THE EDINBURGH PARTNERSHIP

COVID-19 Immediate Support Update

1. Executive Summary

1.1 As part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic a Vulnerable Groups Board was established and was responsible for creating and monitoring several immediate support activities. When the Council's Adaptation and Renewal programme was created, the remit of the Vulnerable Groups Board was transferred to the Immediate Support Workstream of the Life Chances Officer Working Group.

1.2 As the direct funding streams associated with the COVID-19 response were expected to come to an end, those involved in the immediate support activity began to consider how best to build on experience gained to ensure a more effective response to any similar future emergencies. The opportunity to continue to improve working relationships between statutory authorities and third sector organisations has been recognised as one area of focus for future activity.

1.3 In particular, the activity to address food poverty in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the range of third sector organisations that were already involved in tackling food poverty and health inequalities across Edinburgh. In addition, other organisations have developed capabilities in direct response to the pandemic.

1.4 The immediate response work has also shown there is a wide range of Council services which interact, commission or have contracts with the third sector in relation to meeting several different citizen needs. Feedback from the third sector has highlighted a wish for further conversations with the Council around opportunities to become more sustainably involved in a range of future service provision, including tackling food poverty.

2. Recommendations

2.1 It is recommended that The Edinburgh Partnership:

2.2 Note the update provided in this report in relation to the immediate support activity which has been carried out in partnership across the city in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.3 Approve that an event involving all those organisations involved in addressing food poverty across the city, focused on continuing to improve relationships and working practices, is arranged as a key partnership follow up activity.

2.4 Notes the intention of the Life Chances Poverty and Prevention workstream to take forward long term planning for transformation of the Council's future work with all third sector organisations in Edinburgh.

3.   Main Report

3.1   The immediate support activity included the following:

SHIELDING & VULNERABLE SUPPORT

Overview and Support

3.2   The Council was part of a national initiative to support citizens that had distinct support needs arising from the COVID-19 crisis. This resulted in two specific groups with Shielding citizens, identified by NHS Scotland (because of a pre-existing health condition) and Vulnerable citizens (a wider definition around general support needs).

3.3   The initial administrative/contact support for these activities was provided by the relevant service areas before a decision was taken to centralise contact activities within the Council's Customer team. Contact operations for shielding and vulnerable were treated as separate activities, however, the obvious synergies resulted in this work being brought together, before ultimately being supported by the Council's existing Social Care Direct team as part of business as usual activities.

3.4   During the lifespan of this critical work the Customer team was responsible for inbound contact (phone and email to support food, medical and wider Council service queries) and outbound contact (welfare checks, validating ongoing support arrangements etc).

3.5   The Contact team formalised call scripts, call flows and recording procedures to ensure that engagements were effectively actioned through the appropriate pathways. This was supported by an online form that enabled 'vulnerable' citizens to access key support through a simple and easy to use web form. These arrangements worked well during the peak of the crisis and were continually streamlined as operational experience grew. In line with the expected end of national funding for COVID-19 specific support, activities in September 2020 have focused on an orderly return to more typical service support in this complex area.

Funding

3.6   The Council was initially allocated £1.651m from the Scottish Government Food Fund to support the supply and distribution of food to vulnerable citizens. The Council's use of the Fund included direct payments for free school meals, the provision of food boxes to families with vulnerable children and payments to EVOC to facilitate the provision of food support through community organisations. Expenditure on small grants and emergency food boxes was also incurred.

3.7   The initial Food Fund allocation was fully depleted by mid-June. The Scottish Government announced further funding, in the form of two grants, to support (i)

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food distribution to vulnerable groups including supplements to the national food box scheme for the shielded population and food and other practical support for those requiring it under the test and protect programme and (ii) Free school meal arrangements.

3.8 The City of Edinburgh Council received a grant offer of up to £0.986m for support to vulnerable groups for the period from July to the end of September 2020. A further grant offer of £0.603m was made for the provision of free school meal arrangements for the period 1 July to 10 August 2020. This funding was used to support a range of food initiatives, predominately through EVOC's network of 3rd sector agencies.

3.9 In line with Scottish Government guidance an exit strategy was implemented that introduced a scheme of tapered support. The Council has contacted the Scottish Government to establish whether the residual grant could be used to support food poverty beyond September and is currently awaiting a response.

FREE SCHOOL MEALS

3.10 Following the national lockdown, the Council agreed to make Free Schools Meal (FSM) payments to vulnerable school children. This covered the period from 23 March 2020 to 14 August 2020. The payments amount to £11.25 per week for each child and were paid fortnightly to parents' bank accounts. This activity was funded initially by the Scottish Government Food Fund and then by a top up grant of up to £0.603m to mitigate the absence of Free School meals during the summer holidays. The Council made payments for 6647 children, totalling £1.587m.

3.11 Throughout the crisis the Council proactively promoted access to FSM and this resulted in an additional 2k successful claims. Work is ongoing to ensure that all eligible claimants are aware of the scheme and where possible support is made available to ensure a successful application.

CONNECTING SCOTLAND

3.12 Connecting Scotland is a Scottish Government funded programme set up in response to COVID-19 and is a partnership between the **Scottish Government**, local councils, third sector and **SCVO**. Connecting Scotland target those most in need of digital support by providing iPads, Chromebooks and support to develop digital skills for people who are digitally excluded and on low incomes.

3.13 Phase 1 (April – July 2020) of the scheme focused on those who were at risk of isolation due to COVID-19 because they were in the **extremely high vulnerability group** ('shielding') or the **higher risk of severe illness** group.

3.14 Edinburgh received 43 applications for devices, with the demand significantly over-subscribed, with requests for 1039 iPads, 893 Chromebooks and 1656 MiFi from Edinburgh's allocation of 310 iPads, 235 Chromebooks and 545 MiFi. While most applicants received an allocation of devices, almost no applicants received

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the full amount that they had requested due to the significantly high volume of applications.

3.15 Following the end of Phase 1, unallocated devices from other local authorities were supplied to local authorities where demand had outstripped supply. As a result, Edinburgh was able to top-up several applicants' allocations.

3.16 Following the success of the scheme Phase 2 launched on 18 August 2020 and focused on:

- households with children, or where a child is normally resident (this includes pregnant women with no child in the household)

- care leavers up to the age of twenty-six (in line with eligibility for aftercare support).

3.17 This scheme has run in conjunction with a **separate Scottish Government programme** to provide 25,000 laptops or tablets, with internet access, for disadvantaged pupils to support learning outside school.

IMMEDIATE SUPPORT PROJECT REVIEW

3.18 As the immediate support activity was established due to an emergency there were no pre-determined objectives or expected benefits identified at the outset. It is not therefore possible to assess the project as would be done in a traditional project closure report. However, as the Council intends to bring forward radical transformation for service delivery and there remains a significant risk that some activity may need to be restarted if a second COVID-19 wave of infections continues to increase, it is worthwhile considering the lessons learned and any follow on actions/service transition.

3.19 Both the Council and EVOC are therefore currently working on assessments and audits of the activity that has been carried out to ensure that any future activity benefits from any lessons learned during the emergency response. Those reports will be made available once completed. However, the main themes for follow on activity are:

Communication about the end of support through direct funding. Ongoing work is taking place to ensure consistent messages are provided to third sector organisations and households who received support. It is necessary to ensure business as usual pathways are available and communications in place to direct people to these resources.

Preparing for a second wave. Ongoing work to ensure web forms, phone lines etc can be remobilised quickly if required. This activity will be aligned with EVOC to ensure a co-ordinated approach to contact and delivery of support activities. These engagements will focus on decisions needed with respect to the best model for addressing any future immediate support needs. For example, it has

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already been indicated by the Scottish Government that additional activity for those self-isolating and requiring support will need to be considered.

Third sector engagement and involvement in future service delivery.
Ongoing engagement through relevant forums (e.g. Edinburgh Partnership etc) to appropriately scope and detail the long-term relationship between the Council and its third sector partners. With respect to the issue of food insecurity, The Edinburgh Poverty Commission have identified specific actions related to future food insecurity activity and the intention is to hold a gathering of all interested parties as soon as possible to begin initial discussion around future co-operation.

Digital Inclusion. Ongoing support of wide range of activities (Connecting Scotland, schools programme, wifi initiatives) to address digital poverty in the city.

Tackling Homelessness*.* Ongoing strategic activity to address immediate and longer-term issues relating to homelessness, including supply of available properties and clarity on central funding.

3.20   Activity related to these themes will continue to be progressed in partnership where necessary. In particular, the Edinburgh Partnership Board is asked to give its endorsement to the proposed event to be jointly arranged by EVOC and the Council with a specific focus on food poverty in the city.

3.21   If the Scottish Government confirm any further funding is available, the intention would be to use the proposed engagement event with EVOC, and food providers across the city, to establish how this short-term funding could be effectively used to tackle the critical issue of food poverty.

4.   Contacts

Crawford McGhie, Senior Manager – Estates and Operational Support
Crawford.mcghie@edinburgh.gov.uk

Neil Jamieson, Customer – Senior Manager,
Neil.Jamieson@edinburgh.gov.uk

Maria Arnold, EVOC Senior Development Officer - Adult Health and Wellbeing,
maria.arnold@evoc.org.uk

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