are reported elsewhere but, as well as preparing for general reinstatement, services are anticipating and making ready to accommodate increased demand in some areas – for example licensing, as lockdown restrictions permit use of outdoor spaces, and planning, where application volumes are still almost as high as normal and have been processed virtually but where site visits have not previously been possible.

The ways in which the Council and communities have worked together has involved considerable change and significant effort in delivering services which meet new and very extensive needs. Positive feedback for all those involved in the response has been considerable, including recognition of those who are continuing to deliver normal Council services alongside others who are directly working on the response. People and community groups have proactively contacted the Council since lockdown began in March to welcome and acknowledge the support they have received and to highlight individual

circumstances where that help has made a very significant difference. This feedback is being collated on an ongoing basis.

Previous reports have highlighted how the Council's IT teams swung into action immediately on notification of lockdown to enable home and remote working to commence as quickly as possible.

Argyll and Bute Council has been using Skype for Business video and call technology for several years and this has undoubtedly resulted in a smoother transition into the new and different ways of working that social distancing demands.

Since lockdown – and working from home – started on 23rd March, there have been almost 11,000 Skype calls, with nearly 41,000 participants in total. Six thousand Skype meetings have taken place, all involving at least three attendees and with a total of 25,000 people involved.

These meetings include the Business Continuity Committee, which has operated on an entirely virtual basis since the start, and the first online Planning, Protective Services and Licensing Committee meetings, Licensing Board meeting, and Local Review Body Hearings as well as the Integrated Joint Board meetings, have all been supported as normal – but virtually – by Governance staff. A report outlining proposals for the resumption of committee meetings after the July recess will be presented to the Special Council meeting.

Customer Service staff – including those usually working in the Council's call centre and service points around the area – provide support to the Coronavirus helpline as well as fielding more routine 'normal business' enquiries which are starting to increase.

Registration staff provided a seven-day death registration service from an early stage in line with national guidelines. As the pandemic eases the requirement for this has lessened.

The team have also been involved in supporting people who have had to cancel wedding ceremonies during the lockdown period. Like other services they too are forward planning for a resumption of their marriage services in line with the Scottish Government's phased easing of restrictions.

Environmental health officers were asked to take on new responsibilities and powers in relation to social distancing through emergency coronavirus legislation, working in partnership with Police Scotland. Officers have now received training in this regard and along with the Council's Anti-social Behaviour Coordinator, have been handling a number of reports and queries from members of the public – dealing with over 150 complaints and making more than 500 visits or calls to people or premises. They report high levels of compliance overall with lockdown restrictions and to date no warnings or prohibition notices have been issued.

work on the Argyll and Bute Rural Growth Deal. They participate in the Argyll and Bute Economic Resilience Forum which has been set up in response to the pandemic and which includes representatives from the private sector. The approach to recovery is featured in a separate report to the Business Continuity Committee.

3.9 Decisions

Key decisions made in the period since the last update are noted below. These are less frequent given the embedding of response-related activities and this summary does not include the type of operational decisions taken on a day-to-day basis at service level

5.0 IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Policy - This is in keeping with the Council's commitment to manage its response to the Covid-19 pandemic in supporting the people and communities of Argyll and Bute and in adhering to national guidance.
- 5.2 Financial – none arising from this report.
- 5.3 Legal -. Amendment of the Powers Delegated to Officers and Standing Orders was agreed at the Council meeting of 30th March 2020 in accordance with Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973.
- 5.4 HR – impacts on staff at all levels.
- 5.5 Fairer Scotland Duty:
 - 5.5.1 Equalities - protected characteristics – None
 - 5.5.2 Socio-economic Duty - none
 - 5.5.3 Islands - none
- 5.6. Risk – addresses risk associated with ensuring business continuity and resilience.
- 5.7