

From: Beverley Wall  
Strategic Policy and Professional Services

Date: 8<sup>th</sup> April 2020

1. Special Advisor
2. Minister

cc: See Below

## **STATEMENT TO THE ASSEMBLY'S COVID-19 AD HOC COMMITTEE**

**Issue:** You have been invited to make a formal statement to the Assembly's Covid-19 Ad Hoc Committee, detailing the work which you and the Department are leading to support vulnerable people and communities at this difficult time.

**Timing:** Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020 at 2.30pm (Your statement will follow the statement from the Minister for Education)

**Priority:** Urgent

**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:** Ongoing media and political interest in the Department's response to the Covid-19 crisis.

**Recommendation:** You are invited to note the content of this submission to include;

- (a) A draft statement for your consideration - Annex A**
- (b) Index of key interventions – Annex B**
- (c) Detailed briefing to support you in responding to questions - Annex C.**

## **Detail**

You are scheduled to deliver a Statement to the Assembly's Covid-19 Ad Hoc Committee on Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> April. This statement will focus on the work which you and the Department are leading to support vulnerable people and communities in response to challenges presented by the ongoing public health crisis.

2. Delivery of the statement presents an important opportunity for you to update the Assembly on the range of interventions which you have put in place to support vulnerable people and communities. The key interventions include:-
  - Legislative and operational changes to provide easier and faster access to Welfare Benefits;
  - Changes to Universal Credit to increase the standard allowance and make available a non-repayable Contingency Fund Grant;
  - Suspension of medical assessments to ensure continued entitlement and suspension of face to face appointments;
  - Additional measures to support those in social homes and tackle homelessness;
  - A range of measures to support and maximise the impact of the Voluntary and Community Sector;
  - Community Contingency Fund in partnership with local councils;
  - Measures to address food distribution issues/food poverty; and
  - Support for Arts and Sport.
3. A draft statement, reflecting the key actions taken has been prepared for your consideration at **Annex A**. More detailed background briefing on all Departmental

interventions is attached at **Annex B and C** to support you in dealing with any questions which may arise following the statement.

4. The Ad Hoc Committee session is due to commence at 2.30pm with a Statement by the Minister for Education, Peter Weir MLA. It is anticipated that your Statement will be scheduled for approximately 3.45pm and the session will conclude at 5.00pm.

## **Recommendation**

5. You are invited to note the content of this submission for your appearance at the Assembly's Covid-19 Ad Hoc Committee meeting. This briefing includes:
  - A draft statement for your consideration - Annex A
  - Index and detailed briefing to support you in responding to questions – Annexes B and C.

## **Beverley Wall**

### cc list:

Tracy Meharg

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Anthony Carleton

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**Statement to Assembly Covid-19 Ad Hoc Committee**

**Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020**

**Deirdre Hargey MLA, Minister for Communities**

To begin this afternoon, I would like to formally recognise the many difficulties and challenges which people and communities, particularly the most vulnerable, are facing at this time. As Minister for the Department for Communities, I am committed to doing everything in my power to support the most vulnerable in our society.

Today I welcome the opportunity to update the Assembly on the important work which I have undertaken to help support and protect people in need during this public health crisis. In recent weeks, intensive work has taken place across the Department for Communities, in partnership with our multiple partner organisations, to ensure that those most in need are protected and receive the necessary help and support they require.

One of my key priorities has been to ensure continued delivery of benefits to those in need and to introduce necessary changes to the system to provide additional support and flexibilities in these extraordinary times. To date, work has been completed to change the necessary legislation, regulations and operational processes to provide easier and faster access to Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment, Jobseekers Allowance, Employment Support Allowance and Discretionary Support.

We have seen unprecedented demand in terms of new claims for Universal Credit with 45,000 cases received in the last three weeks, a tenfold increase. As a result, we have reconfigured a lot of our services to make the payment of benefit to these people our first and foremost priority. Since 16<sup>th</sup> March the average number of claims received each week has been 16,650. This can be compared to a weekly average of 1,950 new claims before this crisis. Significant operational adjustments have been put in place which put a priority on payments and supporting the most vulnerable.



In the last 3 weeks we have made over 35,000 regular payments of UC with 99% of those paid on time. Our average speed to answering calls this week is under 3 minutes. We are answering nearly 95% of calls offered to us. Yes, there will be exceptions, but please recognise the context our staff are delivering against.

All of this has been delivered with a much reduced workforce due to the circumstances we are operating under. This has resulted in available staff being redirected to priority areas, including dealing with new claims for Universal Credit and Discretionary Support and maintaining important telephony services.

I would wish to take this opportunity to pay tribute to staff right across the Department who have provided an exceptional public service under the most severe pressures. Their determination and hard work has helped ensure that important services continue to be delivered at this exceptionally difficult time.

These important changes to our business operations have presented significant challenges for managers and staff. We have worked closely with trade unions to ensure that we comply with social distancing guidelines across our office network and have increased cleaning regimes to protect our staff.

Many staff are now working rota systems to ensure that these guidelines are strictly adhered to and I would commend them for their dedication in working long hours and over weekends to ensure that vital public services are delivered.

Members will be aware that the Universal Credit standard allowance has increased for everyone by £86.67 a month. In addition, everyone making a new claim to Universal Credit can now apply for a non-repayable Universal Credit Contingency Fund grant, available through Discretionary Support. This is publicised through NIDirect - the main citizen facing information portal as well as the Department's social media channels and through the network of advice and community groups.

In terms of Discretionary Support, a number of steps have been taken to improve our ability to respond to increased demand. We have amended the Regulations to widen the grant

eligibility criteria to provide a grant for short term living expenses to assist claimants specifically affected by COVID-19. An on-line application form for the new living expenses grant is now available and staff have been redeployed to this area to ensure that we can manage the increase in applications.

We have also suspended face to face appointments across the Jobs and Benefits network and this includes medical assessments for PIP and ESA to ensure continuity of awards. Access to telephony channels will continue to be available for anyone claiming UC, PIP, ESA, JSA and Discretionary Support. However, given the significant staff absences experienced across all benefit operational areas and the potential long delays in answering calls, new on-line application forms for ESA, JSA and Discretionary Support (Covid-19 living expenses) are now available on NIDirect. The forms can be downloaded, completed and emailed directly to the relevant benefit area for processing.

Due to the Covid-19 crisis, some households in social homes may face difficulties with paying the rent which are beyond their control. I can assure these households that their home is secure and they will not be evicted. Both the Housing Executive and all of our Housing Associations have given a commitment to treat all rent issues with sensitivity. They will support tenants through this difficult period. The Department will work with Housing Associations and the Housing Executive to help them keep tenants in their homes and to ensure that the welfare system can provide help to their tenants as fast as possible.

The package of measures recently announced by the UK Chancellor, alongside changes to Local Housing Allowance rates and increases in periods of Discretionary Housing Payments, provide some assurance to both landlords and tenants at this time. I have also announced that the proposed Housing Executive rent increase will be put on hold until October 2020. People are worried about their jobs and the impacts of this crisis on their families and I do not want them to face additional pressures about whether they can pay their rent. My officials and I are also exploring the groups of people who remain adversely affected by COVID-19, the scale of the issue and the mechanisms available to the Department to support these groups.

I am particularly focused on how we can protect the homeless during this period. The Housing Executive has taken a number of emergency measures, including the sourcing of additional temporary accommodation for those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. I am thankful that we have no-one currently sleeping on the streets of Belfast and I would commend those who have worked with us in the Public Health Agency, the Department for Health, PSNI, the Probation Board and local homeless providers to ensure the protection of this most vulnerable of groups.

The Department's Make the Call Helpline has reprioritised its available resources in light of the decision to step back from home visits and attending community events in order to protect vulnerable people and minimise the spread of Covid-19. All additional resources have been redeployed to the telephony team to increase its capacity to assist those who need to access benefit advice and other supports and services. I know that this vital service has been a lifeline to many vulnerable people during this crisis and we will ensure that the necessary resources remain in place to continue this service.

My Department has also worked closely with Advice NI to support the establishment of a Freephone Covid-19 Community Helpline. This service is available 9.00-5.00 seven days a week to ensure that the most vulnerable and those at risk of Covid-19 have access to practical support services and emotional support at this most difficult time. The Department also provides funding to Advice NI for the Independent Welfare Changes helpline which is also another important source of information for the public.

Whilst the main focus of the Department has been on responding to the ongoing crisis situation, I have continued to progress important work in relation to welfare mitigations. A draft Bill to allow for the extension of mitigation payments for the bedroom tax has been shared with the Executive. Once approval to proceed has been granted then the Department will ensure that it is formally presented to the Assembly as quickly as possible.

The legislation to extend the remaining welfare mitigation schemes will be laid shortly after the Bill. However, the Department has now implemented contingency arrangements with mitigation payments made under the sole Authority of the Budget Act from 1 April 2020. This

approach has been agreed with the Department of Finance and was announced by the Minister of Finance during his opening statement to the Assembly on the Budget Bill on 25 February 2020.

The use of the Budget Act will allow the Department to make payments to people who would otherwise be entitled to a Welfare Supplementary Payment. This approach is an exceptional measure that is necessary to protect people and ensure that payments continue to be made. This approach will continue for a short period until the relevant legislation to extend the mitigation schemes is approved by the Assembly.

At this point I would wish to place on record my sincere thanks to our range of voluntary and community sector partners who continue to deliver important services to local communities. I have put in place a Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Leadership Group, with support and input from local government and other stakeholders. This Group has a key role in providing collective leadership across government and grass roots community organisations to develop and implement urgent measures for protecting and supporting communities in need.

This partnership approach has been demonstrated this week with the introduction of a new weekly food distribution service. My Department is investing £10m in this service over the next three months which will see 10,000 food boxes being delivered each week to the most vulnerable in society during the current lockdown. The box of mainly non-perishable goods will be delivered directly to the door of vulnerable people who have been notified to shield by their GPs and who do not have access to local support networks. These boxes will also be available to those who are not shielding, but are in critical need of food.

Whilst my Department is leading on the initiative, it has only been made possible through collaborative working with Health Trusts, local councils, the Voluntary and Community sector and the private sector. This vital service will ensure that those most in need in our society who do not have a support network of family and friends to help them through this emergency will have access to basic food supplies. It will also allow those at risk of social isolation to

see a friendly face and know that we as a society have not forgotten about them. There is a tremendous amount of goodwill and generosity in action across our society, which is very welcome at this challenging time.

The Department has taken the lead in responding to the challenges that community and voluntary organisations face in introducing a range of flexibilities in terms and conditions around grant funding, including upfront payment and reduced bureaucracy. In addition, we have introduced a COVID-19 Community Support Fund, releasing £1.5m initially, through local government's existing Community Support Programme. This funding will enable our local Councils to directly support grass roots organisations in tackling poverty and helping those in greatest need. We have also released £200k to the Community Foundation's Small Grants Programme to further tackle the crisis at a local level.

I was also pleased to work with the Education Minister to announce a new scheme to introduce direct payments to families whose children would normally benefit from a free school meal. Payments are being issued by the Education Authority and will also cover the Easter holiday period. This is an important initiative to ensure that families do not experience additional hardship as a result of the decision to close our schools.

One of the positive aspects to arise from this crisis has been the willingness of people to reach out to help others and to volunteer their services across a range of areas. I was pleased to work with Volunteer Now in launching a public campaign **#helpeachother** to direct new volunteers to its online registration and volunteer matching platform. Since its launch the campaign has already had over 2,000 people registering to express support. Existing volunteers across health trusts, sporting bodies and other large organisations are also being coordinated to respond to immediate needs.

I am conscious that other sectors are facing significant challenges at this time. I recently announced a new £1m Covid-19 Creative Support Fund which will be a mechanism to support individual artists and institutions in finding innovative ways to combat social isolations and address wellbeing challenges. The Arts Sector has such an important role to play in keeping spirits high and promoting creativity in these difficult times.

I have also asked my officials to work with Sport NI and the Sports Forum to consider immediate practical steps which can be taken to support sporting organisations. To date this has involved early release of 2020/21 grant awards and we are also seeking to have a programme in place to provide emergency financial relief to grassroots sporting organisations.

We are all involved in a fast-moving and most challenging situation which demands a highly flexible and responsive approach across Government and with our partners in the voluntary, community and private sectors. I will continue to work closely with Executive colleagues, with the Committee for Communities and with this Assembly to ensure that we do all in our power to limit the damage of this deadly health crisis and to protect the most vulnerable across our communities.

I know that I will have your full support for the measures we have introduced so far and I am happy to engage further with Members to explore how we can all work together to protect everyone within this society.

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**Key Intervention:** Funding bids for COVID-19 interventions

Background: The Department has submitted a number of funding bids to the Department of Finance for COVID-19 related interventions. The list of bids is attached at Appendix A. We are currently awaiting the outcome of the funding allocation process. A draft Executive paper was circulated on Tuesday 7 April which indicated the Department was to be allocated £30.3m for –

- NIHE – Homelessness - £3.3m
- Discretionary Support COVID-19 - £5m
- Discretionary Support Economic Shock - £10m
- Community Support Scheme - £2m
- Shielding package for clinically high-risk - £10m

You have responded to this draft paper by writing to the Finance Minister requesting that the £10m for Discretionary Support Economic shock is reallocated to Local Councils to support them in their ongoing work in the COVID-19 response.

We are currently awaiting a response from the Finance Minister and for the draft paper to be discussed at the Executive.

**Lines to Take:**

- The Department has submitted a number funding bids to Department of Finance worth £90.6m in Quarter 1 and £49.0m in Quarters 2 to 4 of 2020-21 in order to address the current COVID-19 crisis.
- These bids are being assessed by Department of Finance, alongside bids from all other departments, before being brought to the Executive for decisions around allocations.
- The proposed interventions include the delivery of regular food packages to clinically vulnerable people who at the minute don't have a support network in place and an increase to the Discretionary Support fund to extend the provision of emergency financial support to people affected by the COVID-19 outbreak.
- The Department also wants to support Local Government at a time when Councils are sustaining a large loss in their regular income and also to bolster the Community Support Programme that they manage with the Voluntary and Community Sector.
- The NI Housing Executive need financial support for additional Homelessness costs. It is inevitable that there will be a reduced capacity within homeless hostels as staffing levels fall and they begin to implement their contingency plans (including holding units vacant). It is estimated that a significant number of additional units of temporary accommodation will be required.



**DfC COVID-19 2020-21 Funding Requirements**

<b>COVID-19 Actions - Quarter 1 bids</b>		<b>Revised 2020-21 £'000</b>
NIHE – Homelessness	Quarter 1	5,727
NIHE – 90 New Laptops for Remote Working	Quarter 1	100
Private Rented Sector support	Quarter 1	11,145
Housing Rights – Additional Staff & IT costs	Quarter 1	108
Sick Leave pay for DfC Recruitment Agency staff	Quarter 1	752
Local Councils Compensatory Costs	Quarter 1	16,500
Discretionary Support COVID-19 Scheme	Quarter 1	5,000
Discretionary Support Economic Shock Scheme	Quarter 1	30,000
Community Support Scheme	Quarter 1	2,000
Culture Division - Resilience fund	Quarter 1	1,500
Sport	Quarter 1	1,000
Shielding package for clinically high-risk	Quarter 1	10,000
Supporting People providers	Quarter 1	2,100
NIHE Homeless Out of Hours	Quarter 1	194
Car Parking for essential staff	Quarter 1	890
Additional staff for Discretionary Support	Quarter 1	250
Funeral Loans	Quarter 1	2,730
Additional Surface Pros for Benefit Processing**	Quarter 1	630
<b>Requirements Total</b>		<b>90,626</b>

<b>COVID-19 Actions - Quarter 2 to 4 bids</b>		<b>Revised 2020-21 £'000</b>
NIHE – Homelessness	Quarter 2	4,765
Local Councils Compensatory Costs	Quarter 2	16,500
Community Support Scheme	Quarters 2, 3 & 4	6,000
Culture Division - Resilience fund	Quarters 2, 3 & 4	2,500
Sport	Quarters 2, 3 & 4	3,000
Supporting People providers	Quarter 2	2,100
NIHE Homeless Out of Hours	Quarter 2	194
Additional staff for Discretionary Support	Quarter 2	250
UC Operations – Additional Staff Costs	Quarters 3 & 4	3,500
Delay in implementing NIHE Rental Increase	Quarter 4	4,500
Housing Association Grant - additional costs	Quarters 3 & 4	4,710
Support Package for Business Improvement Districts	Quarters 2, 3 & 4	1,000
<b>Requirements in Quarters 2, 3 &amp; 4</b>		<b>49,019</b>

<b>Total Estimated 20-21 COVID-19 Requirement (£'000)</b>		<b>139,645</b>
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<p><b>Key Intervention:</b> Advice for the public on how can they apply for financial crisis support and benefits during the COVID 19 pandemic</p>
<p><b>Background:</b>  Information on how the public can apply for financial crisis support and benefits during the COVID 19 pandemic is published on nidirect <a href="http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-and-benefits">www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-and-benefits</a> and on the DfC website <a href="https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/landing-pages/covid-19-service-updates">https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/landing-pages/covid-19-service-updates</a>. These are kept updated and the links have been shared with MLAs, the Advice Sector and stakeholders.</p>
<p><b>Lines to Take:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Department is using existing communication channels in place to urgently advise organisations and individuals what actions they can take.</li> <li>• Information on how the public can apply for financial crisis support and benefits during the COVID 19 pandemic is published on NIDirect and on the DfC website.</li> <li>• These are kept updated and the links have been shared with MLAs, the Advice Sector and stakeholders.</li> </ul>

- The Department also uses Ministerial media interviews, Press Releases, the Departmental twitter page and the Jobs & Benefits NI Facebook page to signpost the public to the most recent benefit and financial crisis support information.
- Universal Credit information is also available through a range of digital channels including Facebook, Spotify, Google search and the Google Display Network. Information is available online at [www.nidirect.gov.uk/universalcredit](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/universalcredit) and this includes short videos to explain Universal Credit and how to apply.
- The Department also provides funding to Advice NI for the Independent Welfare Changes helpline which is also another important source of information for the public.

**Key Intervention: Discretionary Support****Background:**

Discretionary Support, a unique service in Northern Ireland (NI), is primarily a telephony based application process delivered through a bespoke IT System developed by the Department's ICT Services.

There is no interface with any other benefit paying systems meaning there is manual intervention required throughout the application process.

**Lines to Take:**

- Discretionary Support legislation and regulations has been enhanced by introducing a COVID-19 living expenses grant to help those who find themselves in a financial crisis due to the direct impact of COVID-19.
- This has increased demand further at a time, when DS is already under significant pressure. A new on-line Covid-19 living expenses application form is now available on niDirect, it can be downloaded, completed and sent directly to DS via a dedicated email address.
- Staff attendance across ESA, JSA and DS has been running at an average of between 30-40% of normal levels.
- Demand on telephony, new claims and DS applications have significantly increased ranging between 50-90% higher than forecasts.

**Key Intervention:** Universal Credit**Background:**

There has been unprecedented demand for UC with 45k cases received in the last three weeks, a tenfold increase. As a result, we have reconfigured a lot of our services to make the payment of these cases our first and foremost priority. We have set up regular briefings sessions with partners in the advice sector. We have also established a vulnerable person's hotline.

**Lines to Take:**

- We have seen a ten-fold increase in those claiming Universal Credit. COVID-19 is without doubt a health crisis, but for many more it has also become an economic crisis.
- Yet despite this, I must reassure members that the team are doing an outstanding job. They have made the payment of claims their priority and have been creative and flexible in their approach. In the last 3 weeks we have made over 35k regular payments of UC with 99% of those paid on time. Our average speed to answering calls this week is under 3 minutes. We are answering nearly 95% of calls offered to us. Yes, there will be exceptions, but please recognize the context we are delivering against.
- I want to pay tribute to all my teams in the Department who have been at the forefront of our response to this crisis, processing claims, answering telephones and making payments. They have been magnificent and I thank each and every one of them.
- I also want to thank our partners in the advice sector. They too have faced an unprecedented demand for their services. My social security teams have held regular meetings with them to keep them up to date with the many changes we have had to make. We have also stood up a trusted partner's helpline for vulnerable customers. It is important that in these times of crisis, we don't leave anyone behind.
- Advance payments are available for anyone making a new claim. In the last 3 weeks, approximately 12k people have taken out an advance payment. The recent increases of £1k per year for all those on UC will cover the cost of repaying these advance payments. Whilst I am certainly no fan of either advance payments or the 5-week wait for a first UC payment, for families in real financial hardship, these advance payments do at least give them access to money, quickly.
- In addition, unique to NI, people claiming UC can apply for a non-repayable grant from the UC Contingency Fund through the Discretionary Support Scheme.

**Key Intervention:** Increase in volume of calls to benefit telephony services

**Background:**

There has been a significant increase in telephone enquiries across all benefit operational areas. There were almost 50,000 inbound calls to Finance Support last week - this compares to a forecast of less than 9,000 calls for the week.

**Lines to Take:**

- Access to telephony channels will continue to be available for anyone claiming UC, PIP, ESA, JSA and Discretionary Support.
- However, given the significant staff absences experienced across all benefit operational areas and the potential long delays in answering calls, new on-line application forms for ESA, JSA and Discretionary Support (Covid-19 living expenses) are now available on NIDirect. The forms can be downloaded, completed and emailed directly to the relevant benefit area for processing.
- UC have introduced a new telephony service that will better signpost callers to the on-line service. This service will operate between 10am – 4pm Monday to Friday.
- UC have set up a dedicated hotline for our trusted partners across the advice sector so they can reach us with any particular vulnerable or challenging cases.

**Key Intervention:** Staffing pressures including measures taken to adhere to social distancing guidelines

**Background:**

COVID-19 has had a significant impact across a range of business areas with unprecedented levels of staff absence due to self-isolation, confirmed diagnosis or caring responsibilities, and a significant increase in workloads across their benefit processing services.

The implementation of social distancing guidance has further impacted staff availability as office layouts have been reconfigured and attendance rotas introduced to ensure that guidance is strictly adhered to.

**Lines to Take:**

- Due to the unprecedented demand for **our services**, new arrangements have been introduced to protect our staff and those who attend our offices.
- All our offices have been closed to the public in line with the PHA guidance.
- Additional staff resources have been identified through other business areas who have had their own work temporarily suspended to enable them to help meet the increased demand in **Discretionary Support** applications.
- We have worked hard with our commercial team to increase the cleaning across our network to reassure and protect our staff. It has not been without its difficulty and we have had to seriously redesign some services to meet the PHA guidance on social distancing.
- I met with NIPSA and continue to do so to reassure them we will do everything required as an employer to protect our staff.



**Key Intervention:** Changes to the Health Assessments that support our benefit Decision Making processes

**Background:**

Changes to health assessments (PIP, ESA & UC) that support our benefit decision making processes have been implement in order to protect our most vulnerable people, our staff and the Healthcare Professionals during these every challenging times.

**Lines to Take:**

- My Department has implemented a number of changes to the Health Assessments (PIP, ESA & UC) that support our benefit Decision Making processes.
- These include the temporary suspension of Face to Face Assessments, with Assessments instead being undertaken as Paper Based Reviews, supplemented with Telephony Assessments where these are appropriate.
- I have also suspended, for three months, new reviews and reassessments for Personal Independence Payment; and all re-referrals for Work Capability Assessments for Employment & Support Allowance and Universal Credit.
- This temporary suspension will also apply to the reassessment or renewal activity for a number of other health and disability benefits including Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit, Disability Living Allowance for children and those aged 65+, and Attendance Allowance.
- I continue to keep arrangements under review and will consider implementing additional measures to support those in receipt of Health & Disability Benefit should these be needed.

**Key Intervention:** Measures taken to increase support to vulnerable people

**Background:**

As part of the Department's strategy of supporting people affected by Covid-19:

- Assistance to support families entitled to free school meals will not be taken into account in the calculation of income related benefits
- From 6 April the [standard allowance](#) in Universal Credit and the basic element in [Working Tax Credit](#) was increased for one year. Both will increase by £20 per week on top of planned annual uprating. This will apply to all new and existing Universal Credit claimants and to existing Working Tax Credit claimants.
- The minimum income floor in Universal Credit has been suspended for the duration of the outbreak – meaning every self-employed person can now access, in full, Universal Credit. It ensures that the self-employed are supported by the benefit system so that they can follow the Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-being guidance on social distancing and self-isolation.
- From April, [Local Housing Allowance](#) rates will be increased to the 30th percentile of market rents. This will apply to all private renters in receipt of UC and to existing [Housing Benefit](#) claimants.
- Changes have also been made to ensure that carers can continue to be paid benefit when they have temporarily ceased to care for a severely disabled person due to either of them self-isolating or being infected with coronavirus. These changes to the current rules regarding entitlement are designed to cover a break in care due to the coronavirus so that carers can continue to receive their carer's allowance.
- In addition measures are also being taken operationally by DfC to ensure that during the period of COVID-19 that emotional support can also count towards the carer's allowance care threshold of 35 hours a week.
- Increasing the Housing Benefit additional earnings disregard from £17.10 to £37.10 per week.
- In UC and new style Job seekers allowance (JSA), for the next 3 months, work search and work availability requirement will be removed for new and existing claims. Sanctions for these requirements will also be removed
- For both new style and old style JSA it will be ensured that Coronavirus and/or isolation are excluded for the purposes of a period of sickness.
- Statutory Sick Pay will be paid for anyone who is sick or [self-isolating because of coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#) and can be paid from the first day as and from 13 March. These changes will provide certainty to individuals that they will be entitled to Statutory Sick Pay from the very first day that they are off work, if they are unwell or isolating, in line with the latest government advice.
- Discretionary Support has been amended to include a specific grant for short-term living expenses where the claimant or any member of their immediate family is infected by COVID-19 or is advised to self-isolate. Claims for this grant can be made by completing an application form on NIDirect rather than the usual teleclaim process. The grant may be payable to people in employment provided they have an income below £18,137.

- The Department also provides the UC Contingency Fund, which can assist with living expenses for new UC claimants while waiting on their initial benefit payment. This is a non-repayable grant that can be paid up to mid-way through the second UC assessment period.
- The rate at which the living expenses awards is calculated has also been increased during the current crisis.
- Students in full-time education who are normally not eligible for benefits may access emergency financial support through the Discretionary Support scheme during the current public health crisis.
- From 8<sup>th</sup> April, the Social Fund Funeral Expenses Payment scheme has been increased from £700 to £1,000. The scheme meets the reasonable necessary costs of a burial or cremation including: the purchase of a grave; necessary burial or cremation fees; the cost of any medical references or the removal of active implanted medical devices for cremations; reasonable costs if a body has to be moved for more than fifty miles; and travel costs for the applicant to arrange and attend the funeral and other funeral costs
- A person may be eligible for a Social Fund Funeral Expenses Payment if they or their partner are in receipt of Universal Credit, Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance (income-related), Pension Credit, Working Tax Credit where a disability or severe disability element is included in the award, Child Tax Credit or Housing Benefit.

**Lines to Take:**

- There have been a series of changes to social security benefits that will provide financial support to those affected by COVID-19.
- Both the Executive and I have made clear, we will do whatever it takes to support people affected by COVID-19 and we have been clear in our intention that no one should be penalised for doing the right thing.
- These are rapidly developing circumstances, I continue to keep the situation under review and will keep the Assembly updated accordingly.
- People's safety and protecting them and their families is of primary importance.
- I will ensure any and all changes are communicated as soon as possible to the public.

**Key Intervention:** Work Psychology Wellbeing and Resilience products for DfC/NICS employees and Vulnerable Customer Support products

**Background:**

The Department's Work Psychology Service has put together a series of self-care articles specifically tailored to the current crisis and with the aim of helping our colleagues to protect their mental health and wellbeing. It is also appreciated that the role of DfC in supporting the most vulnerable customers in the community is both challenging and crucial in the pandemic. Consequently, a further series of articles has been designed to help our colleagues to support our most vulnerable customers; including those with mental ill-health, hearing loss, autism and learning disability.

Work Psychology Services has built a partnership with Clinical Psychologists from Belfast Trust to share knowledge and products across their organisations. This collaborative approach will enable the teams to work at pace, develop the highest quality of product and provide benefit for colleagues and those in the community. Articles have been shared for dissemination across the NICS, The Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment and some local councils.

**Lines to Take:**

- Colleagues and people in the community have new wellbeing and resilience support needs as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Work Psychology Services has designed a number of products aimed at supporting colleagues and people in the community to address these needs.
- These articles are being shared across DfC, NICS and some councils.
- In partnership with Belfast Trust, Clinical Psychology colleagues, DfC Work Psychologists would like to make available products to other public or community and voluntary organisations where they may be of benefit.

**Key Intervention:** Supporting vulnerable people and communities through provision aimed at those with disabilities and health conditions.

**Background:**

The Department has taken steps to ensure our contracted disability providers continue to be funded and are able to provide one to one support, through the Workable (NI) and Employment Support programmes. In light of the COVID-19 circumstances the Condition Management Programme has been temporarily suspended and the Health & Social Care staff who deliver the programme temporarily redeployed at DfC's cost to mainstream NHS to support the NI Executive in tackling this crisis

Workable (NI) – provides support to assist people with disabilities integrate into the workplace, and helps those who are in danger of losing their job due to their disability, keep their jobs. As of 6 April 2020 there are 790 participants on Workable (NI)

Employment Support - offers opportunities to people with a disability who, although capable of meaningful employment, were unable to obtain unsubsidised jobs due to the severity of their disability. As of 6 April 2020 there are 392 participants on Employment Support.

Access to Work NI - provides support to participants when there are additional costs created because of their disability.

**Lines to Take:**

- Through the Workable (NI) and Employment Support work programmes 1,182 people with significant disabilities continue to receive one to one support remotely from their designated support officers.
- There has been an increased need for support as both employees and employers are extremely anxious around current economic uncertainties and the potential for disproportionate impact on disabled people both economically and in their mental Wellbeing.
- Support is also continuing for those employees who fall into the 'furlough' category who are seeking high levels of support in terms of reassurance, managing stress and maintaining the skills/strategies required of them to re-enter the workplace.
- Access to Work (NI) provides assistance to clients in work and due to reduced numbers of people in work and furloughed clients this has significantly reduced the number of new clients seeking assistance and the face to face client application process has been suspended.
- Processing of client payments has continued with a limited number of staff working remotely in order to maintain financial support to clients still availing of Access to Work (NI) provision. In 3 working days up to 03.04.20 109 payments have been approved on Account NI.

**Key Intervention:** Steps 2 Success Employment Programme being delivered remotely and help being provided to manage participant's wellbeing.

**Background:**

Steps 2 Success (S2S) is delivered on behalf of the Department by 3 Lead Contractors supported by their Supply Chain Partners. As a result of the current Covid-19 situation, Lead Contractors are providing support to Programme participants remotely. Recognising the health and wellbeing ramifications of the current situation, in addition to addressing employability needs for all Programme participants (just over 3,500 people), S2S providers are offering practical help to those deemed to be more vulnerable, such as those with a health condition or disability. Providers are also ensuring that their own staff are being kept up to date through internal newsletters, and daily telekits.

In many instances participants have been offered a triage service by telephone to help the S2S providers ascertain the support level required. This may be through daily or weekly telephone calls from a member staff who will talk the participant through measures on reducing anxiety, use of outside space, cooking recipes and exercise. Where clients are self-isolating, they are being advised of support locally, such as which supermarkets are doing deliveries. This is alongside the provision of support and guidance in relation to employer information, the availability of vacancies, and job matching. If an email address is not available, information packs are posted out.

**Lines to Take:**

- Whilst the Minister took the decision to suspend referrals to the Steps 2 Success Programme as of 18 March 2020, those currently on the Programme continue to receive substantial support.
- Steps 2 Success Providers recognise the health and wellbeing ramifications of the current situation, particularly for those who are most vulnerable in our society, and are taking a holistic approach to supporting over 3500 current Programme participants.

**Key Intervention: Self-Employed Start-Up Support for Benefit Recipients****Background:**

We are currently exploring a range of options with strategic partners aiming to provide additional support to benefit recipients who are interested in becoming self-employed, or who are in the early stages of business development.

We recognise the impact Covid-19 will have on the local economy and how this will result in many people becoming reliant on benefits. This is being taken into consideration with the development of any proposed scheme.

**Lines to Take:**

- There is currently a vast range of business start-up support available. A number of options aiming to provide additional support to benefit recipients wishing to start a business are in development.
- Unfortunately, there may be an increase in people claiming benefits who have previously been self-employed but have had to cease trading. We recognise this and are actively considering what support will be needed to help people in this category.

**Key Intervention: Changes to health and disability benefits****Background:**

To reassure vulnerable people and their families about the continuity of their benefits during the Coronavirus outbreak measures were introduced to

- suspend all PIP reviews and face to face reassessments;
- stop all re-referrals for Work Capability Assessments across ESA and Universal Credit;
- stop all reassessment/renewal activity on other health and disability benefits including Industrial Injuries , Disability Living Allowance (DLA) for both children and those aged 65+, and Attendance Allowance (AA);
- extend awards to ensure continuation of benefit;

**Lines to Take:**

- My priority is to ensure individuals can access financial support in these unprecedented circumstances and that existing benefit payments are maintained - around 12,500 PIP/ DLA & Attendance Allowance awards are being extended.
- These measure are effective for three months from 25<sup>th</sup> March 2020.
- During the three month period the situation will be monitored and reviewed regularly.
- It is likely that further action could still be required, depending on how the situation develops.
- If people experience a change in their needs they are still encouraged to contact the Department to ensure they are receiving the correct level of support.



## **Key Intervention: Welfare Mitigation Schemes**

### **Background:**

The legislation that provides for the existing welfare mitigation schemes had a sunset clause that acted to terminate the various schemes on 31 March 2020. 2. A Draft Bill to allow for the extension of Social Sector Size Criteria (SSSC) mitigation payments has been shared with the Executive. The subordinate legislation to extend the other welfare mitigation schemes beyond 31 March 2020 has also been drafted and submitted to Minister.

Further to a request from the Executive the Department has developed a proposal for a review that would consider if the existing mitigation measures are continuing to meet need. This review would also consider any new mitigation measures that may be introduced as a result of the New Decade, New Approach Deal. To date there has been no agreement on the timeframe for this review and therefore the legislation to extend the welfare mitigation schemes has not been laid in the Assembly.

The legislation to extend the welfare mitigation schemes was not approved by the Assembly ahead of the prescribed termination date of 31 March 2020. Therefore the Department has now moved to implement contingency arrangements whereby mitigation payments will be made under the sole authority of the Budget Act from 1 April. The Minister of Finance made reference to this in his opening statement to the Assembly on the Budget Bill on 25 February 2020.

The use of the Budget Act to make payments is not ideal and is intended to be a temporary measure until the draft legislation is approved by the Assembly. It has been agreed with the Department of Finance that an allocation of £7 million for the three month period from May to June 2020 will be authorised for expenditure. If the legislation to extend the mitigation schemes is not approved by early June then an extension of the contingency arrangements will need to be considered.

### **Lines to Take:**

- A draft Bill to allow for the extension of mitigation payments for the bedroom tax has been shared with the Executive. Once approval to proceed has been granted then the Department will ensure that it is formally presented to the Assembly as quickly as possible.
- The legislation to extend the remaining welfare mitigation schemes will be laid shortly after the Bill. However, I am unable to provide a definitive timeframe for proceeding at this stage.
- As the legislation to extend the existing welfare mitigation schemes has not been approved my Department has now implemented contingency

arrangements with mitigation payments made under the sole Authority of the Budget Act from 1 April 2020. T

- This approach has been agreed with the Department of Finance and was announced by the Minister of Finance during his opening statement to the Assembly on the Budget Bill on 25 February 2020.
- The use of the Budget Act will allow the Department to make payments to people who would otherwise be entitled to a Welfare Supplementary Payment. This approach is an exceptional measure that is necessary to protect people and ensure that payments continue to be made.
- This approach will continue for a short period until the relevant legislation to extend the mitigation schemes is approved by the Assembly.

**Key Intervention:** Support for Housing Rights**Background:**

- Housing Rights is a limited company and registered charity which offers help and support to members of the public and to other housing and advice professionals throughout Northern Ireland.
- Its primary objectives are:
  - to prevent homelessness and help people find a solution to a housing problem by delivering a Housing Advice Service to provide advice, advocacy/ negotiation and representation;
  - to support other frontline practitioners involved in the provision of advice and information on housing issues; and
  - to utilise evidence gathered from work with clients to identify issues and help bring about improvements in housing legislation, policy and practice for people in NI.
- The department provides up to £855,000 in annual grant funding to meet the core service functions of Housing Rights.

**Lines to Take:**

- As I outlined in my statement on 27 March, the advice sector plays a vitally important role as part of the response to COVID-19.
- I am looking at what additional urgent financial resource I can provide to Housing Rights to support our citizens at this time
- To that end I have bid for additional funding of £100,000 to assist them with the increased costs they are likely to face in responding to this crisis.
- Housing Rights are experts in their field and have been very busy. I will continue to do all I can to ensure they have the finance they need to offer the best of their advice to those who need it.
- As a further contingency measure I have also introduced a number of grant flexibilities to enable Housing Rights and the wider advice sector meet the increased demand for their services including :
  - the upfront payment of grant funding for a defined period and flexibility in our approach to supporting community and voluntary groups who deliver these essential community services,
  - temporary suspension of targets and funding conditions; and
  - temporary suspension of grant monitoring arrangements.

## **Key Intervention:** Measures to protect Private Tenants from Eviction

### **Background:**

The current Covid-19 outbreak continues to be an evolving situation and we are continuing to liaise closely with counterparts in the Department for Work and Pensions so that we are kept up to date on developments, thereby ensuring that people here are provided with the same protections as those in England, Scotland and Wales. With regards to private tenants Minister Hargey's statement released on 27 March outlined measures she is putting in place to ensure people continue to have secure accommodation in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Lines to Take:**

- UK Govt has confirmed a the three-month mortgage holiday will be extended to buy to let landlords whose tenants are experiencing difficulties due to the present situation. This is aimed at alleviating the concerns of landlords, who might be worried about meeting mortgage payments, and should therefore mean no unnecessary pressure is put on their tenants.
- An increase in Local Housing allowance (LHA)
- landlords have been asked to work with their tenants to plan ahead for the next few months. This could include establishing affordable repayment plans, taking into consideration tenants' individual circumstances, at the end of any mortgage holiday period.
- I am currently exploring a range of measures, including introducing a Bill in the Assembly by accelerated passage which will temporarily **extend the notice to quit period** that landlords must give tenants to 12 weeks before proceeding with evictions.
- My Department has written to the Lord Chief Justice regarding consideration for introduction here to the Practice Direction which is being introduced in England and Wales. County Courts here have indicated they are dealing with only urgent cases from 30 March onwards, and this is expected to further limit the number of cases of eviction proceeding during this period.
- I intend to provide Tenant and landlord Guidance which will provide helpful information during this emergency period. (Further information is provided in the next section)
- I am exploring with my Officials and the Department for Economy potential measures to help students facing financial hardship as a consequence of continuing to pay housing costs.

**Key Intervention: Guidance for Landlords and Tenants****Background:**

- A document providing housing related advice to assist tenants and landlords to remain safe and secure, and comply with obligations while observing social distancing guidelines has been prepared.
- The guidance will be published as soon as possible, and a commitment has been made to have it published by 10 April 2020.
- The guidance will be hosted on the DfC website, NI Direct and on the websites of partner organisations including Councils and housing providers.

**Lines to Take:**

- My Department has produced a guidance document which sets out the new measures put in place for the housing sector in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The guidance aims to assist tenants and landlords to navigate safely and securely through their rights and obligations during this unprecedented period.
- This guidance will be kept updated regularly to help ensure that readers have the latest information available.

**Key Intervention: Delivery of Supporting People through NIHE****Background:**

Each organisation funded through the Supporting People programme is responsible for their contingency planning and staffing. In order to support this, The Housing Executive have shared Public Health and Central Government Guidance; to guide planning, preparation and coordination, and continue to share additional information when it becomes available.

Additionally, the Housing Executive have identified money from the Supporting People 2019/20 budget to distribute to Supporting People provider organisations who receive a single source of public funds. This will support the implementation of Covid-19 contingency plans in the short term and will be available to support voids for isolation, personal protection equipment, extra cleaning costs and staff cost pressures.

A Housing Executive Task Force is in place, with Surge Plans from Housing Executive Homeless Services and Supporting People to be shared imminently, outlining contingency arrangements which will be taken to continue to deliver services during the COVID-19 outbreak.

I have confirmed with colleagues in DoH that, while in normal circumstances it would be the responsibility of the independent sector organisations themselves to source their own supplies, in a pandemic that is not the case and the Trusts will allocate PPE to our Service Providers. Service Providers have been issued with contact information for provision of PPE.

**Lines to Take:**

- COVID-19 presents a challenge for us all but it presents very particular challenges to those who are vulnerable and who are supported to live independently through the Supporting People Programme.
- DfC is working closely with the NIHE and the Department of Health regarding the continued provision of housing support services to vulnerable people.
- The NI Housing Executive is leading on the response to support Supporting People providers.
- The Housing Executive has identified a number of measures, including flexibilities around contract management that they are proposing to protect the vulnerable and to support providers.
- Government guidance for Supporting People providers was issued on Tuesday 17 March. Guidance will be updated as required, in discussion with DfC and DoH.
- Systems have now been put in place at Trust level with Single Points of Contact established for the management of PPE specifically and they have nominated a separate point of contact for dealing with the Independent Sector and charities in particular.

**Key Intervention:** NIHE response to Covid-19 to support vulnerable people and communities

**Background:**

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive is the strategic housing authority and largest social landlord in Northern Ireland with over 85,000 homes.

In line with government advice the NIHE have made changes to the way it delivers its services. These changes are intended to protect customers and staff while ensuring that it continues to provide key essential and statutory services.

**Lines to Take:**

- Public reception areas in local offices have been closed. Staff are still working from the offices and can be contacted by phone.
- In line with Government advice on social distancing NIHE will not be carrying out home visits
- Due to the current Covid-19 crisis, some households in social homes will face difficulties with paying the rent that are beyond their control.
- Any tenant facing difficulties paying rent during Covid-19 is assured that their home is secure and they will not be evicted.
- The NIHE (and all Housing Associations) have given a commitment to treat all rent issues with sensitivity. They will support tenants through this difficult period. The Department is working with the NIHE (and HAs) to help keep tenants in their homes and to ensure that the welfare system can provide help to their tenants as fast as possible.
- To minimise the spread of the virus and in keeping with the Government's advice on social distancing the NIHE repairs service will move to an emergency service only until further notice.
- Only repair works where there is a risk to life or property will be carried out.
- Housing benefit payments will continue as normal.
- The Housing Executive's rent increase of 2.7% that was due to come into effect today (6 April) will now not come into effect until 1 October 2020.

## Key Intervention: Measures to Support Homelessness

### Background:

The Housing Executive has set up a dedicated team to manage their response to COVID-19 to support Homelessness. Our Chief Executive's Business Committee has subsequently approved a number of interventions delivered or planned in the near future to support homeless individuals or those threatened with homelessness. **The Housing Executive has submitted a bid for its response to Covid-19 which included £3.7million specifically for homeless services. In addition these actions have been taken on the assumption that the Housing executive's core functions in terms of its responsibilities under homeless legislation are funded to the level bid for, i.e. £15.6million rather than a 2019/20 baseline level of £10.6million.** Activities undertaken included:

- Putting systems in place to ensure the NIHE can continue to fulfil its statutory duties re homelessness both during normal working hours and out of hours. This has included implementing a dedicated phone number for homelessness. Our Housing Advisors, working remotely, continue to offer homeless advice and assistance to customers over the phone and where necessary source temporary accommodation. Our Out of Hours homeless service continues to operate for those who require assistance outside of normal working hours.
- Publishing a surge plan for homeless services
- Ensuring an adequate supply of temporary accommodation to support homeless individuals/families or those threatened with homelessness by increasing supply to supplement existing provision (to cope with any increase in demand and potential reduction in supply of existing temporary accommodation due to reduced staffing:
- Adding an additional 100 single lets to the bed bureau, of which a number have been designated specifically for those homeless households with COVID-19 symptoms. Further single lets are expected to be acquired this week.
- Increasing the number of Dispersed Intensively Managed Emergency (DIME) accommodation units provided by Queens Quarter Housing from 77 to 92 units.
- Securing 40 non-standard units to accommodate those who present as homeless but who show no symptoms and therefore not required to self-isolate.
- Seeking to use vacant NIHE properties to supplement temporary accommodation provision and working to procure furniture packs to make these habitable.
- Working with the sector to reconfigure services:
- Night Shelters have been reconfigured to operate as temporary accommodation to minimise risk;
- Drop-in Centres have moved from an in-reach to an outreach model and have redeployed staff resources accordingly.
- Working with the Welcome Organisation to provide emergency transport for homeless clients who may need to be moved from current location to self-isolation.
- Supporting all rough sleepers to access accommodation and ensure no-one sleeps rough on the streets:



- As part of the response to rough sleeping a total of 49 individuals have been identified and temporary accommodation has been offered to each rough sleeper. As of 4pm on 6th April there is only two of these individuals known to be rough sleeping despite the best efforts of the Housing Executive and partner agencies. These individuals are rough sleepers in Newry and the Housing Executive and partner agencies continue to engage on a daily basis in an effort to encourage the two individuals to avail of the temporary accommodation on offer.
- Of the 49 rough sleepers a total of 34 are Persons From Abroad/No Recourse to Public Funds. The Housing Executive has committed to working with the Department for Communities and Department of Health to ensure a Memorandum of Understanding is drafted with regards to funding the continued assistance of individuals who are Persons From Abroad/No Recourse to Public Funds.
- In relation to Domestic Violence we have set up twice weekly conference calls with the PSNI and are seeking to develop a crash pad model with Women's Aid. We are also linked in to the PSNI Preventing Harm teams.
- We are liaising with the Department of Justice and Housing Rights Service in relation to the Prisoner Early Release scheme to ensure no-one is discharged into homelessness. We are continuing on normal business in this area in alternative ways for example by setting up conference calls for the Prison LAPP meetings.
- Providing support and assistance for the homeless provider sector by:
  - Temporarily suspending Supporting People contract performance management arrangements to allow providers to focus on implementing contingency plans and deliver essential services.
  - Providing financial assistance to Providers for expenditure associated with the implementing their contingency plans.
  - Assisting the sector to appoint a Co-ordinator to act as a bridge between the Homeless Sector, Providers and Statutory agencies primarily NIHE, the Public Health Agency, Health and Social Care Board and Department of Communities.
  - Supporting the creating of an Emergency Relief Panel to assist providers to fill staff vacancies.
- Working with colleagues in the Departments for Communities and Health and the Public Health Agency to commence a programme of testing and consider the need for a dedicated isolation facility.

#### **Lines to Take:**

- Homeless households are often some of the most vulnerable in society and the current pandemic creates particular risks for these individuals, many of whom have underlying health conditions related to their experience of homelessness.
- The NIHE have been working closely with Health and Social Care colleagues, the Departments for Communities and Health and the homeless provider sector to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on people facing homelessness and ultimately to prevent deaths during this public health emergency
- The NIHE has been proactive in seeking to put in place additional accommodation and supports measures.

**Key Intervention:** Local alcohol producers diversifying to produce hand sanitizer

**Background:**

Local producers of alcoholic drinks are licensed by HMRC to produce alcohol suitable for consumption.

The Department has been lobbied in recent weeks to allow these producers to sell their products directly to the public during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Any change to allow this would require primary legislation.

A number of local producers of alcoholic drinks have moved production to produce hand sanitizer.

The Department has received a number of queries asking if this is possible.

The Department is responsible for the policy and legislation related to the retail sale of alcohol. As local producers cannot be licensed to sell their products by retail the Department is unable to assist.

HMRC have however issued guidance for local producers should they wish to diversify.

**Lines to Take:**

- My Department is responsible for the policy and legislation relating to the retail sale and supply of alcoholic drinks.
- I believe that a number of local producers have moved production already to produce hand sanitizer.
- I welcome and commend their efforts to provide this vital product to our hospitals and those in the community in need.
- I believe HMRC has produced guidance which is available on their website for any local producer who wishes to diversify.
- Currently, local producers are not a category that can apply for a liquor license.
- I am considering the responses to a recent consultation on liquor licensing laws which included local producers of alcohol being able to sell directly to the public.
- I had hoped to be announcing my policies around now but unfortunately that has been overtaken by recent events.

**Key Intervention: Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)****Background:**

A Business Improvement District (BID) is a mechanism that has been successful in bringing local businesses and other stakeholders together with the aim of regenerating their areas and improving their local trading environment. BIDs are developed, managed and paid for by the business sector by means of a compulsory BID levy which the non-domestic ratepayers within the proposed BID area must vote in favor of, before the BID can be established. All non-domestic ratepayers within a potential BID area have the opportunity to vote on the proposals before the levy is imposed.

The Department for Communities is promoting and supporting the development of BIDs as a key component of its commitment to help strengthen the competitiveness of our towns and cities. To date 8 BIDs have been established with funding and support from DfC: Ballymena, Coleraine, Enniskillen, Newry, Strabane and three in Belfast; Belfast One in the city centre, Destination CQ in the Cathedral Quarter and Linen Quarter BID. These BID areas (involving over 5,000 businesses) are expected to bring in a total investment of more than £17 million over their 5 year term.

**Issue**

BIDs are totally reliant on their annual levies from the businesses in their areas to be able to operate. A number of BIDs here are due to issue their levy invoices for the forthcoming year but with the majority of businesses in their areas either now closed or no longer operating as a business, it is likely that most of them will not be in a position to pay their levy this year. Businesses are already signaling to those BIDs that they will not be able to pay this year even if they do re-open.

If BIDs are not supported through this current crisis the likelihood is that a number of them, if not all, will no longer be in a position to continue to operate and provide the necessary support to the businesses in their areas.

BIDs in Britain are facing the same issues that BIDs here are currently facing. Officials have been engaging with colleagues in England, Scotland & Wales on ways in which we can support BIDs at this time and options will be put forward to the Minister in due course.

**Lines to Take:**

- My officials are currently working with counterparts in Britain on options for providing support to Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) affected as a result of COVID-19.
- BIDs, working along with public sector and business partners, will be key to driving forward the recovery of our local economy and town & city centers following the current devastating economic shock.

**Key Intervention:** Community Support Fund**Key Intervention:** Sustaining over 300 organisations in the third sector

The Department has been proactive in responding to the challenges that community and voluntary organisations face by introducing a range of flexibilities in grant funding. This includes advancing payments towards salaries and running costs along with a temporary suspension of existing targets and grant monitoring arrangements. To enable this to happen, the grant teams have completed over 300 Economic Appraisals, prepared associated contracts for funding and paid out over £9.5m in grant payments to over 300 organisations since 1 April.

**Background:**

**Sector sustainability** – the VCS has never been so important and these proactive moves, including paying half of their annual funding upfront early in the new financial year, will help to both sustain the organisations themselves and continue the work that they do at a community, household and individual level.

**Flexibilities** – in addition to receiving funding early, a range of flexibilities have been introduced to ensure that the organisations are fully focused on addressing need in these exceptional times rather than completing governance paperwork and liaising with the department. We have streamlined processes to enable organisations to react to local demand/need without waiting on departmental approval.

**Lines to Take:**

- These measures are commensurate with the need to ensure value for money in relation to the management of public money and to enable organisations to “do the right thing” for their communities and the individuals they support.
- The £9.5m that has been paid out to date will provide critical funding to the VCS and the exceptionally important role that they play.

**Key Intervention:** VCD has introduced a COVID-19 Community Support Fund, releasing £1.5m initially, to be reviewed at six weeks, through local government's existing Community Support Programme. We have also released £200k to the Community Foundation's Small Grants Programme to tackle the crisis at a local level.

**Background:**

The voluntary and community sector (VCS) plays a vital role in supporting communities and individuals during and after emergencies. The sector will be vital as part of a multi-agency approach in response to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreak. The Department for Communities recognises that working with Local Government to assist in the delivery of support at a local level is critical.

Many VCS organisations provide support spontaneously by virtue of their geographical proximity to an emergency rather than because they are designated or statutory emergency responders. Community groups, community facilities, churches and clubs often continue to provide support to people impacted by emergencies for months or years after an incident and long after emergency and statutory services' work has been completed.

This can result in community groups and facilities providing support which extends beyond their usual function or constitution's purposes. This presents challenges in terms of services provided, often to very vulnerable people impacted by an emergency, and also presents risks for the community groups themselves who can come under significant organisational and individual strain in dealing with the emergency.

The Department is working to meet additional funding needs for the VCS. The COVID-19 Community Support Fund is currently being distributed via the existing Community Support Programme in partnership with local councils to 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
- Delivering Ministerial priorities for tackling poverty, targeting objective need and embedding a rights based approach.

The Department will continue to liaise with council to review the funding already allocated and to consider whether further funding is required to support the VCS. Officials will also continue to review these categories to ensure they are, and remain, appropriate and targeted to deliver support where it is needed most as the situation evolves, and as other funding for the VCS response to COVID-19 is rolled out, including from Community Foundation NI, National Emergencies Trust, National Lottery Community Fund and others.

Although final confirmation of the full funding allocation has not yet been received from the Department of Finance, the Department has agreed to release the first

£1.5m to Councils over the next week. The Minister has asked for this to be reviewed after 6 weeks to assess what additional funding will be required.

A further £0.5m will be allocated to key sectoral bodies including Volunteer Now to assist them in the huge expansion of their work to meet the needs of the VCS during this crisis.

In addition, the Department has already committed £200k match funding to the Community Foundation Coronavirus Community Fund for small grants to community organisations supporting older people in response to the COVID 19 crisis.

**Lines to Take:**

- We benefit from an exceptionally strong and proactive Community and Voluntary Sector, with mature and effective grass roots infrastructure. Local groups in every town, city and rural area have been the “first responders” in many case for the vulnerable people living in their communities.
- I have provided additional funding to support this grass roots delivery within the Community and Voluntary sector.
- My Department recognises that the voluntary and community sector is vital to support people and communities as we tackle this crisis. I am allocating additional money for grassroots community based responses which will be distributed via local councils. This additional funding will be focused on Food, Financial Need/ Poverty, and Connectivity.
- This money will support community based responses to the crisis. The first £1.5m of additional funding for the Community Support Fund was released this week and I have asked my officials to review this funding in six weeks’ time to assess what additional support is required.
- It is currently difficult to quantify the funding requirements of the community and voluntary sector arising from this crisis. It is clear that grassroots charities which previously relied on trading income and donations are suffering from reduced donations and are not able to continue with their usual fundraising. Early UK-wide suggestions are that this crisis may lead to a reduction in income for the third sector of £4 billion.
- My officials are working closely with the Department of Finance to investigate potential mechanisms to alleviate some of the funding gap here.

**Key Intervention:** COVID 19 Community Helpline.

A single free phone Community Helpline is operational and is currently operating 7 days per week providing a one stop shop for services that vulnerable people can access. Plans in place to enhance the service and scale up capacity.

**Background:**

The Covid-19 Community Helpline went live on Friday 27 March and operates 9am to 5pm, 7 days per week initially, although this will be kept under review and the service will move to 9am to 9pm if necessary.

The Helpline has been taking calls from members of the public who need advice and support relating to the COVID 19 emergency, initially linking people into local services. By Monday we had already answered 1981 calls and demand is increasing rapidly.

**It is important that people who are vulnerable, who are already known to local grass roots groups and being supported locally to access food understand that they do not need to ring the Helpline, as this duplicates effort and slows down people accessing support.**

**The Helpline service also offers e-mail and text message response facility.**

Telephone: 0808 802 0020

Email: [covid19@adviceni.net](mailto:covid19@adviceni.net)

Text: **ACTION** to 81025

Some of the services which can be accessed via the helpline include: delivery of food parcels to vulnerable people including those in the shielded group who have no other way to access food deliveries; information about retailers offering delivery in a local area; help from the voluntary and community sector to deliver prescription medication and advice on claiming benefits.

Advice NI have put in place a detailed directory of community and voluntary organisations at both a local and regional level covering everything from domestic abuse, to mental health to local sports groups willing to walk dogs for vulnerable people. Helpline staff will provide a warm handoff to the relevant service if they are unable to deal with a query themselves.

Plans are being developed to enhance the capacity to take calls, thereby reducing the average waiting time during peak periods. Volunteers are being recruited and we are currently exploring the option for existing civil servants to volunteer on the helpline whilst working from home.

**It is important that people who are vulnerable, who are already known to local grass roots groups and being supported locally to access food understand that they do not need to ring the Helpline.**

**This is really important, as those calling the Helpline for food, who are already engaged with and receiving food from local grass roots groups, are simply being referred back to Trusts and Councils through the Helpline – thus duplicating effort and potential displacement of existing services.**

**Lines to Take:**

- The Community Helpline has been operational from Friday, 27th March. 7 days per week, initially from 9-5, although I hope to move to 9-9 if required going forward.
- The helpline has received a steady stream of calls to date covering a wide range of topics.
- Call volumes are high and the Department is working closely with Advice NI to enhance capacity to take calls. Volunteers are being recruited and we are currently training civil servants to work on the helpline whilst working from home.
- It is important that people who are vulnerable, who are already known to local grass roots groups and being supported locally to access food understand that they do not need to ring the Helpline, as we do not want to duplicate effort or slow down support getting to people who need it.



**Key Intervention:** Working with Volunteer Now in launching a public campaign #helpeachother

Working with Volunteer Now in launching a public campaign #helpeachother to direct new volunteers to its online registration and volunteer matching platform. Since its launch the campaign has already had over 2,000 people registering to express support. Existing volunteers across health trusts, sporting bodies and other large organisations are also being coordinated to respond to immediate needs.

**Background:**

The Minister helped launch a public campaign #helpeachother by Volunteer Now to direct new volunteers to their online registration and volunteer matching platform. NI Direct has been updated to direct the public to Volunteer Now. Over 2,000 volunteers have been recruited to date. Existing volunteers across health trusts, sporting bodies and other large organisations are being coordinated to respond to immediate needs, with for example sporting bodies assisting the Community Development and Health Network on delivery of prescriptions.

Volunteer Now have allocated different roles to ensure key activities are covered to support the vulnerable. Telephone support, is an important role for keeping in touch with people. Collection and delivery of shopping as well as linking in with pharmacies at a regional level is required, given the additional security and safeguarding risks at play here. Supporting organisations such as food banks will be another aspect, which can be done through local Trusts, councils, and grass roots organisations. Matching for these activities will take place in an attempt to get volunteers into the right place at the right time. Resilience and sustainability of the plans will be important, given that this emergency might be prolonged, and there is a need to protect the wellbeing of those volunteering.

Volunteer Now has developed guidance for groups and organisations coordinating volunteer efforts and for individual volunteers. Safeguarding and safety in the face of the virus are paramount. Access NI guidance on fast tracking checks is in development, as many groups are unaware that they are undertaking 'regulated activity'. As Councils and Trusts mobilise front line response structures (Trust Hubs linked to councils and the grassroots VCS), new volunteering needs will emerge and Volunteer Now will need assistance to screen and vet new volunteers. The Department is seeking the assistance of the Department of Finance in the potential redeployment of civil servants to assist.

Sports Governing Bodies and their clubs have mobilised large numbers of their volunteers who are assisting with the community based efforts that have delivered immediate benefits to those who have had to self-isolate, are at risk or to the more vulnerable. The Governing Bodies are working with the Department and have offered support in terms of the use of facilities, vehicles, expertise and staff. These resources will be critical and will be utilised as part of contingency measures to ensure that critical support and assistance is available in the longer term as the crisis evolves.

**Key Intervention:** Access NI checks are being fast tracked for certain groups and staff from the Historic Environment Division of the Department for Communities are working with Volunteer Now to carry out initial volunteer screening.

**Lines to Take:**

- Volunteer Now are working hard to coordinate needs and willing volunteers. I was proud to help launch their #helpeachother campaign last week which invites new volunteers to register on their BeCollective platform in response to COVID 19. Over 2,000 new volunteers have been recruited to date.
- Volunteer now are also taking the lead in ensuring the safeguarding of both volunteers and the people they are helping. Volunteer Now have published new guidance on their website to ensure safety of volunteers and those they help.
- Sporting bodies are engaged with health partners and councils and have mobilised club staff and volunteers to assist in key actions.
- Safeguarding is key risk and is being dealt with as a priority in partnership with Access NI.
- A number of social media and other groups of people are springing up – such is the generosity of spirit of our communities, however, Volunteer Now are working to engage with as many of these groups as possible to ensure they are adhering to safe working practices and statutory requirements for safeguarding.
- Neighbours and families can help each other without the need for screening, however, people assisting others with whom they have no prior connection can meet the requirements of regulated activity and individuals' safety must be of paramount importance

**Key Intervention: Access to food**

The Department for Communities is developing the model of a twin track approach to food supply to vulnerable people, including people who are isolated or shielding and who might need help with the shopping/supplies of food/meals. Within the wide grouping of vulnerable people and alongside those within the shielding cohort are those with poor health (but not so bad as to get a GP letter), vulnerable; self-isolating; financially vulnerable; emerging vulnerable and those who already face food insecurity on an ongoing basis. In short we recognise the need for a “community food net”.

This vital service will ensure that those most in need in our society will have access to basic food supplies. Led by councils, up to 10,400 food boxes will be delivered weekly by local networks, including volunteers and local voluntary and community organisations as part of our effort to support the most vulnerable in society during the lockdown.

**Background:**

The Department is leading the initiative that has been made possible through collaborative working with Health Trusts, local councils, the Voluntary and Community sector and the private sector. The third sector and grass roots organisations are best placed to assess local need and will be at the heart of the partnership. Alongside this, support from the private sector is an important element, both in terms of food supply, food safety and logistics.

On Tuesday a new service commenced which will see up to 10,400 food boxes being delivered to the most vulnerable in society during the COVID-19 lockdown. This support by the Department for Communities will allow a weekly box of mainly non-perishable goods to be delivered directly to the door of vulnerable people who have been notified to shield by their GPs and who cannot afford food and do not have access to local support networks. These boxes will also be available to those who are not shielding, but are in critical need of food.

Initial volumes for food provision are up to 10,400 packages per week, however there will be the ability to flex up or down as required based on data from Councils, the COVID-19 Community Helpline, local partnership groups and councils which are best placed to identify those in immediate need of food insecurity.

The model reflects the following key assumptions:

- The local characteristics of a strong family, community and faith infrastructure alongside a thriving third sector is a significant advantage.
- The model must be scaleable and resilient given the uncertainty associated with the duration, scale and geographic spread of the pandemic.
- Support already in place for Vulnerable Isolated People (VIPs), for example the Trusts’ hot meals service, will continue.
- Additional shielding support will be targeted on the basis of objective need.

- In the interests of maintaining confidence and self-efficacy, those shielding will be encouraged to secure support from existing personal /community networks.

**Lines to Take:****How many people will initially receive food parcels?**

It is estimated up to 10,000 vulnerable people will receive food parcels in the first week.

**What is the capacity of the service?**

The service is demand led and will be able to scale up or down as required.

**Who is eligible for the food packages?**

The client group includes those who are shielding, as well as those who are vulnerable during or due to the current emergency.

**How will vulnerable people be identified**

Those who are shielding were issued with the Covid 19 Community Helpline number in the letter from their GP. Anyone else who is vulnerable and in need, and who is not already being supported through Health & Social Care Trusts or grass roots organisations, can contact the NI Covid 19 Community Helpline. They should contact the freephone COVID-19 Community Helpline number on 0808 802 0020 or email: [covid19@adviceni.net](mailto:covid19@adviceni.net) or text: ACTION to 81025.

Local knowledge within statutory agencies/communities/grass roots organisations will be important information channels, as I am aware from many great examples of work already being delivered across communities. Remember, through this programme of support, we are seeking to enable the great work already happening on the ground that is targeting objective need and responding to it.

**There have been delays in people being able to get through to the COVID-19 Community Helpline, will the service be able to cope with extra demand?**

As with all support mechanisms at present, there will be times when the infrastructure will be tested. However, the longest wait time for telephone response last week was ten minutes and the line is supported by texting and online options. We have secured additional resources for the Helpline and we are monitoring the volume of calls to ensure that we can build capacity to meet the demand.

**How much will this cost?**

I am committed to helping those with no means of access to food, and the final costs will be driven by the extent of that need. The investment is high and I have set aside £10m which should be sufficient to fund the programme over the next 3 months.

**Who is supplying the food?**

Commercial arrangements are now in place with 3 large local suppliers who will deliver food boxes to around 16 sites for distribution beginning next week.

**What do the packages contain?**

The boxes will have a range of items to meet the needs of people for around a week and include for example beverages, fruit, tinned meat and some toiletries.

**How will they be delivered?**

The food boxes are being delivered to council based distribution centres, and from there will be distributed direct to people's homes through a strong partnership arrangement that includes local government, other statutory organisations including Health Trusts and grass roots community and voluntary sector partners.

**Is there a charge for the service?**

There is no charge for those who need access to food and are unable to access food though other means of support such as online delivery, support from family/friends.

**One of the biggest issues for people seems to be securing online shopping delivery services slots. Can you help with that?**

My officials have been talking to the big retailers, as these vulnerable people are amongst their most loyal customers. However, there are difficulties in relation to the collection and sharing of personal data by government here. The database that exists in England doesn't exist here. Officials in my department and health are working intensively with retailers to find a solution.

The business community has stepped up however. In particular the small business community is responding quickly in term so delivery. I am aware that over 200 Spar, Eurospar and Vivo stores are now offering home delivery to help those who are unable to get access to groceries. A list of the stores offering this service is available on the Consumer Council website / Vulnerable Consumers.

There are other online resources to help secure a delivery – 'InYourArea' is a collaboration by Belfast Live and small businesses to help advertise who is offering delivery in each postcode area. There is a map on the Consumer Council's website.

In addition, there is an army of volunteers in place, who are working through the Local government Covid 19 Hubs and will provide help with shopping and delivery to anyone who wants to avail of such arrangements.

**How are volunteers protected with contact and safe distancing?**

It is vital that we protect those who are helping others. Volunteer Now has produced excellent guidelines containing practical advice to ensure people receiving support and those delivering that support are safe. I would again like to thank those incredible volunteers who doing so much for those in their communities who are vulnerable and in need.

**What about foodbanks?**

The objective of this work is support people in critical need of food due to the impact of Covid-19.

We recognise that many others outside of the shielding cohort need help accessing food / supermarket essentials as a direct consequence of the current Covid-19 pandemic. These people may be incapable (due to illness or impairment) from accessing the shops, because they are self-isolating, or because they are not able to afford food / their usual route to food support – e.g. food banks.

Foodbanks are continuing to provide a vital help to many of our most needy. I am considering how best to get help directly to foodbanks if needed, but surplus food boxes can be made available to foodbanks to ensure access to food is there for the wide range of vulnerable people in our society.

**What about older and ill people who can't lift the food packages?**

Where people have difficulty in lifting or carrying food packages from doorsteps, this can be highlighted through the initial helpline call and the necessary arrangements can be made.

**How long will the food service be in operation?**

The service will be continually evaluated during the COVID-19 lockdown and is initially in place for up to 12 weeks, after which I will reassess.

**Key Intervention:** The Department is working with partners to ensure that vulnerable people can access their medications even if they are unable to leave their home.

**Background:**

The objective is to ensure the safe delivery of medication from community pharmacy to vulnerable and isolated people who are self-isolating or unable to arrange for the collection of their medication. The delivery of medication will, in the main, be dealt with separately to the delivery of food packs or other supports to people's home, due to the protocols that must be in place for community pharmacies and volunteers that wish to take on this responsibility. The Department is working closely with the Health and Social Care Board and Community Development and Health Network to put these services in place as quickly as possible.

A set of Standard Operating Procedures are being developed by the Health and Social Care Board to be circulated to all organisations that may have volunteers that would fit the criteria for medications delivery. Mechanisms are being established for Community Development and Health Network to liaise with the HSC Trusts and local government hubs for the identification of those who need the support, and the matching of appropriate volunteers to local pharmacies.

**Lines to Take:**

- One of the biggest priorities is to ensure the safe delivery of medication to vulnerable and isolated people who cannot arrange for anyone to collect their prescriptions. This is something which my Department are working closely with the Health and Social Care Board and other Health partners to put in place.
- Recognition needs to be given to the fact that the delivery of medication should be treated sensitively and carefully.
- Community Development and Health Network is working with the DoH and HSCB to produce a set of robust procedures that protect the patient, the community pharmacy and the community / voluntary sector organisations who may wish to provide support.

**Key Intervention:** Wellbeing in Isolation**Background:**

The objective is to ensure that people in all circumstances can access information, guidance and support, including connection into specialist provision, in relation to maintaining good mental health and wellbeing through the pandemic in all its stages.

The Group is proposing a blend of wellbeing messaging via digital and mainstream media messages through a 'Your Mind Matters' campaign and the creation of a unique online wellbeing hub available to every citizen. This would be a specially adapted and open access version of Inspire Wellbeing's existing Workplace Wellbeing Hub currently available to the NICS, our Emergency services, health care workers and private sector employers. No other region has gone as far as this in looking after the mental health of their population and successful implementation could be a powerful example of collaboration across departments, agencies (PHA) and the voluntary and community sector; as well as sending a clear public message about the Executive's commitment to mental health and wellbeing.

**Lines to Take:**

- I am aware that potentially one of the longest lasting impacts of this crisis might be the impact that it has on the mental health of each and every one of us. This is why wellbeing and mental health support must be front and center of our response.
- My officials are working with Inspire Wellbeing and the Department of Health to develop a 3 tiered strategy focusing on the short, medium and long term plan to help people build wellbeing strategies into their daily lives.
- In the short term our focus will be on the immediate issues relating to anxiety, feelings of loss of control, loneliness, isolation and the 5 Steps to Wellbeing.
- In the medium term the focus will be on adding tailored content for specific issues such as parenting, bereavement, carers, and addictions.
- In the longer term we will focus on a trauma informed community response to the end of the Corona Virus and a return to 'normality', a time when trauma and adverse experiences can manifest themselves.



## **Key Intervention: Additional Support for the Arts Sector**

**Background:** The Covid-19 pandemic has already had a wide-ranging impact on the Arts and Cultural Sectors. Arts facilities, theatres, concert halls and craft markets have had to close to the public, and festivals have been cancelled, resulting in a significant loss of income at all levels across a sector already existing in financially challenging circumstances.

Following Ministerial approval work has advanced in three key areas

- £10k is to be provided to an online campaign called the “bread and butter” Emergency Support Fund which will help individual artists who have seen their incomes substantially reduced due to the ongoing shutdown. This fund will provide a single payment of £200 to applicants who are accepted.
- Work is ongoing in developing a Creative Support Fund with Arts Council NI. This fund will initially be for a total of £1m and will both provide support to the artistic and creative sectors both by helping to mitigate loss of earnings during the current period. However, it is anticipated that this approach will also bring about public value by supporting and encouraging the creation of new work.
- The Arts Council Board have been asked to roll over funding from 2019/20 into 2020/21 in order to give a degree of assurance to organisations at this critical time. This is a necessary step in extraordinary circumstances to prevent a new application process at this time. In the event that reprogramming is such that recoveries of funding prove necessary, the Arts Council could do so.

### **Lines to Take:**

- I have asked the Board of the Arts Council to act within a matter of days to give immediate security to organisations by rolling over 2019-20 grant awards into 2020-21 thereby enabling the advancement of payments.
- I have also asked my officials to work with the Arts Council in developing a new programme of support that can be rapidly implemented. This programme will assist the sector by providing financial support and enabling them to continue working during this period of lockdown.
- I would like to pay tribute to artists, performers, creative producers and those working in the arts and creative sector in libraries, museums, galleries and theatres. I look forward to a day very soon when the libraries, the museums, the theatres, concert halls, community centres and craft fairs reopen. Until then, I know we can rely on the arts sector to continue to find creative ways to raise our spirits and touch our imagination during these difficult days.

## **Key Intervention: Closure of Libraries**

### **Background:**

Due to the rapidly evolving situation with COVID-19, Libraries NI temporarily closed all public libraries and Out of Hours access from 5:00pm on Friday 20 March 2020 until further notice. All mobile libraries and Homecall services have been stopped and all events in public libraries have been cancelled. During this period all loans from libraries will be renewed automatically.

The current pandemic has significantly increased the use of on-line users for both adults and children. Previously children's books had not been prioritised when purchasing ebooks, however, they are becoming increasingly important with children at home for an extended period of time. Officials are working with Libraries NI to consider how best to address this issue and ensure there are a sufficient supply of ebooks to meet demand during this period.

With regard to on-line newspapers Libraries NI is currently looking at this provision, however, there are issues which need to be resolved before this can be progressed. Indicative costs to provide on-line access to newspapers are in the region of £70-£80k per year and given the current circumstances any award of contract for this service is likely to be a Direct Award Contract.

### **Lines to Take:**

- The current pandemic has significantly increased the number of on-line customers for Libraries NI. I can assure you that Libraries NI is actively considering a range of ways to enhance their digital offering during this difficult period.
- My Department allocated Libraries NI funding of £4.372m, in the 2019/20 financial year, for book stock. This included e-resources including ebooks, downloadable talking books and e-magazines all of which can be accessed remotely, free of charge on laptops, tablets and mobile devices. People who are not already library members can join on-line free of charge.
- Libraries NI has advised me that it is also currently investigating the options for providing online access to newspapers during this period of social distancing and isolation in light of the coronavirus pandemic.

**Key Intervention:** Liofa Gaeltacht Bursary Scheme**Background:**

In the event that Gaeltacht college courses are cancelled this summer there is a question how this would impact on DfC's 2020 Gaeltacht Bursary scheme. A decision has been made that the 2020 scheme would be extended to 2021, with deposits being paid in the current year in order to secure available places. This approach will also help colleges to meet some of their administrative courses during this period of social distancing.

**Lines to Take:**

- In the likely event of cancellation of Gaeltacht college courses this summer, the 2020 Liofa Gaeltacht Bursary scheme will be extended into 2021. This means participants will be given the chance to attend the summer colleges next year instead.
- It is intended that deposits will be paid to Irish Language colleges in the current year in order to secure available places.
- This will help the Colleges to meet their administrative costs and stay viable in current difficult circumstances. Steps have been taken to keep students and parents informed.

**Key Intervention:** Sign Language support for BSL/ISL community and families of deaf children.

**Background:**

Officials within the Department's Language Team have worked in support of the Public Health Agency and others to ensure that deaf people have timely access to public health information on Covid-19 through interpreters. Similarly, they have been working with others to help set up a new free remote interpreting service for British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) users to allow deaf people to access an interpreter using their mobile phone, tablet or other devices.

Ordinarily, the Department's interventions to support the BSL/ISL community and families of deaf children are through various face to face learning courses, initiatives and projects. These interventions provide employment opportunities for Deaf sign language tutors, sectoral session workers and BSL/ISL interpreters. The funding is delivered through the Department's Sign Language Partnership Group budget which is £200k.

Given current circumstances, officials are examining new ways, in consultation with the Deaf sector to deliver this support online e.g. Family sign language courses delivered to parents/siblings of deaf children remotely on screen. Additionally, they are examining ways of supporting BSL/ISL interpreters to make contact remotely with deaf people to tackle the increased social isolation currently experienced.

**Lines to Take:**

- Officials within the Department's Language Team have worked in support of the Public Health Agency and others to ensure that deaf people have timely access to public health information on Covid-19 through interpreters. Similarly, they have been working with others to help set up a new free remote interpreting service for British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) users to allow deaf people to access an interpreter using their mobile phone, tablet or other devices.
- Officials are examining new ways, in consultation with the Deaf sector, to deliver online support e.g. Family sign language courses delivered to parents/siblings of deaf children remotely on screen rather than through current face to face arrangements.
- They are also examining ways of supporting BSL/ISL interpreters to make contact remotely with deaf people to tackle the increased social isolation currently be experienced by this community.

**Key Intervention:** PRONI is supporting victims of historical institutional abuse by working with the Department of Justice (DoJ) and Researchers from the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board to identify and collate information relating to vulnerable victims and survivors.

**Background:**

PRONI holds the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry (HIAI) record.

PRONI staff are assisting Researchers from the HIA Redress Board to compile individual evidence packs relating to each of the 530 victims and survivors of historical abuse who gave evidence to the original inquiry.

PRONI has created detailed indexes of the records and these are enabling the Redress Board Researchers to identify relevant records relating to an individual more efficiently and effectively in order to create the evidence pack as quickly as possible.

**Lines to Take:**

- My officials in PRONI are working with the Department of Justice (DoJ) and the Historical Institutional Abuse (HIA) Redress Board to process requests from vulnerable victims and survivors who gave evidence to the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry (HIAI).
- PRONI holds the HIAI record and is playing an important role in facilitating DoJ researchers to identify all the records at PRONI which relate to the victims and survivors of historical abuse.
- I am aware that it is vital that the needs of this vulnerable group of people are not forgotten and that every effort is made to mitigate against further delay and possible distress to victims and survivors.
- This is important, complex and time consuming work and PRONI's assistance to the researchers will ensure that all relevant information is identified and provided to the Redress board.
- I remain committed to ensuring that PRONI continues to work with DoJ and the HIA Redress Board to facilitate this critical work going forward.

**Key Intervention:** Minister has written to the Economy Minister requesting extension of their Small Business Grant and Retail, Hospitality and Tourism schemes to sports entities operating small businesses.

**Background:**

DfE has launched a Small Business Support Grant Scheme with businesses that are currently in receipt of Small Business Rate Relief (SBRR) to be eligible to receive a £10,000 cash grant payment. The SBRR scheme has been used as a mechanism to identify small businesses for the purposes of the additional support being provided in the current crisis. The majority of sports clubs do not receive SBRR as they are already in receipt of [Sports and Recreation Rate Relief](#) – this provides sport and recreation bodies 80 per cent relief on the parts of their premises that are used for sporting purposes. Areas not used solely for the prescribed recreation are excluded from the relief. Community Amateur Sports Clubs (CASCs) receive 100 per cent relief. From a rating perspective this exclusion is simply to avoid a position of duplicate relief.

It had been the expectation of the sports sector that the small business grants scheme would extend to sports entities that are operating small businesses. However, DfE have clarified that *'In respect of the £10K scheme, sports clubs are exempt if they receive sports and recreation relief'*.

It is understood that other de-rated sectors which are also excluded from the SBRR scheme, including manufacturing, are also requesting an extension of the support grant to their sectors.

DfE is also proposing another scheme whereby a grant of £25,000 will be provided to companies in the retail, tourism and hospitality sectors with a rateable value between £15,001 and £51,000. It is anticipated that the larger sporting clubs and organisations will be able to access this funding but we have not yet received any clarification. This would be mainly applicable to premiership football clubs, GAA clubs, golf clubs etc. This scheme, unlike those in other jurisdictions, includes tourism as a named beneficiary. The other jurisdictions specify retail, hospitality and leisure as the relevant sectors.

**Lines to Take:**

- Sports clubs that are also businesses are suffering from the same issues as businesses in other sectors i.e. negligible or zero cash flow to sustain their facilities so that they will survive and be there when the crisis is over.
- The sector expected that that recently announced Small Business Support Grant Scheme and the Retail, Tourism and Hospitality relief funds would be available to those who are businesses as well as sporting entities.
- The sporting Governing Bodies and clubs are playing a major role in supporting the crucial volunteer effort, and in keeping our communities informed on key health and safety messages.
- Receipt of these business grants will be a life line for our local sports organisations during this difficult time.

<b>Key Intervention:</b>	The Department for Communities is working closely with Sport NI, the IFA, GAA, Ulster Rugby and other Governing Bodies to ensure that the significant weight of the sports sector supports our critical services.
<b>Background:</b>	<p>Sports Division is working closely with Volunteer Now to support a coordinated response to the need for community support for those most vulnerable and isolated within our communities. This includes working with SportNI, the NI Sports Forum and Sports Governing Bodies. Information has been gathered on the key resources that sporting organisations can provide access to as the crisis evolves, including staffing numbers (available for key volunteering roles), vehicles and facilities. Grassroots volunteers from across the sporting sector have been asked to register as a 'COVID' specific volunteer on the Volunteer Now Be Collective site.</p> <p>We are currently working with Volunteer Now, Councils and Trusts to maximise the impact that volunteers from the sporting codes can have. Councils are currently establishing local hubs and it will be critical that we work in partnership within these structures. Volunteer coordinators' are in place from each organisation and are working with councils to establish how best to utilise these services.</p> <p>Sports Division has identified other facilities/vehicles that the governing bodies have to offer and has mapped out sports halls that are within a five mile radius of hospitals. IFA, GAA and Ulster Rugby have also offered their facilities to DOH (including Kingspan and Windsor) for mass testing if needed.</p> <p>The Department is working with SportNI and the NI Sports Forum to get health and wellbeing messaging out through sporting organisations to the sporting sector and local communities. As the messaging changes this is being reflected in the social media campaigns, including mental health, keeping active and observing the advice on social isolation and protecting the vulnerable.</p> <p>Weekly tele-conferences have been arranged with sports policy officials and the respective ALBs from England, Scotland and Wales. There is also regular contact with colleagues in DTTS in Dublin.</p>
<b>Lines to Take:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is clear that sport has a critical role to play in supporting vulnerable people and communities in the current crisis. This role encompasses the provision of leadership, supporting communities and individuals, keeping people connected and getting critical health and wellbeing messages out.</li> <li>• The resilience of the sporting organisations and those who take part in sport has been clearly demonstrated as clubs and volunteers have stepped up to the mark to help the most vulnerable in our society and I know that as time goes on that support will remain steadfast. My officials are working closely with Sport NI, the IFA, GAA, Ulster Rugby and other Governing Bodies to ensure that the significant weight of the sports sector supports our critical services in the weeks ahead.</li> </ul>

**Key Intervention:** Prompt release of £2.4m Lottery Funding already committed to sports by Sport NI.

**Background:**

Sport NI last week issued £2.4m already allocated through its Lottery funded programmes, to give security to funded Sports Governing Bodies, with relaxed protocols at this time. It facilitated the immediate release of remaining year 2019/20 grant balances sending £1M into club and high performance programmes. In addition, Sport NI ensured early release of 50% of Year 2020/21 grant awards into the club sector and 25% of awards into the high performance sector. This released a further £1.4M to funded sports. The remainder of these grants will be made available immediately when we have clarity on when sports programmes can begin again and also when the Olympic and Paralympic Games will take place during 2021.

The release of this funding gave immediate support to the sector to ensure that sports will have money to pay staff, alleviate cash-flow concerns, provide assurance to staff, and keep the organisations afloat. Sport NI also recognized that it is highly unlikely targets set for this year will be able to be achieved under the current circumstances and assured the sector that it will not have unreasonable expectations considering what sports can achieve this year.

**Lines to Take:**

- Sporting organisations at every level, from grassroots to professional operations, are facing serious financial challenges as a result of their competitions or major events being postponed or cancelled, the loss of income through games, coach education, youth camps and other fund raising activities.
- Sport will have a crucial role to help society deal with the aftermath of the emergency. It is therefore essential that sporting organisations and clubs are in a position to offer communities and individuals access to sport and physical activities as soon as it is safe to do so.
- Sport NI have acted to give security to funded Sports Governing Bodies, with relaxed protocols at this time.
- They have facilitated the immediate release of remaining year 2019/20 grant balances sending £1m into club and high performance programmes. In addition, Sport NI have moved to ensure early release of 50% of year 2020/21 grant awards into the club sector and 25% of awards into the high performance sector. This will release a further £1.4m to funded sports.
- The remainder of these grants will be made available immediately when we have clarity on when sports programmes can begin again and also when the Olympic and Paralympic Games will take place during 2021.



<p><b>Key Intervention:</b> Launch of DfC Sport Hardship Fund (£500,000 Exchequer Resource Funding) anticipated for 10 April 2020.</p>
<p><b>Background:</b></p> <p>The Sports Hardship Fund has been established by the Department for Communities and Sport Northern Ireland. The Minister for Communities has asked for an urgent response to support grassroots sports club, acknowledging the role that those same clubs will play in helping Northern Ireland recover from the impacts of Covid-19 and rebuild connected and cohesive communities.</p> <p>Programme Timeframe</p> <p>It is anticipated that the Programme will open on 10 April 2020 and is likely to remain open for up to three months to 30 June 2020 subject to the availability of funds and the NI Executive's continued assessment of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. The status of the Programme will be reviewed on a monthly basis by DfC and SNI.</p> <p>Eligible Organisations Include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constituted NI not for profit sports clubs affiliated to a governing body of sport</li> <li>• Governing body of Sport with office base in NI</li> <li>• Constituted NI community/voluntary organisations delivering sport and/or physical recreation as their primary activity</li> <li>• Recognised NI charity delivering sport and/or physical recreation as their primary activity</li> </ul> <p>Amount</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• £500,000 subject to spending approval</li> <li>• Business case cover for up to £1m</li> </ul> <p>Types of support:</p> <p>A flat rate £2,000 grant to cover items such as</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rent/lease payments</li> <li>• Utilities, including Heat, Light, Water rates</li> <li>• Essential Grounds Maintenance</li> </ul>
<p><b>Lines to Take:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This Hardship Fund will provide vital assistance to local sports clubs and sporting organisations who are unable to access other Government support. The fund will help with critical funding to cover immediate financial pressure such as rent payments and utility bills.</li> <li>• It is Important that prompt support is available to sports clubs and organisations to enable them to continue with the significant role they play within our local communities.</li> </ul>

- The sports sector will continue to play a major role as we recover from impact of Covid-19 in terms of volunteer support, physical and mental health and community re-engagement.