

From: Tracy Meharg

To: Permanent Secretary Colleagues

Date: Monday 23 March 2020

cc **HOCS**
EIS
DfC Grade 3s

PARTNERSHIP WITH VOLUNTARY & COMMUNITY SECTOR: RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Background

1. Minister Hargrey has assumed the lead role in the Executive for supporting and enabling the Voluntary & Community Sector as it seeks to mobilise and co-ordinate its response to support the community in this emergency. This Department will be the government gateway for the Sector, liaising across departments and with local government to support delivery on the ground.
2. The Department is taking a three strand approach to supporting the Sector as follows:
 - Sustaining existing capacity and services delivery – this has been delivered via a strong public commitment to immediate **funding flexibilities**;
 - Significant new investment in a COVID-19 **Community Contingency Fund**:
 - for grass roots, community based responses, with three broad criteria (Food, Financial Need / Poverty; and Connectivity¹) to be distributed through local government;
 - a regional element to support community infrastructure and innovative approaches;
 - match funding (at 100%) to Community Foundation NI to deliver small scale community grants.

¹ Note – payments will not be made to individuals, and Councils should not use the funds for internal council salaries / overheads

- A **COVID-19 Voluntary & Community Sector Leadership Group** to establish the key response themes and set direction for the sector and co-ordinate the collective response.

Structures for Delivery and Oversight

3. Minister Hargey established the COVID-19 Voluntary & Community Sector Emergencies Leadership Group on Friday 20 March (ELG). The ELG will focus on mobilising the sector in support of the Executive, and providing feedback to Departments on what is needed from us. The Minister chaired the first meeting and made it clear that the collective leadership of central and local government and the third sector working together, has never been more important.
4. Initially six core Response Teams will be established, jointly led by a named sectoral and government lead. There will be a wider Reference Board to sense check proposed actions, provide real time feedback and allow for communication with the wider sector. The core Response Teams and structure for delivery are set out at **Annex B**.
5. Last week most progress was made on three workstreams: **establishing a helpline; access to food; and mobilising volunteers**. Work has begun on access to medicines/essential supplies and longer term support for well-being (physical and mental). We have also connected with PSNI and Justice on support for vulnerable people and broader community safety issues. Other issues will no doubt emerge.

Link with local government.

6. Local Government is represented on the ELG. Communication with Local Government will be through SOLACE. Local government is also represented within the regional co-ordination arrangements and is aligned to the structures established within the Department's Operations Centre. Daily communication links are in place between the 11 councils, which will ensure information can efficiently flow from councils to the Department and also from the Department to all councils. This will allow for the effective flow of information to ensure current and anticipated issues at local level can be worked through on a timely basis.

Issues Raised in ELG

7. For information, **Annex C** includes a list of the issues raised during the meeting – some strategic, others tactical. A number of these we have actioned already with colleagues across departments.

Reporting

8. The ELG plans to 'meet' twice weekly, or as necessary, to consider progress against plans. The outcomes of these meetings will be fed into our Situation Reports, and from there to CCGNI. Communication to and from the Sector will be managed by NICVA.
9. Moira Doherty and Sharron Russell are leading the work for DfC and have connected with many of your departments already; it is clear that colleagues are moving swiftly to be helpful and to work across boundaries.

Action for Permanent Secretaries

10. I would ask you to note the work that is being taken forward as outlined above and to note in particular that Minister will write to her Executive colleagues in relation to this work, highlighting the need for collaboration and seeking support for a common approach to funding flexibility across the Executive, as an important visible signal of support to the Sector.
11. It would be very helpful if you could indicate whether you would like any contact to come through your DoC structure, or whether there is a more appropriate person to lead in relation to this work.

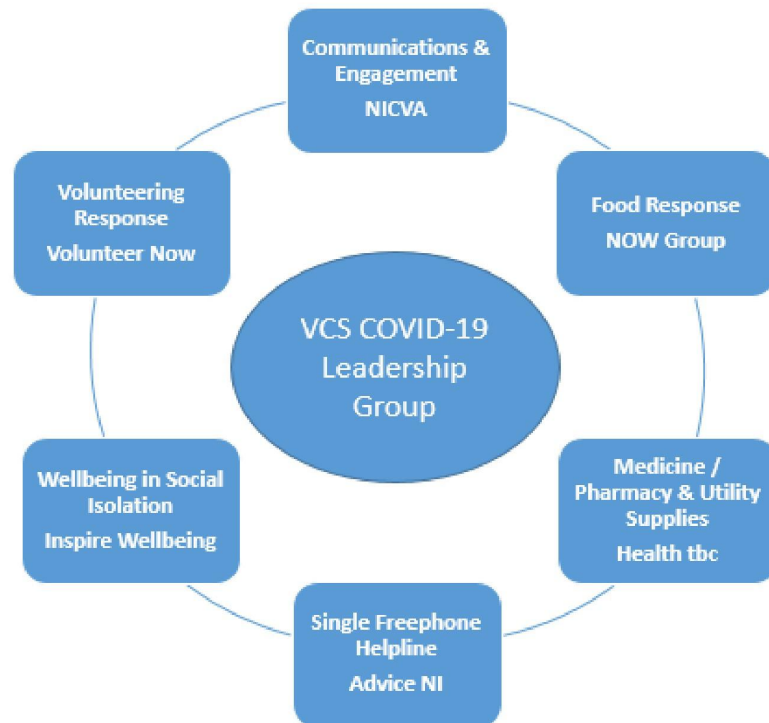
TRACY MEHARG

**VOLUNTARY & COMMUNITY SECTOR EMERGENCIES LEADERSHIP GROUP –
INITIAL PRIORITIES AS SET OUT IN THE EXECUTIVE’S COMMUNITY RESPONSE PLAN**

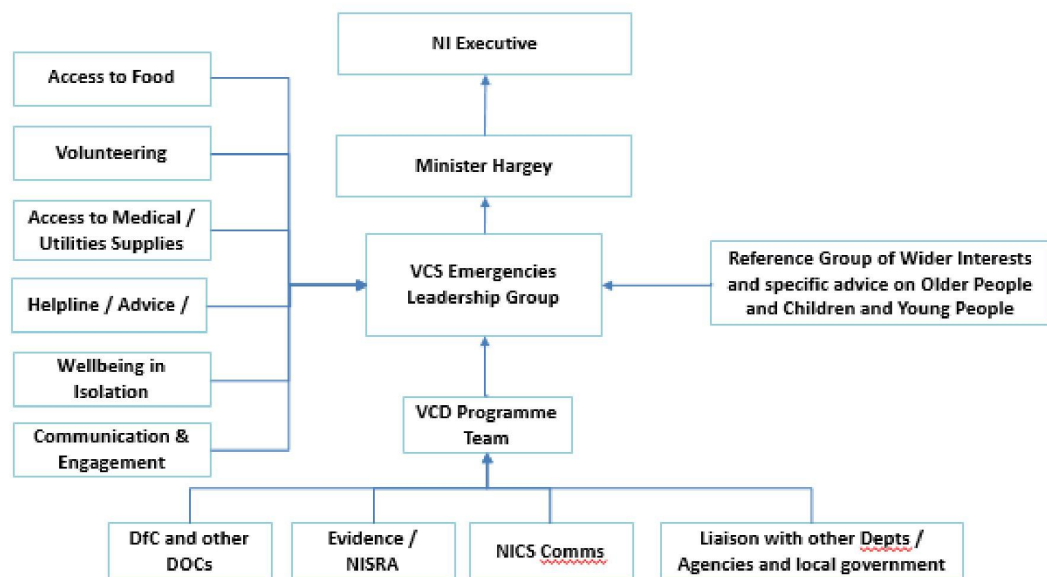
NICS COVID-19 RESPONSE PLAN CLUSTER & PRIORITY	COMMITMENTS
<p>1. The Health and Well-being of our Citizens</p> <p>Priority 5 - DOH, DFI, DAERA, DFE and DOJ - Supplies And production of essential goods and critical services (medicines, food, water, chemicals) and distribution to vulnerable people and groups (school meals, people in custody, the homeless, Self-isolating and other vulnerable groups)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grant funding flexibilities for all DfC funded organisations, including advance funding. • Seek Executive Support for extending funding flexibilities across all departments and agencies • Development of a COVID-19 Community (Contingency) Fund (regional and local) • Co-ordination of Volunteering Activity • Access to Pharmacy / Medication • Access to key utilities top ups • Access to Food – incl Free School Meals, Holiday Hunger and wider Food Poverty <p>[insert agreed additional commitments and actions]</p>
<p>3. Societal and Community Well-being</p> <p>Priority 9 - DFC – role of and impact on the VCS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications and Advice – Establish (urgently) one single Freephone Helpline to provide advice, direction and connection into other support services. • Wellbeing in Social Isolation and beyond • Oversight by VCS Emergencies Leadership Group <p>[insert agreed additional commitments and actions]</p>

STRUCTURE

PROPOSED INITIAL RESPONSE TEAMS



COVID-19 VCS RESPONSE – DELIVERY / REPORTING STRUCTURE



Issues and potential priorities raised by VCS organisations to be included in plans.

General

- Clear agreement that the Department was best placed and ready to lead, but the role of local government is key to supporting delivery.
- Welcome from the Sector of the Department's commitment to co-design responses and to involve grass roots groups as activity progresses.
- Leadership and clear, joined up communications is key – NICVA and reference to NI Direct
- Use existing community networks for communications
- Many supports are already in place and communities need to be supported and funded groups freed up to scale up and divert resource in a responsive way
- Sectoral partners offering to lead core strands of the response at a regional level – Food, Helpline / Advice.
- NICVA ready to lead on communications between the Sector and Government.
- Keen sense that we learn lessons from previous emergencies (Red Cross key here)
- Need to use key data / evidence to drive action and target activity.
- Connection between core responses (ie volunteering runs through all elements) and between the regional and local is critical – joining up the parts of the jigsaw.
- Information Security concerns

Funding Streams

- Community Foundation NI small grants fund £200k focused on older people (initially).
- National Lottery Community Fund also 'stepping up' and responding to need.
- Minister agreed to match fund at 100% during the meeting, bringing the fund to £400k
- Interest in joining up funding streams in so far as possible.
- **All Departments - urgent need for a consistent approach to funding flexibilities.**

Food

- Foodbank model needs to be reversed (food must now go out to people)
- Trussell Trust and Foodshare keen to be involved.
- Restaurants and private sector suppliers keen to help
- Many groups (NR) have their own existing connections and do not need further support.
- Food issues are wider than FSM – food poverty and holiday hunger – food safety an issue
- Offer from NOW Group to co-ordinate delivery

Communities and Local Government

- Need for benefits advice on job losses / temporary layoff
- Benefits – digital access required for Universal Credit
- Benefits and Utility top-ups – how would this work in a lockdown or isolation context
- Potential for Arts/Culture and resilience package of support
- Housing – approach of private landlords and issues re housing benefit
- There was one view that Emergency Planning Officers could be the natural link point between regional and local government in terms of communications.
- All agreed that local government was critical in terms of communication between the regional and local and the connection into delivery.

Education

- Free School Meals – some thought that many children won't take up offer of FSM in the context of not being at school.
- Activity packs for children – can we bulk buy and deliver

Executive Office

- Messaging and Public Information – people aren't listening and changing their behaviours (social distancing).

Justice

- Vulnerable households – domestic violence
- Access NI checks
- Community Safety – volunteers on the street in a lockdown situation
- Scams – some targeting elderly
- Black market goods
- Sanctuary Spaces for children

Health

- Urgent need to identify those most vulnerable to enable targeting activity for support – delivery of food and medicines.
- GP messages re bulk prescribing and resultant access to pharmacy
- Wellbeing activity when self isolating

Finance / Economy

- HMRC holiday would assist greatly in costs of employment - all looking to the announcement due re economic support – concerns re jobs in the Sector – some organisations already struggling to be viable.
- Fiscal packages of support – need for clarification, especially around rates and mortgages
- Broadband access will become increasingly critical
- Subject to Chancellor's announcement on any package to support the Social Enterprise, sectoral colleagues would like to see departments explore the potential for a Social Enterprise resilience fund, similar to Scottish example.

Infrastructure / DAERA

- Rural Transport – access to food
- Scale and coordination differences in rural areas - older population
- Farming community has specific issues re benefit entitlements