

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. This report provides members of the Business Continuity Committee with an update on decisions made and actions that the Council has taken as part of its contribution to that collective response. All response activity is developed and implemented in the context of emergency legislation and government guidance, this is an unprecedented and rapidly evolving situation and this position is subject to ongoing change and review.

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 The Council is currently responding to the global Covid-19 pandemic and is focused on resilience activity and maintaining critical frontline services. In order to provide capacity and focus in dealing with this response and adhere to UK and Scottish government guidance on Covid19 it has delegated emergency powers and has established a Leadership Group, comprising the Council Leader, Depute Leader and Leader of the SNP Group (as the largest Opposition group), to ensure appropriate focus and oversight of decisions.
- 3.2 The Council's constitution gives specific delegations to the Chief Executive. Section Three Part C paragraph 3 (A)(5) gives the Chief Executive power, in an emergency, to instruct executive action on any matter after consultation with the Leader or, in his/her absence, the Depute Leader of the Council. This provides a

basis for taking any urgent decisions which require to be made in response to Covid-19.

- 3.3 On 31 March 2020 the Council agreed that for the life of the COVID-19 crisis the consultation by the Chief Executive will be with the Leader, and Depute Leader and Leader of the SNP Group where available. The decisions taken in consultation with this Leadership Group are being logged and a formal report on all decisions taken will be submitted to a future meeting of the council. All Elected Members receive a daily bulletin to keep them apprised of the situation on an ongoing basis.
- 3.4 In following national guidance on reducing the spread of Coronavirus the threat from COVID-19 affects every aspect of community life. The Council's response therefore is wide ranging and involves all areas of the Council's work.
- 3.5 Below is a summary of the actions the Council has taken in response to support three key areas of life in Argyll and Bute: our communities and high risk residents, businesses and young people in education.

Caring for People

- 3.6 The Council is working in close partnership with the Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP)'s Public Health team and the Third Sector Interface (TSI) to make help available for local people who need it. Through close joint working with the HSCP, TSI, and community volunteers, the Council's Community Development Service has set up and co-ordinates eight "Caring for People" teams across Argyll and Bute.

These locality teams have been set up to respond to non-medical needs and are currently focused on:

- Building local relationships with groups and volunteers in local communities who are working hard with volunteers to support local people, and also engaging with support and services available from the Council and its partners.
 - Responding to referrals ranging from asks for help to more complex needs with issues being raised through daily tactical meetings if there is no local resolution.
 - Managing the Helpline number which launched 27th March 2020 and is part of the wider approach under Caring for People.
 - Provision of specific Covid-19 webpage where information for those within the shielded category will feature.
 - Supporting volunteer co-ordinators in place across the eight localities to help the team mobilise local volunteering support.
- 3.7 Community requests, including those from people in the shielded category (the people who are at high risk from COVID-19 and advised to stay home for 12 weeks), flow via the helpline to Social Care or the eight Caring for People Locality teams where requests are prioritised accordingly and actioned. Caring for People locality teams liaise where required with multi-agency partners,

community response groups and volunteers to ensure needs are met. The Council's Community Development Team manages the workload logged through the helpline onto a new Caring for People caseload management system.

- 3.8 On Friday 27 March the Council in partnership with the HSCP and TSI launched the community helpline – 01546 605524 – as part of our work to support communities in dealing with the threat of COVID-19. The helpline provides a single point of contact for local people with concerns about financial, business, education, registration and social and homecare needs. Individuals can also use the helpline to volunteer. It is open Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm and emergency social care services remain in place for anyone with an immediate or urgent need out with those hours.
- 3.9 The Council's Customer Service Centre (CSC) Team set up the helpline using its service centre software and experience in routing and managing calls efficiently. Drawing on this in-house experience and expertise also has a cost benefit as costs associated for the setup of such a service in Councils less digitally developed than Argyll and Bute are in the range of £6,000 per month. The CSC Team deals with calls to the new helpline in addition to calls coming in on existing contact centre numbers and has redeployed staff from the closed Service points to deal with the demand.
- 3.10 The Council has also been promoting sources of medical help via its various communication channels to help residents keep themselves and others safe. The key source of advice is www.nhsinform.scot

Businesses

- 3.11 The Council has created a dedicated section on the website for information about COVID-19 and this includes a section on help for businesses: <https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/coronavirus-information-businesses>
- 3.12 Our Revenues and Benefits Team is administering Scottish Government grant funding for individual businesses. This represents a huge increase in the volume of work of this team. To support in this, employees from the council's Economic Development Service have been drafted in as additional, temporary resources.
- 3.13 The teams are working together to provide information and advice on grants and rates reliefs to businesses affected by the pandemic and to process applications for funding support. Over 1,300 emails relating to business grants (some will be applications, others will be queries or follow-up to information requested) have been received with over 446 processed at the time of this report. By grant type, 418 have been processed for the £10,000 grant with 390 approved and 49 processed for the £25,000 grant with 37 approved.

Education

- 3.14 All schools in Argyll and Bute are closed indefinitely due to the outbreak of Coronavirus. This has placed teachers, students and families in an unprecedented situation. The council's response has included:

- Making arrangements to ensure that school meals continue to be available
- Providing childcare for children of essential workers
- Providing information for parents and families on implications for their students' qualifications
- Providing the support of our Education Psychologist Services for children with additional support needs, for whom the change in routine could be particularly challenging.
- Making the best use of technology to support teachers as they continue to provide education to children and young people learning from home.

Additional steps

3.15 The council is also:

- Working with our emergency planning partners in identifying and addressing issues and sharing key messages for the public in how to respond to COVID-19
- Creating temporary re-deployment opportunities for employees, so that we can focus resources in areas of greatest need.
- Making temporary changes to how we deliver services so that we can continue to deliver the most vital services while also following current national guidance on stopping the spread of COVID-19.
- In terms of capital projects and area regeneration activity, we are making final payments to contractors, dealing with current tenders and contracts including ceasing operations at all of our on-site operations. We are engaging with partners to ensure we can re-commence as quickly as possible and are looking at external funding opportunities to support a number of our third sector partners during this time.
- New development management arrangements are being put in place to ensure planning decisions continue to be made in accordance with the latest Government guidance. New planning applications continue to be accepted and we are working on ways of establishing decision-making arrangements in the very near future. We are meeting developers by Skype and are focused on managing caseloads to avoid, where possible, backlog buildup. The GIS team are providing support to other services to assist with mapping and data to support the overall response.
- The Council's Housing team are working to assist homeless people in finding a suitable place to stay at this time, including procuring emergency accommodation in local areas.
- Waste collection services have been changed in light of the impact of the pandemic. A two-weekly general waste collection service commenced from 6th April to support households in managing waste after civic amenity sites had to be closed in line with national guidelines.
- Underpinning many activities is a robust and concerted ICT response, with support teams working to make sure that the Council's technology resources are put to the best possible use. This includes support of customer service through telephony and digital resources as well as significant effort to support home working for over 1,000 employees in line with government advice.

Council Services Decisions and Actions

3.16 The following summary outlines a broad range of key decisions and actions that have been taken across Council services in response to the pandemic; incorporating emergency legislation, government guidance and working in partnership with other responding agencies. This is a rapidly evolving situation and this position will be subject to ongoing change as we mobilise our response to best protect our employees and communities and provide essential services. Information on all services is hosted on the Council's website at the following link: <https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/coronavirus-help-and-advice>

3.17 Summary of key decisions and actions in response to Covid-19 Pandemic

Service Area	Decision /Action	Effective date
Education:		
Schools	<p>All schools closed across Argyll and Bute due to the outbreak of Coronavirus.</p> <p>Pupils and parents have been supplied with home learning resources and access to remote learning websites to ensure they can continue their classroom activities outside of school as required.</p>	effective Monday 23 rd March
School Meals	<p>10 school Hubs remain open every weekday during school term to ensure that children who are entitled to free school meals can continue to receive those meals. Arrangements are also in place for the school holiday period: Dunoon Grammar; Rothesay Joint Campus; Oban High; Colgrain Primary; Castlehill Primary; Lochgilphead Joint Campus; Tarbert Academy; Tiree High; Tobermory High; and Islay High.</p> <p>School Meals provision for children of key workers responding to CV19 free of charge regardless of any entitlement to free school meals.</p>	<p>effective Monday 23rd March</p> <p>effective Thursday 26 March</p>

Childcare	Arrangements in place for children of key workers to be cared for during school hours whilst the Coronavirus outbreak is ongoing	effective Thursday 26 March
Roads & Amenity Services:		
Crematorium and Burials	<p>The Chapel at Cardross Crematorium and graveside burials restricted to a maximum of 8 immediate family.</p> <p>Access to the Book of Remembrance suspended to limit numbers of visitors to the crematorium.</p> <p>Responsibility for conveying coffins from hearses to graveside/catafalque will rest with funeral directors and council staff will no longer assist.</p>	<p>effective for Crematoriums Wednesday 25th March for Gravesides Thursday 26th March.</p> <p>Effective from Monday 23rd March</p> <p>Effective from Monday 23rd March</p>
General	<p>Range of services suspended:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public conveniences • All roadworks other than emergency repairs • Parking enforcement. • Play parks • Pontoon facilities to all visiting leisure craft. • Cruise ships prohibited from entering Council harbour areas – excepting port of refuge circumstances. • Street lighting repairs and replacement scaled back to dangerous defects 	<p>effective Tuesday 24th March</p> <p>effective Thursday 26th March</p>
Waste	<p>Range of services suspended:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civic amenity sites • Commercial waste • Glass collection bring sites • Bin delivery and replacement <p>Collection of blue bins/bags, glass and domestic food waste suspended and introduction of new 2 weekly bin collection service.</p>	<p>effective Tuesday 24th March</p> <p>effective Thursday 26th March</p> <p>New bin collection effective Monday 6th April</p>

Development, Economic Growth & Strategic Transportation		
Oban Airport	<p>Scheduled air services subsidised by the council to Coll and Tiree, Colonsay and Islay restricted to emergency personnel only.</p> <p>Converted the scholar service to a cargo service so the scheduled flights can carry cargo over to the islands and facilitate landing with reduced personnel.</p> <p>Have facilitated supplies of food and services to Coll organised by the Scottish Government.</p>	<p>Effective from Thursday 26th March</p> <p>Effective from Thursday 26th March</p>
Building Standards & Environmental Health	<p>For the period of the lockdown suspension of site visits for all non-critical tasks in Building Standards, Planning, Environmental Health (subject to Covid-19 Act) and housing.</p> <p>Site visits will now only be undertaken where there is an immediate or imminent public health/public safety issue</p>	<p>Effective from Thursday 26th March</p> <p>Effective from Thursday 26th March</p>
Economic Support	<p>Normal economic support functions suspended to enable Business Gateway together with a range of other economic development staff focus on business support activities.</p> <p>The Council has been scaling up to support a number of UK and Scottish Government funding streams for businesses and individuals and many of those are now processing and granting applications to support communities in Argyll and Bute.</p> <p>Full details of all business support funds and advice hosted on Council website.</p>	<p>Effective from Thursday 26th March</p>

Registration	All changes in respect of registration of birth, deaths and arrangements for marriage and civil partnerships are hosted on the Council website	
ICT	Over the past 2 weeks on average more than 1100 Council staff have been working from home using the VPN service each day. The service peaked at 1145 concurrent VPN users on 31 st March. Staff have full access to their office and communications working environment including access to all corporate and departmental applications. Bandwidth at Kilmory has been temporarily increased to support home working and, although there are minor connectivity issues around the peak logon periods between 8:30 and 9am each morning, almost all staff are working concurrently and without technical issues.	

Council Staff

- 3.18 The health and wellbeing of Council staff is also vital in our response to the pandemic and a wide range of decisions have been taken to facilitate safe working arrangements, working from home, redeployment and enhanced health and wellbeing supports. Arrangements have been put in place to enable staff who are available to provide direct support to the pandemic response to be matched with any areas of need, whether through working within other council service areas or assisting community activities.

4.0 CONCLUSION

This report seeks to provide a high level overview of some of the key decisions and actions that have been taken across council services in response to the pandemic; incorporating emergency legislation, government guidance and working in partnership with other responding agencies. This is a rapidly evolving situation and this position is subject to ongoing change and review.

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 – Any additional costs arising from the implementation of the above changes are being recorded in accordance with Scottish Government and / or COSLA guidance in the expectation that net additional costs will be reimbursed. Further updates on the financial impact of the pandemic response will be reported as part of the normal financial monitoring arrangements.
- 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 Customer Service – supports arrangements for amending decision making framework to support critical customer services.

Douglas Hendry

Executive Director with responsibility for Legal and Regulatory Support Services

1st April 2020

Policy Lead: Councillor Rory Colville

For further information contact: Patricia O'Neill, Governance Manager, 01546 604384, email: patricia.o'neill@argyll-bute.gov.uk