

From: Sharron Russell

Date: 16 March 2020

To: 1. Moira Doherty  
2. Special Adviser  
3. Minister Hargey

## **COVID-19: PROPOSED VOLUNTARY & COMMUNITY SECTOR SUPPORT**

**Issue:** The Voluntary & Community Sector is a key partner and will play a critical role in responding to the challenges emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic. This Submission sets out initial support measures for your consideration.

**Timing:** **Immediate**

**FOI Implications:** In the event of a request for disclosure of information contained in this submission under the FOI Act, the request would be considered in the context of the relevant provisions of the legislation, including any relevant exemptions that may be applicable.

**Presentational Issues:** Public and community interest is very high at this time.

**Financial Implications:** The Executive's allocation from the funding announced in the Chancellor's budget statement of 11 March is not yet known. However, an indicative bid for £2m for 2020/21 has been communicated to the Department of Finance.

**Legislation Implications:** Urgent changes to benefit regulations have been made in response to Covid-19 and are referenced in the body of this Submission. Proposals for a Covid-19 Community Support Fund and flexibility in discretionary grant funding are covered by Article 3 of The Social Needs (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 – *Power to provide financial assistance*.

**Equality implications:** Those most likely to be vulnerable in the context of a public health threat such as Covid-19 are older people, the socially and rurally isolated, those with disabilities and those with caring responsibilities. There is a clear opportunity to focus support and target resource to these groups.

**Recommendation:** That you note this briefing and approve the letter to issue to directly funded community organisations (**Annex A**) and local government partners (**Annex B**).

## **Detail**

We need to respond swiftly to the emerging needs created by the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly for the most vulnerable in our community. This will require us to work in partnership with our colleagues in the Voluntary and Community Sector delivering critical services on the ground.

2. The capacity of the Sector to meet emerging demand for existing services, as well as those which emerge as a result of the pandemic, is likely to be stretched. This Submission sets out initial support proposals for your consideration.
3. A two strand proposal for how we could support the Sector at this time is set out: our approach to grant funding for existing services, and provision of contingency funding for additional support.

## **Flexibility in Grant Funding**

4. You have asked us to look at streamlining our approach to grant funding to ensure proportionality and a focus on outcomes. We have a proposal within the 2020/21 Change Fund for a co-design approach to be taken with the sector and other statutory partners. However, given the current climate, we propose introducing contingency flexibilities, for a period of three months initially, to provide breathing space to enable organisations to focus on priority activities.
5. Proposed extraordinary grant flexibilities could include:
  - a quarter or half (to be decided) of the annual discretionary grant payment in advance, which would allow the continuation of salary contributions and overheads in circumstances where employees are required to self-isolate for example. Whilst we can already do this under existing procedures where the organisation has a robust assurance rating, there may be a question of timing if Minister wishes to advance payments prior to contracts being issued on 1<sup>st</sup> April as we do not, as yet, have budget cover from the Department of Finance.
  - temporary suspension of targets and funding conditions which are directly impacted by organisations' response to the Executive's published advice and guidance for employers;

- temporary suspension of grant monitoring arrangements such as vouching and requiring organisations to seek prior approval for re-profiled spend within already approved budget.
6. There is more work to be done to bottom out the detail of what we wish to do, and there are risks to being seen to relax existing governance arrangements. However, we are in exceptional times and, working with internal governance and audit colleagues, we are confident that we can minimise the risk to public funds, whilst supporting community groups to take appropriate action and respond flexibly to the needs of the communities that they are funded to serve.

### **COVID-19 Community Support Fund**

7. Given the emerging and predicted health, social and economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, there are likely to be disproportionate impacts on a number of vulnerable groups. Those who are socially and rurally isolated, those with health conditions and disabilities, carers and older people are likely to be among those most impacted.
8. To address these anticipated needs, it is proposed that we introduce a new COVID-19 Community Support Fund; this fund could provide the following categories of support:
- Financial – low income and at risk due to financial stress
  - Food - access to food (whether due to cost or availability)
  - Connectivity – those living alone or in rural and border areas that are likely to experience greater challenges in accessing services.
9. This would be an extraordinary fund to be delivered through the established Community Support Programme infrastructure. If you are in agreement, further detail can be worked up urgently with delivery partners in NICVA, Health and Social Care, Public Health Agency and Local Government.

### **Recommendation**

10. That you note this briefing and agree:
- The proposals outlined in relation to initial flexibilities in grant funding arrangements at paragraph 6;
  - To issue the letters at **Annex A** and **Annex B** to directly funded community organisations and local government Chief Executives.
  - That officials work at pace with partners outlined at paragraph 9 to bring back further proposals for a COVID-19 Community Support Fund for your consideration.

**Sharron Russell**  
**Director, Voluntary & Community Division**

Cc: Tracy Meharg  
DfC Press Office  
Deputy Secretary's Office ECG  
Permanent Secretary's Support

**ANNEX A**

Minister's headed paper

16 March 2020

Dear community sector colleague,

I am writing to update you on the action I am taking to help mitigate the potential impact of Covid-19 on the people and communities that we support.

You will be aware that the situation is fast-moving and evolving – it is therefore necessary that we respond with equal pace.

I have made plans to ensure that every area of my Department has contingency arrangements in place in the event that reasonable and worst case planning assumptions are realised. The key business continuity priorities, for the Department and our Arm's Length Bodies have been identified as:

- provision of social security benefits and child maintenance services
- provision of social housing and essential repairs
- payment of grants and flexibility in our approach to supporting community and voluntary groups delivering essential services on the ground
- prompt payments to suppliers for goods and services

I have brought forward urgent changes to benefit rules to help those affected by Covid-19, including amendments to Statutory Sick Pay, Employment and Support Allowance and

Universal Credit. These changes mean that there will be no delay in access to sickness related benefits.

My primary objective is to ensure that people are protected and that important community services will continue to be delivered. I am working with partners across the Executive and its agencies to discuss ongoing risk levels and to feed into emerging advice and planning. We will continue to rely on the advice from the Public Health Agency (PHA) advice - [link here](#) COVID-19 (coronavirus) guidance

I recognise the vital role that you play in supporting many of those in our community who need help now more than ever. In recognition of this, and given the extraordinary circumstances that we find ourselves in, I have authorised the following additional steps to ensure that we are ready to face the challenges presented by Covid-19 together:

**Grant funding flexibilities** to include:

- an upfront payment of grant funding for a defined period, to allow for, amongst other things, the continuation of salary contributions in circumstances where employees are required to self-isolate;
- temporary suspension of targets and funding conditions which are directly impacted by your response to the Executive's published advice and guidance for employers;
- temporary suspension of grant monitoring arrangements such as vouching, and the need to secure prior approval for reprofiling of previously agreed budget; these to be recommenced at a later stage with a reasonable and proportionate approach based on risk.

Sponsor teams will be in touch very quickly to let you know how these flexibilities will work.

**Covid-19 Community Support Fund**

Given the emerging and predicted health, social and economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, there are likely to be disproportionate impacts on a number of vulnerable groups. Those who are socially and rurally isolated, those with health conditions and disabilities, carers and older people are likely to be among those most impacted.

To address these anticipated needs, I will introduce a COVID 19 Community Support Fund; this fund could provide the following categories of support:

Financial – low income and at risk due to financial stress

Food - access to food (whether due to cost or availability)

Connectivity – those living alone or in rural and border areas that are likely to experience greater challenges in accessing services.

This will be an extraordinary fund to be delivered through the established Community Support Programme infrastructure in which local government distributes funding on our behalf. My officials are working with delivery partners in NICVA, Health and Social Care, Public Health Agency and Local Government to ensure that the proposed Fund takes account of emerging need.

I am extremely grateful for your support as we face these challenging times – it is vital that together we work to support those in our community who will need it most in the weeks ahead.

**DEIRDRE HARGEY**

**MINISTER FOR COMMUNITIES**

## ANNEX B

Minister's headed paper

16 March 2020

Dear [insert Chief Executive's name],

I am writing to update you on the action I am taking to help mitigate the potential impact of Covid-19 on the people and communities that we support.

You will be aware that the situation is fast-moving and evolving – it is therefore necessary that we respond with equal pace.

I have made plans to ensure that every area of my Department has contingency arrangements in place in the event that reasonable and worst case planning assumptions are realised. The key business continuity priorities, for the Department and our Arm's Length Bodies have been identified as:

- provision of social security benefits and child maintenance services
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- temporary suspension of targets and funding conditions which are directly impacted by the response to the Executive's published advice and guidance for employers;
- temporary suspension of grant monitoring arrangements such as vouching, and the need to secure prior approval for reprofiling of previously agreed budget; these to be recommenced at a later stage with a reasonable and proportionate approach based on risk.

Our sponsor teams will be in touch with funded groups very quickly to let them know how these flexibilities will work.

**A Covid-19 Community Support Fund**

Given the emerging and predicted health, social and economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, there are likely to be disproportionate impacts on a number of vulnerable groups. Those who are socially and rurally isolated, those with health conditions and disabilities, carers and older people are likely to be among those most impacted.

To address these anticipated needs, I will introduce a COVID 19 Community Support Fund; this fund could provide the following categories of support:

Financial – low income and at risk due to financial stress

Food - access to food (whether due to cost or availability)

Connectivity – those living alone or in rural and border areas that are likely to experience greater challenges in accessing services

This will be an extraordinary fund to be delivered through the established Community Support Programme infrastructure through which my Department and local government distributes funding together. My officials will work with delivery partners in NICVA, Health and Social Care, Public Health Agency and local government to ensure that the proposed Fund takes account of emerging need.



As we face these challenges, the need for us to work together has never been more important. In that context, I would encourage you to take steps similar to those set out above in relation to grant funding flexibilities. I have authorised these flexibilities for those groups directly funded by my Department, but much of the funding through which we support community services is distributed through Community Support Programme for which you are responsible. It would be good to see consistency of approach, if that is possible.

Joan McCaffrey, representing SOLACE, is already engaged with my officials on the development of the Covid-19 Community Support Fund and I look forward to proposals coming forward for my consideration as quickly as possible.

I thank you for your continued support and will update on progress as we move forward on this important joint working.

**DEIRDRE HARGEY**

**MINISTER FOR COMMUNITIES**

## Draft Press Release

### ***Communities Minister Deirdre Hargey supports Community and Voluntary Groups as they pull together to respond to Covid-19***

Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey wrote today to all community and voluntary sector groups funded by her Department to assure them of her support as they gear up to respond to the impact of Covid-19 in communities here.

*'The role of community organisations has never been more important as we seek to protect people who might be vulnerable across our communities. I've been heartened over the weekend as I've seen the community response that is already kicking in. Volunteers and community activists are pulling together and seeking to work with government as we tackle this threat to public health together. I want to make sure that whatever help I can put in place is there to make sure this important work is supported'* said the Minister.

She went on *'I have taken steps to ensure that flexibility is there for Groups who are responding to the threat presented by Covid-19, who might otherwise be thinking about delivery targets or administration. We need to support people to do the right thing right now'.*

*'I am also announcing today that I will bring forward very quickly a Covid-19 related Community Contingency Fund. As things develop over the coming weeks, I want to make sure that funding will be available where it is needed by groups who are supporting people who are socially isolated, struggling financially or who can't access food supplies'*

*'I will continuously review the situation and work with other departments across the Executive to coordinate our response'.*

Seamus McAleavey, Chief Executive of NICVA, with whom the Minister has been discussing a co-ordinated response, said *'NICVA welcomes this approach by the Minister to support the Sector as we work together to respond to these unprecedented challenges. I too have been heartened by the willingness of groups on the ground to step up in any way they can to support their communities. I look forward to NIVCA working further with the Minister's officials on the design of the Community Support Fund'.*