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## **Building Back Stronger – learning from the support and relationships with community organisations throughout Covid-19**

### **1.0 Purpose**

The purpose of this report is to review the learning from the support and relationships with community organisations throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. This report will make recommendations for structures of working with communities and community organisations to help support needs arising as a result of Covid-19.

### **2.0 Recommendations**

- Offer regular peer to peer support and networking opportunities for community organisations from across Argyll and Bute.
- Provide ongoing targeted support to community organisations to access funding to address the needs identified:
  - Rising energy costs and the challenge of heating village halls
  - Ongoing maintenance costs and repairs for community facilities
  - Digital communication and technology upgrades
  - Volunteer and staff recruitment
- Liaise with other grant providers to ensure funding criteria addresses the needs of communities identified following Covid-19.
- Continue to target partnership work and embed support around the gaps identified in thematic areas of work.
- Note the best practice engagement to ensure those with protected characteristics are supported to participate.
- Note that the extensive engagement for the Argyll and Bute Outcomes Improvement Plan can be used by others to prevent duplication and consultation fatigue.
- Recognise in any strategic planning that there are still impacts and sensitivities surrounding Covid-19.

### **3.0 Background**

Further details of the background can be found in Appendix 1 including the following:

- Argyll and Bute Covid-19 Partner Response – Caring for People
- Wider Scotland Context of Covid-19 Recovery
- Argyll and Bute Recovery Framework

## 4.0 Detail

### Support Structures

- **Covid Community Response Group Meetings - Regular communication between the Council and community providing the opportunity for peer support and networking**

Since the beginning of the Test and Protect response in 2020, the Community Development team co-ordinated monthly meetings with the Covid-19 Community Response Groups. These meetings aimed to bring together groups who supported the emergency response in their communities to share information and examples of best practice. They importantly provided an opportunity for Argyll and Bute Council Community Development to identify and respond to needs arising. The online meetings were initially held within each of the four administrative areas of Argyll and Bute to support local issues. Following common challenges identified there was a move to support Argyll and Bute wide meetings from August 2021 to increase opportunities for networking and shared support.

<b>Benefits</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Opportunity for peer support and sharing of good practice. Examples included sharing of policies and procedures for reopening community facilities and resources to support volunteers.</li><li>• Able to identify shared needs arising in order to provide a comprehensive response e.g. in response to volunteer fatigue and concerns about volunteer resilience, group members' staff and volunteers were offered free access to the Council's Health Assured counselling service.</li><li>• Argyll and Bute Council Community Development were able to build strong trusted relationships with response groups which allowed for assistance to be requested efficiently and effectively.</li><li>• Online meetings made it easy to bring together organisations from different locations across Argyll and Bute.</li></ul>
<b>Challenges</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Some issues and questions raised were out with the scope of Community Development. Due to the need to go to other partners, this impacted on response times.</li><li>• With multiple response groups from all areas who are actively delivering services, it could be a challenge to find a time for meetings that suited all community groups.</li><li>• Resource commitment required from Argyll and Bute Council Community Development to host and facilitate meetings, take notes and circulate, raise queries to relevant partners and follow up as needed.</li></ul>

The groups stopped meeting in April 2022 in line with the end of the Council's Test and Protect support. Evaluation of the support offered over the period 2020-2022 was extremely positive, further information and testimonies can be found within the Community Learning and Development annual report case studies shown in Appendix 2. When the meetings ended, there was a desire shared by the groups who attended for there to be continued opportunities for community organisations from across all areas to meet, network, share learning and best practice.

**Recommendation: Offer regular peer to peer support and networking opportunities for community organisations from across Argyll and Bute.**

- **Covid-19 Micro Grants Fund - Targeted funding for identified needs**

Through the support meetings, we were able to understand that there was a need for recovery funding in particular for village halls. At Council on 24 June 2021 it was agreed that an amount of £30,400 be made available to support impacts of Covid-19 on community groups and in particular village halls. The Covid-19 Micro Grants Fund was created and organisations were invited to apply for up to £500 to help community facilities to re-open safely and support their community-led recovery activities. Activities the fund supported included provision of cleaning materials or personal protective equipment, training of staff and volunteers, as well as events to bring the community together. Within an 11 week period, the fund was developed and launched, applications were assessed and 63 organisations were awarded funding.

**Benefits**

- A quick, streamlined process from application to award taking best practice from the Council's community funding processes
- Simple application form
- Funding criteria targeted specifically to meet the needs identified

**Challenges**

- Staff resource commitment required to ensure the quick turnaround
- Maximum award of £500 meant impact of individual project was limited for some ambitions such as larger village hall repairs and improvements

**Recommendation: Provide ongoing targeted support to community organisations to access funding to address the needs identified.**

As part of the end of project monitoring process, community organisations were asked, 'Does your organisation require any further Covid-19 support?' Some examples of the key challenges still faced included:

Identified Need	Partner Supporting
<p>Low footfall along with smaller groups folding and not restarting has led to reduced income for community facilities</p> <p>Ongoing need for promotion and signposting of existing provision</p>	<p>Argyll and Bute Council Community Planning and Community Development Team have a general offer to all community organisations for support and an annual small grants scheme that groups can apply to for priority projects.</p> <p>Argyll and Bute Third Sector Interface also offer support in this area.</p>
<p>Rising energy costs and the challenge of heating village halls</p>	<p>Funding need outstanding.</p>
<p>The cost of living pressure is having an impact on community organisations who also feel a responsibility of creating community cohesion to reduce isolation</p> <p>Ongoing need for promotion and signposting of existing provision</p>	<p>Multi agency support is being delivered by a range of partners and Council services.</p>
<p>Volunteer and staff recruitment</p>	<p>Argyll and Bute Third Sector Interface are leading on volunteer support.</p>
<p>Ongoing maintenance costs and repairs for buildings</p>	<p>Funding need outstanding</p>
<p>Digital communication and technology upgrades</p>	<p>Support has been initiated from the Council's Digital team and Argyll and Bute Council's Community Development resource through an external funding opportunity.</p> <p>Argyll and Bute Community Learning and Development Partnership are supporting learners and community organisations to develop digital skills.</p>

**Recommendation: Provide ongoing targeted support to community organisations to access funding to address the needs identified:**

- Rising energy costs and the challenge of heating village halls
- Ongoing maintenance costs and repairs for community facilities
- Volunteer and staff recruitment
- Digital communication and technology upgrades

- **‘Resilient Communities’ added to criteria of Argyll and Bute Council’s annual Supporting Communities Fund from 2021-2022 onwards to meet the needs of communities**

In 2020 there was a review of the criteria of Argyll and Bute Council’s Supporting Communities Fund to align this to the needs arising for community groups from Covid-19 and Council commitments to climate change and child poverty. The category of ‘Resilient Communities’ was introduced and supports projects which tackle the effects of the pandemic in communities. This includes for example, projects which tackle loneliness and isolation, digital exclusion, building skills and confidence in getting online as well as supporting smaller organisations to recover and re-build stronger.

#### **Benefits**

- Integration of criteria into existing funding scheme better targets resources towards need
- Capacity building support offered by Argyll and Bute Council Community Development throughout grant application process and signposting to other appropriate funds if unsuccessful

#### **Challenges**

- Fund is consistently oversubscribed
- Specific eligibility criteria must be met

**Recommendation: Liaise with other grant providers to ensure funding criteria addresses the needs of communities identified following Covid-19**

#### **Engagement**

- **CONSUL Engagement – Used feedback from Covid-19 community response groups and an online web forum to identify key themes under which partnership actions for Building Back Better took place. ‘You**

**said we are doing' updates were provided to the community through the website and email communication.**

In November 2020, the Building Back Better (Communities) Group initiated a consultation asking Covid-19 community response groups and the wider community to share their experiences of the pandemic, including the impacts and the positives that could be built on or strengthened in the future.

In the first stage of the consultation, community groups shared their views in online sessions that were independently facilitated by the Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC). For the second stage, the themes that emerged from these sessions were uploaded onto a web forum called CONSUL. This opened the discussion wider and the community of Argyll and Bute were invited to share their thoughts.

The Building Back Better (Communities) Group reviewed the findings from the online forum and agreed these key themes to take forward partnership actions:

Theme	Lead Partner and Contact Information
Access to Food	<p>Argyll and Bute Council</p> <p>This includes ongoing work to support to Argyll and Bute Food Forum and the creation of a Food Policy and Delivery role.</p> <p>Key contact: Jayne Jones            Email: <a href="mailto:jayne.jones@argyll-bute.gov.uk">jayne.jones@argyll-bute.gov.uk</a>            Tel: 01546 604681</p>
Digital	<p>Argyll and Bute Council</p> <p>Work is ongoing to support digital infrastructure and access for communities, particularly on islands and remote rural areas.</p> <p>Key contact: Iain MacInnes            Email: <a href="mailto:iain.macinnnes@argyll-bute.gov.uk">iain.macinnnes@argyll-bute.gov.uk</a>            Tel: 01546 604647</p>
Income Maximisation	<p>Argyll and Bute Council</p> <p>Support in place through Revenues and Benefits service including the Flexible Food Fund.</p>

	<p>Key Contact: Fergus Walker  Email: <a href="mailto:fergus.walker@argyll-bute.gov.uk">fergus.walker@argyll-bute.gov.uk</a>  Tel: 01586 555237</p>
Non-Covid-19 Related Health Matters	<p>Argyll and Bute Health and Social Care Partnership</p> <p>Specific to healthcare provision during the pandemic which has since returned to business as usual. The World Health Organisation has declared an end to Covid-19 as a public health emergency.</p> <p>Key Contact: Kristin Gillies  Email: <a href="mailto:Kristin.gillies@nhs.scot">Kristin.gillies@nhs.scot</a></p>
Resilient Communities, Communication and Structures of Working Together	<p>Argyll and Bute Council</p> <p>Identified as requiring further action. Recommendations of how to support this area of work have been included within this report.</p> <p>Key Contact: Rona Gold  Email: <a href="mailto:rona.gold@argyll-bute.gov.uk">rona.gold@argyll-bute.gov.uk</a>  Tel: 01436 658862</p>
Social Isolation and Mental Health	<p>Argyll and Bute Health and Social Care Partnership</p> <p>Support and provision outlined in <a href="#">Living Well Strategy</a>. An example of the support in place includes Welfare Officers stationed within GP practices.</p> <p>Key Contact: Samantha Campbell  Email: <a href="mailto:samantha.campbell3@nhs.scot">samantha.campbell3@nhs.scot</a>  Tel: 07792 406 558</p>
Volunteers and Volunteering	<p>Argyll and Bute Third Sector Interface</p> <p>Provision of volunteer support package and use of online volunteer management platform.</p> <p>Key Contact: Takki Sulaiman  Email: <a href="mailto:takkisulaiman@argylltsi.org.uk">takkisulaiman@argylltsi.org.uk</a>  Tel: 07377 070387</p>

**Recommendation: Continue to target partnership work and embed support around the gaps identified.**

- **Argyll and Bute Outcomes Improvement Plan – Comprehensive engagement, with a focus on supporting non-digital participation and seldom heard groups.**

Argyll and Bute Council's Community Development Team supported the Community Planning Partnership's consultation to help develop the next 10 year Outcomes Improvement Plan.

The support was aimed at those with barriers to digital participation, as identified by Connecting Scotland. This included low income households, people aged 60+ and disabled people, additional groups targeted were people in areas with poor/no connectivity and those without essential digital skills.

Paper forms were distributed widely along with self-addressed envelopes to enable free returns. Interactive sessions were delivered using creative methods to support those with additional support needs and limited literacy. Community Development supported over 40 sessions which offered the opportunity for approximately 520 people to take part.

The consultation had 1978 responses in total and the overall priorities identified were transport and infrastructure, housing, community wellbeing and financial inclusion.

**Recommendations:**

- **Note the best practice in engagement to ensure those with protected characteristics are supported to participate.**
- **Note this extensive engagement can be used by others to prevent duplication and consultation fatigue.**

- **Remembering Together – Taking time to reflect and commemorate as we move forward.**

Remembering Together is a Scotland-wide project, delivered by Greenspace Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Government, which seeks to collect and input acts of reflection, remembrance, hope and healing within communities following the Covid-19 pandemic. The aim of the project is to co-create community artwork across the 32 local authorities which commemorates experiences.

CHArts (Argyll and Bute) in partnership with Greenspace Scotland and Argyll and Bute Council, commissioned a consultant to deliver the first phase of the project in the area



which focused on engagement and the development of initial concepts for the next delivery phase.

The project gathered feedback from 78 people across 8 events at the end of 2022. The results showed that there was interest in having a community day, and in having nature/ flora and fauna as part of a memorial.

Wider feedback from this engagement included:

- Confusion over why a memorial is being created for a virus that is still very active throughout communities and that is still affecting daily lives.
- Some communities are still quite cautious of gathering in public or attending in-person events / workshops.
- The terminology from the Scottish Government / Greenspace Scotland was seen as a barrier to engagement as many people did not want a physical memorial to an on-going challenge.
- Challenges with people suggesting that any ideas taken forward have to benefit everyone and not be just for a specific community.

This project will now move onto phase two which provides funding from 2023 into 2024

**Recommendation: Recognise in any strategic planning that there are still impacts and sensitivities surrounding Covid-19.**

## 5.0 Conclusions

This paper has outlined examples of previous successful support structures and engagement delivered since the outbreak of Covid-19. The benefits and challenges have been outlined and recommendations made. Argyll and Bute Council and partners have the opportunity to use these recommendations to shape targeted support and service provision to help communities Build Back Stronger.

## 6.0 Implications

Strategic Implications	<p>Inform targeted service provision and resource allocation.</p> <p>Consultation with communities in 2022/23 will shape the next 10 year plan for Argyll and Bute. The priorities identified were transport, housing, community wellbeing and financial inclusion.</p>
Consultations, Previous considerations	ABOIP, CONSUL, Remembering Together

Resources	<a href="#">Argyll and Bute Council Community Development</a>
Prevention	Aims to prevent further impact of Covid-19 on communities and community organisations and help to build back stronger
Equalities	Those with protected characteristics targeted within all engagement and support structures referenced

For more information, contact:

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## References

[CPP partner covid update\\_caring for people.pdf \(argyll-bute.gov.uk\)](#)

[Covid Recovery Strategy: for a fairer future](#)

[Argyll and Bute Living Well Strategy](#)

## Appendices

### Appendix 1 – Background

### Appendix 2 – Exert from Community Learning and Development Partnership Annual Report 2021-2022

### Appendix 3 – Argyll and Bute Council’s Covid-19 Micro Grants Evaluation Report

## Appendix 1 - Background

- **Argyll and Bute Covid-19 Partner Response – Caring for People**

Argyll and Bute Caring for People Partnership was set up in response to COVID-19 lockdown measures. The partnership, comprising of Argyll and Bute HSCP Public Health, Argyll and Bute Council and the Third Sector Interface, was established to provide guidance and coordinate community support.

A helpline was set up for people who were self-isolating or vulnerable to request help to access to food, essential supplies and mental health support. The local Caring for People teams worked closely with community organisations and volunteers to coordinate and deliver this essential support on the ground.

Information and resources were developed including leaflets on where to go for help, money worries, and general wellbeing which were distributed to all households in Argyll and Bute. Other resources created included guidance on how to volunteer safely and a website with information about businesses, accessing funding and groups who were helping locally.

The following case study provides an example of the strong local partnership working to provide support for those most in need: [Community empowerment: Covid-19 update | Audit Scotland \(audit-scotland.gov.uk\)](#)

- **Wider Scotland Context of Covid-19 Recovery**

In October 2021 the Scottish Government published their [Covid Recovery Strategy: for a fairer future](#). This strategy set out the Scottish Government's vision for recovery and focused on tackling inequality and disadvantage. The vision aimed to:

- Address the systemic inequalities made worse by Covid.
- Make progress towards a wellbeing economy.
- Accelerate inclusive person-centred public services.

The development of the strategy was based on public engagement including a Citizens' Assembly of Scotland, open dialogue events with stakeholders and incorporated findings from the [Social Renewal Advisory Board January 2021 report](#).

The Social Renewal Advisory Board was created to reduce inequalities as we 'Build Back Better' and focused on hearing from those with lived experiences. Listening events were held in local authorities and targeted disabled people, minority ethnic communities, people on low incomes, older people, younger people, and women. The listening event held in Argyll and Bute was led Argyll and Bute Council's Community Planning and Development team and the Third Sector Interface.

- **Argyll and Bute Recovery Framework**

The Argyll and Bute Recovery Action Plan outlined the key themes and the actions to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and to shape the “new normal”.

Building Back Better (strengthening communities) was identified as one of the key work streams. The main purpose of this work stream was to build on community resilience evidenced through the pandemic and develop the best ways to respond, engage and work in partnership with our community organisations for the future. The need for the temporary Building Back Stronger role was an agreed outcome to support this purpose. This post has been hosted under the Chief Executive’s Unit within the Community Planning and Community Development Team.

## Appendix 2 – Exert from Community Learning and Development Partnership Annual Report 2021-2022

### Case Study 1

### The Power of Partnership Working

#### Impact – the difference made

The impact of this work is best expressed by the feedback offered by participants, who reported that the group helped them in various ways to continue the vital work they had been delivering to support their communities during and in recovery from the pandemic (see Evidence section, below).

The way in which we created conditions for community groups to be supported, and to empower community groups within their communities in response to Covid-19, was recognised as an example of Best Practice within Audit Scotland's Community Empowerment: Covid-19 report: [Support for local networking: Garelochhead Station Trust's experience during Covid-19 – Communities Channel Scotland \(communityscot.org.uk\)](#)

#### Evidence – how do we know?

The case study above reflected feedback from our evaluation where 100% of respondents said that the effectiveness of their group had increased as a result of the support offered. Additional comments included:

*"The meetings and information shared by the team and other responders has helped us to guide our response to changing covid events. The meetings also helped us not to feel like we were working in isolation which was helpful in itself"*

#### **Bute and Cowal Elderly Befrienders**

*"I have appreciated opportunities to discuss my work in terms of maintaining resilient personal morale, and also to recognise its significance in the wider context of other Argyll communities responding to challenges of pandemic restrictions on community life. The group sessions mitigated my sense of personal isolation, and also resulted in helpful guidance in terms of risk assessments."*

#### **Ross of Mull and Iona Community Transport Scheme**

#### Lessons Learned

Attendees of the group reported that they valued the support and signposting from the Community Development team, and also the structure of the group. This allowed them to share experiences and practice with peers, alleviating feelings of isolation and making them feel less like they were working alone.

#### Feedback from those involved

*"As a small local charity operating an additional emergency response during lockdown and beyond, the Covid Response Group was vital for us! It connected us to other similar organisations and even more importantly to the 'bigger picture', ensuring we weren't duplicating effort and limited resources.*

*It was particularly helpful to have the Community Development Team's very proactive help in accessing specific Covid funds.*

*It might sound inconsequential but one of the most important aspects of the group, besides the practical support, was the feeling that we were appreciated further up the chain – the mainstream media focus was on the NHS and not all the formal and informal volunteering that was happening in charities and voluntary organisations around the country. While we were working flat out with very vulnerable people, many working folk relaxed to a different pace of working life during Covid, but not us! - so that recognition was an important motivating factor that I could share with my colleague and our community of volunteers.*

*However the Covid cloud did have a silver lining - one of the enduring benefits of this group is the enhanced professional relationships I now have with the other organisations involved and in particular our Community Development Officer."*

**Jayne Burnett, Manager, Visiting Friends.**