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To: Executive Ministers

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

Introduction

1. The purpose of this paper is to advise the Executive of ongoing progress in enabling the voluntary and community sector response to Covid-19 and to seek agreement that all Departments follow the DfC lead on grant funding flexibilities.

Background

2. You are aware I have assumed the lead role in the Executive for supporting and enabling the Voluntary & Community Sector as it seeks to mobilise and co-ordinate its response to supporting the community in this emergency. It is my intention that the Department for Communities will be the government gateway for the Sector, liaising across departments and with local government to support delivery on the ground.
3. The Department is taking a three strand approach to supporting the Sector as follows:
- **Sustaining existing capacity and service delivery** – this has been delivered via a strong public commitment and immediate action to implement funding flexibilities;
 - **New Investment** - significant new investment is planned through a COVID-19 Community Support Fund.
 - **Enabling Community Leadership** – I have established a VCS Emergencies Leadership Group which has met and agreed the key

response themes, is setting direction and co-ordinating the collective response. Each response area is being co-led and delivered by officials and sectoral partners.

4. I chaired the first meeting of the VCS Emergencies Leadership Group (ELG) on 20 March and it has met since to agree actions. The agreed programme of work has been initiated at pace since and good progress has been made on key strands, as set out below:

- **Freephone Community Helpline – 0808 802 0020** co-designed between Advice NI, the Department and other partners. Helpline number included in GP letters to those shielding and it went live on 27 March;
- **Volunteering response** - developing volunteering guidance, promoting Volunteer Now's platform for new volunteers, engaging sporting bodies in key volunteering actions, and identifying and bringing on board the correct points of contact across local government and Health and Social Care Trusts; and
- **Access to Food** – for most people, the support needed will be delivery or collection of groceries and supplies, either through availability of online slots or through volunteers. For those most in need, good progress has been made towards securing a contract to provide weekly food boxes.

Additional detail is set out below.

Access to Food – Sectoral Lead, Now Group

5. My department is leading on the development of a delivery model based on regional and local cross-sectoral partnerships, with cross sectoral involvement (public, private and Third sector) and leadership at local level through Councils. As third sector and grass roots organisations are best placed to assess local need, they will be at the heart of the partnership. Alongside this,

support from the private sector is critical, in terms of food supply and food safety and logistics expertise. The model must be scaleable and resilient given the uncertainty associated with the duration, scale and geographic spread of the pandemic.

6. A food supply and distribution infrastructure is being established. Food leads have been identified in each council area and Councils have been asked to submit their plans for delivering the food element within this emergency, linking to a regional supply hub. They have a key coordination and oversight role.
7. The client group includes those who are shielding, as well as those who are vulnerable during or due to the current emergency. Establishing these arrangements is the immediate priority. There is a working assumption that food boxes will be supplied to local government hubs within two weeks for those who need it within the shielding cohort. Once this is confirmed, plans for an announcement can be put in place.
8. No Department has the whole solution to food support for vulnerable people. DE has put in place a financial response to Free School Meals in the context of school closures and my Department is working to bring together all interests and support that will be so important in delivering relevant and much needed food support to the range of vulnerable groups we know we need to get to. An example of this is the contribution which the Education Authority Youth Service could make. This includes an 'Eat Well, Live Well' programme, located in Youth centres across NI to provide food (breakfast 9 am–11.30 am and lunches 12 noon until 3pm). The necessary funding is now in place for this. They stand ready to help and we are plugging this into the Council plans.

Volunteering – Sectoral lead, Volunteer Now

9. I launched 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. 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.

10. 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.

11. 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. 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.

Access to Pharmacy Supplies – Community Development Health Network

12. 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.

13. A set of Standard Operating Procedures have been 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 CDHN 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. There is the potential for a contract to be put in place with taxi firms to be utilised for deliveries.

Freephone Community Helpline – Sectoral lead, Advice NI.

14. The objective is to establish a single freephone helpline service for citizens to access a range of supports through a series of 'warm handovers'. Working in partnership with Advice NI and the wider sector, the Covid19 Community Helpline went operational on Friday, 27th March, and is currently operating 7 days per week, initially 9-5, with the aim of moving to 8-8 or 9-9 to align with local government community hubs that are being stood up. GPs have issued letters to 40,000 people who are required to 'shield' for up to 12 weeks and these have signposted people to the Helpline. To ensure priority for this group, a soft launch was agreed by all partners to ensure priority was given to those receiving the GP letter, older people in general and other vulnerable groups. A 'Directory of Services/Supports' is rapidly being compiled to supplement the information already held by Advice NI and current design partner organisations. Plans are

being developed to enhance the capacity to take calls. Volunteers will be recruited and we are currently exploring the option for existing civil servants to volunteer whilst working from home. This is being tested by my officials in the first instance.

Wellbeing in Isolation – Inspire Wellbeing

15. 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.
16. 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, is proposed. 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.

Communication and Engagement – Sectoral lead, NICVA

- 17 The objective is to support the work of the ELG and grass roots organisations by maintaining effective two way communication between the Department and the CVS to communicate the department’s key messages and activities around the work set out above; and to ensure that the department’s ongoing response continues to be informed by broad CVS input, through NICVA’s wide membership and extensive contact network of 4,000 individuals. This strand is also developing a public document ‘Community Response Plan’ to set out the

framework of measures being put in place to enable the community response to COVID-19 and signpost to key sources of information and support.

Link with local government

18. Local Government is represented on the ELG through SOLACE. Communication with Local Government has been through SOLACE and through direct, daily operational level with Emergency Preparedness Groups. Councils and Trusts are mobilising local community response hubs which would allow Trusts to share information on vulnerable people who need assistance with councils, who would then coordinate with grassroots community organisations to respond to those needs, for example, food and medicine deliveries. The hubs will be directly linked to the Community Helpline, Volunteer Now and other key sectoral partners.

Immediate Funding Requirements

19. A bid for £8million for a COVID-19 Community Support Fund has been made, with the objective of supporting grass roots delivery, with funding to be distributed via councils (£6m for grassroots) and direct from DfC (£2m for regional support required by delivery organisations).

20. It is proposed that the £6million distributed via councils would be released as part of the existing Community Support Programme to minimise bureaucracy and need for additional administration procedures. It would allow councils to deliver additional funding for grass roots, community based responses, with three broad criteria (food, financial need / poverty; and connectivity). Councils are pressing for confirmation as soon as possible to allow them to respond to the urgent needs of the grassroots VCS.

21. A £10m bid for funding has also been made to support the purchase and delivery of food to those sheltering/other most vulnerable.

Longer term Funding Implications

22. The funding requirement of the voluntary and community sector in this crisis is currently impossible to quantify. However, it is clear that regional coordinating and delivery organisations such as Volunteer Now and Advice NI are already overwhelmed by the demands placed upon them, and grassroots organisations will quickly begin to lose volunteers to sick absence, stress due to family members falling ill and mental health issues. Back up support volunteers need to be in place and trained before this happens.

23. It is clear that grassroots charities which previously relied on trading income and donations only (no core funding from local or central government) are also emerging as an at risk group of organisations which currently have no specific financial support mechanism. Early UK-wide suggestions are that this crisis may lead to a reduction in income for the third sector of £4 billion; NICVA has raised with us that Scotland has committed to a £350m Third Sector Resilience Fund. The longer term funding need is an issue that I will bring back to the Executive very soon.

Recommendation

24. I would like to acknowledge the efforts of colleagues across all departments and sectors in working collaboratively and very intensively over the past two weeks to put these arrangements in place. You are asked to note and endorse the contents of this paper in respect of plans to support vulnerable people during this emergency.

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