

Report to: Regeneration and Community Committee **Agenda Item: 7.3**

Report Title: **Coronavirus Pandemic – Community Response Update** **(Paper E)**

Date: 10 November 2020

Report by: Director of Community, Health and Leisure

For Publication: Yes

If 'not for publication', Insert reference to grounds upon which information is deemed 'confidential' [ref Local Government (Northern Ireland) Act 2014 section 42(2), (3)] or 'exempt' [ref Local Government (Northern Ireland) Act 2014 section 42(4) Schedule 6]:

(i) Confidential grounds: N/A

(ii) Exempt grounds: N/A

1. Relevant Background and Introduction

1.1 In March 2020 following the introduction of government restrictions and lockdown measures in response to the coronavirus pandemic, the Council rapidly responded along with statutory and voluntary organisations to the unfolding emergency situation. A Community Hub was established and operated until the end of July 2020.

This report updates the Council on the Community Response to the ongoing emergency and outlines the need for sustained support within our communities.

The following priorities have been identified:

- Access to Food and Medicine
- Fuel Poverty
- Social Contact and Local Community Support
- Generalist Advice Provision

1.2 The COVID Community Helpline managed by Advice NI continues to operate on 0808 802 0020. This freephone community helpline has been established to help people access information, advice and guidance in relation to the coronavirus pandemic.

2. Key Issues

2.1 Access to Food and Medicine

- 2.1.1 There are six registered foodbanks within the District which offer assistance to those in need of food support and all have all advised that they hold good levels of stock at present. The Department for Communities (DfC) has indicated that there will not be a future food box scheme provided, such as that introduced in the initial stages of the pandemic, but DfC is supporting Fareshare charitable food redistributors to provide food to the sector. A proposal has been submitted to the DfC COVID-19 Access to Food Fund which includes developmental work within the sector and the provision of a central distribution centre for Fareshare produce within the District.

The foodbanks are keen to ensure that, in any future scenario of increased demand, adequate stock supply will be maintained and adequate support made available via volunteers. Community Transport providers have also indicated a willingness to continue to support food aid delivery where required.

Discussion has taken place with the foodbanks and they have all indicated a willingness to engage in a Service Level Agreement to support those in food need due to impacts of the coronavirus pandemic. It is proposed that in the case of increased demand that cannot be met within existing resources the Council will enter into a Service Level Agreement with each of the foodbanks and the Community Transport organisations as required.

A member of the Community Services Team will be identified as a dedicated resource to support access to food including any emergency response.

- 2.1.2 During the initial months of the coronavirus pandemic there was an arrangement with Community Pharmacies and Community Volunteers to deliver medicines to those shielding. This service was stood down on 31 August 2020 and a home delivery service for the period of the pandemic was commissioned by the Health and Social Care Board in consultation with Community Pharmacies NI. This service delivers prescribed items to specified, eligible patients, who due to their medical condition, should not present in the pharmacy and where no other person is able to collect the item from the pharmacy and deliver it to the patient.

2.2 Fuel Poverty

- 2.2.1 Fuel Poverty is a concern for many families and individuals who have become financially worse off due to the coronavirus pandemic. The Society of St Vincent de Paul currently run a fuel assistance scheme and have processes in place to support people presenting in fuel poverty. A number of conferences have indicated a willingness to support a Fuel Voucher Scheme over the winter months. Referral to local provision will be through the Advice NI Helpline.

It is proposed that the Council enters into a Service Level Agreement with interested conferences of the Society of St Vincent de Paul and any other organisation that can demonstrate experience of administering similar provision to ensure district wide support. Indicative Budget £20,000.

2.3 Social Contact and Local Community Support

- 2.3.1 The Community and Voluntary Sector remain fundamental in responding to the pandemic at a local level. The Community and Voluntary Sector Forum continues to meet and the Community Services Team are supporting organisations across the district to maintain services at a local level. 157 RECOVER grants have been allocated to support communities respond to the challenges of adapting their delivery and support the reanimation of activities. This fund remains open.
- 2.3.2 In partnership with the Public Health Agency (PHA), Western Health and Social Care Trust (WHSCT) and South West Age Partnership (SWAP) it is proposed that the Council works on a winter campaign “Happy at Home” that will build on the success and feedback from Positive Ageing October and will promote the positives of life for older people during lockdown. This collaborative approach will deliver a range of activities and information. The campaign will include newsletters (Christmas, January and March), virtual courses, an intergenerational programme with primary schools providing Christmas content for social media platforms and practical information to support older people across the Fermanagh and Omagh District area. Indicative budget £4,000.
- 2.3.3 Plans are underway to prerecord Santa at the Christmas Lights switch on in Omagh and Enniskillen in mid-December. Christmas workshops and activities will be delivered virtually from the Strule Arts Centre, Ardhowen Theatre and Enniskillen Castle Museums targeting all age groups.
- 2.3.4 Community leisure programmes are continuing to be delivered across the District, including the Physical Activity Referral Scheme (GP Referral), Move More Programme (working with people who have been affected by Cancer), Healthy Towns programme in partnership with the PHA (providing physical activity opportunities in community settings across the district) and Every Body Active in Partnership with Sport NI (providing physical activity opportunities in community settings across the District).
- 2.3.5 It is anticipated that even if there is a reduction in travel restrictions, many people may choose not to travel home this Christmas. This may exacerbate the sense of isolation for older people within the District. It is proposed that the Council considers developing a ‘Christmas Cheer Initiative’ in partnership with the Community and Voluntary Sector to provide a small token, for example a box of chocolates and mince pies, to those aged over 65 who will be alone or are caring on their own over the Christmas period. Indicative budget £20,000.

2.4 Generalist Advice Provision

- 2.4.1 Free, accessible, independent advice is provided by Fermanagh and Omagh Advice Consortium which is a partnership between Community Advice Fermanagh (with an Office in Enniskillen) and Omagh Independent Advice Services (with an Office in Omagh). Currently, due to coronavirus pandemic restrictions, appointments for both advice centres are made through the telephone or via email. The uptake of use of the provision of free advice in both the Fermanagh area and the Omagh area is

monitored through collated monthly statistical returns from Fermanagh and Omagh Advice Consortium. During the first 6 months (April – September 2020) of the 2020/21 year 5,870 enquiries have been processed.

- 2.4.2 A contract is currently in place between FODC and Fermanagh and Omagh Advice Consortium for the provision of generalist advice services to the Fermanagh and Omagh area to cover the period April 2020 - March 2021 with the option to extend this contract for a further 3 years. The value of the contract is £250,000 with annual increments of 2% per year.

In addition, a total of £78,754 has been made available to both Community Advice Fermanagh and Omagh Independent Advice Services through Service Level Agreements for Welfare Reform Mitigations Extension in the current financial year.

- 2.4.3 A proposal has been submitted to the DfC, COVID-19 Financial Inclusion Fund which includes additional provision and promotes financial inclusion.

3. Resource Implications

3.1 Financial

There is available budget within Community Services to fund the proposals outlined in this report.

3.2 Human Resources

Delivery will be managed within existing staff resources.

3.3 Assets and Other Implications

None

4. Equality and Good Relations Implications

4.1 Equality

The uniform impact across all Section 75 groups is positive.

4.2 Good Relations

This initiative will have a positive impact on good relations.

5. Sustainable Development Implications

This initiative has a positive impact on the social sustainability pillar of the sustainable development plan.

6. Rural Proofing Implications

There is no adverse effect on rural areas.

7. District Electoral Areas Affected

All

8. Recommendation

8.1 It is recommended that the Council:

- i. approves a Service Level Agreement with each of the foodbanks and the Community Transport organisations as required. Indicative Budget £30,000;
- ii. approves a Service Level Agreement with interested conferences of the Society of St Vincent de Paul and other appropriate organisations to support a fuel voucher scheme. Indicative Budget £20,000;
- iii. approves the delivery of the winter campaign “Happy at Home” for older people, up to a maximum budget of £4,000, across the Fermanagh and Omagh District area during winter months 2020/21;
- iv. approves the development of a ‘Christmas Cheer Initiative’ in partnership with the Community and Voluntary Sector to provide a small token to those aged over 65 who will be alone or are caring on their own over the Christmas period. Indicative budget £20,000;
- v. notes the arrangements in place to support the delivery of medicine to those, who due to their medical condition, should not present in the pharmacy and where no other person is able to collect the item from the pharmacy and deliver it to the patient;
- vi. notes the continued role of the Community and Voluntary Sector in responding to the pandemic and support available to the sector;
- vii. notes the plans for virtual Christmas lights switch on events;
- viii. notes the continued access to a range of leisure programmes; and
- ix. notes the arrangements in place for generalist advice provision within the district.

9. Appendices and Attachments

N/A

10. Background Documents

N/A

Key to Abbreviations:

DfC – Department for Communities
 PHA – Public Health Agency
 WHSCT – Western Health and Social Care Trust
 SWAP – South West Age Partnership