



Subject:	Update on COVID-19 Community Response
Date:	22nd January, 2021
Reporting Officer:	Ryan Black, Director of Neighbourhood Services
Contact Officer:	Alison Allen, Neighbourhood Services Manager

Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sometime in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

Call-in	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues
1.1	The purpose of this report is to further update Members on the continuing planning, partner engagement, support mechanisms and services in place to support vulnerable people during the COVID-19 pandemic
2.0	Recommendations
2.1	That Committee is asked to note the report and to also note that this approach is based on extensive partner engagement (including ongoing engagement with strategic community partners).

3.0	Main Report
	<p data-bbox="258 228 434 259"><u>Background</u></p> <p data-bbox="165 327 1471 461">3.1 Members will be aware of the extensive work by community and voluntary sector partners, Council and other statutory partners as part of the initial COVID-19 emergency response and that this support has continued and developed in response to emerging need.</p> <p data-bbox="165 528 1471 761">3.2 Members will also recall that an update was provided to People and Communities Committee in November 2020 and from this will aware the continuing support to vulnerable people has been designed throughout taking community/voluntary (local as well as thematic) partner feedback in to account and in the majority of circumstances, the community/voluntary sector are delivering services.</p> <p data-bbox="165 828 1471 963">3.3 Members will also be aware that Officers previously engaged with partners, following the initial COVID emergency response, and captured a significant amount of learning. This learning has shaped how we have collectively developed the city wide approach to:</p> <ul data-bbox="309 1030 1385 1164" style="list-style-type: none"> - Better align services at a statutory and community/voluntary level - Ensure we were collectively getting to those who most needed the support and recognising and utilising the community/voluntary sector networks.
3.4	<p data-bbox="258 1236 555 1267"><u>Financial Investment</u></p> <p data-bbox="258 1335 1471 1715">Additionally, Members will be aware Council (supported in part with central government funding) has invested significantly in community/voluntary sector service delivery since the pandemic began in March 2020. This continues to be the most effective method of reaching vulnerable people at present, particularly those people who may not meet the threshold for existing statutory services (and are therefore not known to statutory services at present) and those people who have never had need of support services before, but who need them now perhaps as a result of redundancy, reduced hours or the emotional and physical impacts of the ongoing restrictions.</p> <p data-bbox="165 1783 1430 1814">3.5 A summary of the financial investment in community/voluntary sector delivery is attached.</p> <p data-bbox="165 1881 1471 1971">3.6 Members should also be aware the expected additional financial investment from DfC has been confirmed as £764,000 which needs to be spent before the end of March 21.</p>

3.7	<p>As requested by Members at the SP and R meeting on 10th December, representation (including a formal letter) is being issued to the DfC Permanent Secretary (along with other central government funders) as given the ongoing impact of restrictions, many organisations have not been able to deliver planned activities. Additionally, the significant additional financial investment from DfC of £764,000 to be spent by community/voluntary partners before the end of March 2021 is putting them under more unnecessary pressure when they are already struggling.</p>
3.8	<p>Members should be aware at SP and R on 10th December, Members agreed in advance how that £764,000 should be allocated with the decision being:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - that any increase in demand beyond available budget to date for the micro/medium grant programme already underway be met firstly from the additional funding from DfC - Given the tight timescales involved in delivery, that is, by the end of March 2021, approximately 50% of the funding remaining should be distributed to the nine strategic community partners using the same allocation as used to date - The remaining approximately 50% be allocated to those thematic community/voluntary organisations who it was agreed on 10 December 2020 would receive financial support.
3.9	<p>The winter tranche of micro-grants (max £1,500) received 146 applicants and letter of offer for those have been issued.</p>
3.10	<p>The new medium grand (max £5,000) received 136 applications well in excess of the planned budget from central government funding received to date. The assessment process for the medium grants if currently underway and Officers will update Committee again in due course when the final outcome is known.</p>
<p><u>Ongoing Planning</u></p>	
3.11	<p>Taking all of this in to account, Officers continue to work hand in hand with community/voluntary and statutory partners to ensure services/support systems meet the needs of vulnerable people and that we speak collectively as a city in influencing central government. Indeed, it is the community/voluntary partners from Belfast who we bring to co-</p>

	design sessions with central government who are making policy and service delivery decisions.
3.12	The Council continues to meet with these core partners on a regular basis (minimum weekly) to understand any pressures on the system, what is causing those pressures and what collectively needs to be done to ensure the appropriate supports/services are in place, particularly during the current period where demand for support was expected to be higher. Partners involved are:
3.13	<p><u>Strategic Community Partners</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - North Belfast – Intercomm, North Belfast Advice Partnership, Loughside Community Action Partnership (LCAP) - South Belfast – Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group (LORAG), Forward South, South City Resource Centre - East Belfast – East Belfast Community Development Agency - West Belfast – Upper Andersonstown Community Forum - Shankill – Greater Shankill Partnership
3.14	<p><u>City Wide Partners</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Advice NI (Funded by DfC to run the Regional Helpline) - Volunteer Now (supporting the volunteer eco system across the city should it be needed) - Fareshare (Strategic food supply chain partners regionally and funded by DfC to enhance this, provides food supply to community/voluntary organisations working with vulnerable people, rather than individuals) - Red Cross (Welfare, Hardship and Food support regionally as well as logistics support in the form of volunteers/vehicles if needed. On contract to BCC & Trust) - Trussell Trust (Citywide Network supporting majority of existing foodbanks in Belfast, also with strategic food supply chain partners) - Belfast Trust (supporting clinically vulnerable individuals, also with a contract with Red Cross in similar areas as Council)
3.15	We also continue to regularly engage with our thematic partners through existing city structures.

Current Status of Services/Support Systems

3.16 The current status of services/support systems based on continuous engagement and work with our community/voluntary partners is summarised below:

3.17 Food

- Community/Voluntary Partners (strategic area and thematic) are currently delivering on the food element of their Christmas/New Year funding and are not reporting any issues with supply or capacity
- All foodbanks are well stocked for the next few months due to the generosity of the people of Belfast. Some foodbanks are reporting higher than usual levels of clients for January compared to previous years and some foodbanks aren't reporting higher than usual levels. This may be down to the provision of food support through strategic community/voluntary partners adding additional capacity to the system
- Fareshare (food redistribution organisation) continues to see new community/voluntary members coming on board to receive food from them. They also have significant supplies of food in place due to additional financial investment from DfC and due to pre-planning on their part with local suppliers their supply chain has not been disrupted by Brexit
- DfC are currently in the process of implementing a food pallet scheme directly to community/voluntary partners to supplement their food and personal care/household items supply on an area basis (with a small number of distribution hubs at a community level in place). Officers are supporting this to ensure it doesn't place any additional burden on community/voluntary partners but that they benefit from access to additional products. The DfC budget for Belfast is **£235k** and it is to be broken down further using the same allocation model used by Belfast for North, South, East, West and Shankill.
- The Belfast City Council Red Cross Contract remains in place to provide emergency food support across the city is support cannot be accessed elsewhere. However, requests to use this contract have been extremely low (less than 5 in the last 6 months). This is largely due to the extensive network of community/voluntary partners working tirelessly across the city supporting vulnerable people directly.

3.18 Fuel/Utilities

- All community/voluntary partners are reporting increased demand for support in relation to fuel/utilities and this has been recognised regionally with additional support as follows.

- DfC has put in place a one-off heating payment for those people are in receipt of pension credit, or are in receipt of certain disability benefits at the higher rate. The payment is £200 and has been put in place by the Minister in the last few weeks in recognition of increased pressure in this area
- The COVID-19 Discretionary Support Scheme is intended to provide emergency help or support with living expenses
- DfC launched the 'Warm, Well and Connected' Fund, with the 'Warm' element of this being managed by Bryson/Advice NI. This fund aims to provide help and support to those whose wellbeing has been impacted by cold conditions and those in the most extreme need. In some cases help with essential white goods may be available, but help under this fund is only for those who have been unable to access support elsewhere and whose financial situation has been directly impacted by COVID-19. The support from the scheme is not monetary in nature and vouchers are not provided, instead the necessary help is provided directly to the client.
- DfC also has in place its routine cold weather payment which is paid automatically to those who are in receipt of a qualifying benefit and live in a postcode area where the temperature is, or forecast to be, zero degrees or below for seven consecutive days.
- The annual DfC Winter Fuel Payment made to those over the age of 65 have been and continue to be issued in the normal way
- Many community/voluntary partners (strategic area/thematic) in receipt of funding from Belfast City Council are also using their funding to support clients in need with emergency fuel payments and/or vouchers
- The Belfast Warm and Well Scheme (established under Community Planning) continues to be in operation should individuals find themselves not able to source support elsewhere. This scheme is co-ordinated for Belfast by National Energy Action and is aimed at supporting vulnerable people experiencing fuel poverty and difficult keeping their homes warm.
- The Belfast City Council Red Cross Contract remains in place to provide emergency fuel/utility support across the city if support cannot be accessed elsewhere. However, there have been no requests for fuel/utility support to date. This is due to the extensive network of community/voluntary partners across the city working tirelessly supporting vulnerable people directly.

3.19 Advice/Financial Hardship

- The Advice NI Regional COVID-19 helpline continues to operate to assist and signpost people who need support as a result of COVID-19

- The helpline has had an increase in calls in the last couple of weeks but 95% of those increased calls are specifically from individuals seeking support under the DfC 'Warm, Well and Connected' Scheme (Bryson). This is largely down to the extensive advertising of the scheme DfC undertook and Advice NI are supporting clients to use the full spectrum of available support as detailed above to alleviate their fuel/utility concerns
- Community/voluntary partners (strategic area/thematic) are offering assistance with general financial hardship for vulnerable people as part of the services they are running funded by Belfast City Council and are working closely with the local advice partners to support that with increased access to benefits and working to reduce the debt burden on those individuals.
- Local advice providers are reporting increased demand for their services as a result of the impact of COVID-19 on employment but are currently managing that demand
- As a result of the SP&R decision on 10 December 2020, local advice providers will be given an additional financial allocation to enable them to increase their capacity to meet these pressures.

3.20 Welfare/Emotional Wellbeing

- Community/voluntary partners (strategic area/thematic) are reporting significant impacts on individual and family welfare/emotional wellbeing as a result of COVID-19 and the ongoing restrictions
- An expected increase in calls was expected as the letter re how clinically extremely vulnerable individuals should keep themselves safe was issued from 4 January 2021, however this has not materialised
- A significant proportion of community/voluntary partners in receipt of funding from Belfast City Council (including micro/medium grants) are using some funding in this area.
- In person activity is limited given the restrictions but groups are trying their best to deliver services either online or by phone and are also supporting individuals/families with activity packs
- Groups are also using funding to provide support to vulnerable individuals/families with additional digital devices and associated Wi-Fi/data to reduce isolation and increase ability to access services online
- Good Morning Schemes and Befriending Services are reporting increased demand but due to the additional support of volunteers they are still open for new referrals

3.21	<p>- The Belfast Trust community based health services continue to operate without significant disruption supporting vulnerable people and are also not reporting any significantly increased concerns coming through from those who may be clinically extremely vulnerable in terms of the welfare/emotional wellbeing</p> <p><u>Conclusion</u></p> <p>As detailed above, the overall eco system in the areas of food, fuel/utilities, advice/financial hardship and welfare/emotional wellbeing is experiencing significant increases in demand, including from individuals and families not previously known to services.</p> <p>Staff/volunteers are very tired but their commitment and passion in supporting vulnerable people is what is keeping services going. Additionally, the learning gathered from the emergency COVID-19 response in spring 2020, the subsequent detailed planning between community/voluntary and statutory partners, the significant additional financial investment from BCC and central government, the regional investments in services and the ongoing partnership working has created an environment of genuine and meaningful mutual support.</p> <p>Challenges/issues are identified early, directly from community/voluntary partners working on the ground and possible solutions are brought forward taking in to account their expert knowledge, experience and capacity to deliver. No one who needs support is left without an option for support.</p> <p><u>Financial implications</u></p>
3.22	<p>As detailed in the attached appendix.</p> <p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications</u></p>
3.23	<p>None identified at this stage but will be kept under continuous review.</p>
4.0	Document Attached
	Strategic Area and Thematic Community/Voluntary Partners Funding Summary