



Connecting Communities response to Covid-19

Last updated: 27th May 2020

We have faced several challenges so far during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The initial challenge was the unknown for our staff and the services we run. There was uncertainty over whether staff would be able to continue working safely, if we would have to stop the vast majority of the services we run, how the pandemic would impact our income streams, how we would continue to pay staff in the long term and if we would need to make any staff redundant.

Accessing funding was a challenge to start with, particularly with the increased costs of ingredients for our Dinner To Your Door meals during the period when supermarket shelves were lacking various products.

Purchasing necessary PPE for our Dinner To Your Door staff was a challenge.

Adjustments had to be made to keep up with the huge increase in demand for our Dinner To Your Door service. Going from providing nearly 100-120 meals per week to more than doubling this to over 200 meals per week has required some big changes.

We have needed to redeploy staff to other roles to support our services. This meant staff going into roles that were completely new to them and roles that didn't naturally fit their skill sets.

Working from home was a challenge for the office staff initially with the movement of equipment from the office and having to adjust to working whilst caring for children.

It was necessary to cancel our annual events for 2020. These events are a great way for us to fundraise and to raise awareness of our work locally.

The ongoing challenge is not knowing how long the pandemic and restrictions on movement and activities, as well as social distancing, will last. This will have a big impact on when some of our services such as the Village Hubs in Helmsdale and Golspie and our Art 'n Blether classes are able to run again.

The pandemic has also provided a number of opportunities for us.

We joined forces with a number of local groups and individuals in Helmsdale as part of the 'Helmsdale Resilience Group' to play a lead role in the community response to Covid-19. This has built upon our working relationships with them and increased the

community spirit in the area. The way local people, volunteers and organisations' have come together has been fantastic to see and has benefitted us greatly. This is something that will hopefully continue in the future.

Thanks to additional funding from The National Lottery Community Fund, we have been able to expand our Dinner To Your Door service to new areas earlier than planned. The service is continuing to run in Helmsdale, Brora and Golspie, with the recent addition of Dornoch and Embo.

We have received fantastic support in terms of funding. We have been supported by The National Lottery Community Fund, Supporting Communities Fund, Foundation Scotland and Highland Council.

Where we are now.

We are currently only running Dinner To Your Door and have redeployed staff from other projects to Dinner To Your Door to help support the big surge in demand from people who are unwell, vulnerable, stuck at home or shielding.

Our Village Hubs in Helmsdale and Golspie had to stop running straight away but support continues to be provided by staff via telephone and online.

Our Art 'n Blether classes had to stop running. Before lockdown was announced the classes were run outdoors for a week, but weekly 'live' classes are now available via Facebook so people can still get involved at home.

Some of our main areas of work include:

- The Hub Project Lead makes weekly calls to all Hub members to check in with them, to check on physical well-being and to have a chat to help with their mental well-being. Staff are offering to help members in any way they can, for example picking up shopping or prescriptions.
- Interactive Hub sessions have been set up with activities including online bingo and quizzes. This has helped to allow members to keep in touch with one another.
- Continuing to provide exercise classes that would normally run at the Hub by providing plans and the equipment needed for people to do chair-based exercises at home. There are also plans to try and do a regular Skype online exercise class.
- Creative writing classes have continued each week during Covid-19. This is done through sharing a topic each week and then chatting online to discuss the stories everyone has come up with. The participants are looking into the idea of putting together a book with the work they have done during COVID-19.
- Weekly Hub coffee mornings with cognitive games and challenges.
- We have carried out a risk assessment for each Hub member detailing any particular risks we feel they might be open to, how we can play a part in

reducing these risks, and emergency contact details for each person in case we are concerned.

- Our Hub Project Lead has shared advice on how to protect yourself from COVID-19 with Hub members.
- Art 'n Blether classes are being offered online through Facebook Live so that people can watch, join in and still see the familiar face of the art tutor.
- Our Dinner To Your Door service has become particularly busy during COVID-19 and as a valuable frontline service it has been important for us to be able to continue running this service. We have extended the service to cover Embo and Dornoch during the pandemic. Hub staff and Art 'n Blether staff have been redeployed to help allow this service, plus our Grab 'n Go Bags, to continue running and to deal with the extra demand. So far the staff have done a fantastic job readjusting to these new roles to help out the rest of the Dinner To Your Door team. Staff have told us they have really enjoyed doing this work as it makes them feel useful when other projects have been stopped.
- Connecting Communities and all staff are working closely with the Helmsdale Resilience Group which was set up in response to Covid-19 to support anyone in the village who may need extra help during this time. Connecting Communities have supported with a number of activities the group have been involved in including setting up the Helmsdale Resilience Group Facebook page and running this page day to day, working with local volunteers and producing nearly 200 'treat bags' by baking treats for all older and vulnerable people in the village.
- Connecting Communities' Senior Management Team have also taken the decision to donate the Helmsdale Men's Shed to the local community for use as a food share location. This was something the community were looking into starting up and we felt that our Shed, currently lying unused, was a perfect location for this and would provide a really valuable service for local people, especially at this time.
- Our Hub members were initially very reluctant to accept the new lockdown rules regarding COVID-19 when they were announced in March 2020. Many members said they found the thought of this very daunting and it became a worry for staff, not just how the situation would affect people's physical health but also their mental health. This proved to us just how much people valued being able to attend the Hub and having that vital social interaction with others.
- Hub members tell us how much they are looking forward to being able to attend the Hub again in the future, once it is safe for them to do so. One lady has said 'I didn't realise how much I would miss the Hub until it was stopped and I could no longer go'. Another lady who takes part in the weekly online bingo said 'I love the bingo, it's great to see some of the familiar Hub faces and is something I look forward to each week while being stuck at home.'

The future remains uncertain, but we are hopeful and feel COVID-19 has allowed us to reassess our projects and establish our priorities for the coming years.

Just before Covid-19 there were plans to introduce some new sessions to the Village Hubs we run in Helmsdale and Golspie. The hope is these new ideas can be implemented once the Hubs are back up and running. These include:

- Monthly 'Junior Hub Club' an intergenerational session set up on a Friday afternoon with children from Helmsdale Primary School who finish at 12 noon that day.
- A walking group to start again in the Spring.
- 'A little chatty café' taking place on a Friday afternoon with a picnic lunch and games/entertainment.
- Monthly trips for Golspie Hub members.
- Funding was secured through the local Community Council in Helmsdale to begin a monthly shopping trip with Hub members to Tain. Hub members are already discussing trips they would like to plan once the Hubs are able to start running again.

As a result of Covid-19, our Hub Open Day in Helmsdale, scheduled for March, had to be postponed and it is very unlikely that the Dog Show, planned for June, will take place. If we are able, we will reschedule both events. If social distancing restrictions are not eased to such an extent that these events can happen this year, we hope to be in a position to run them both next year as usual.

We have received confirmation that an application to the Care Inspectorate has been approved. This will allow us to start providing a home care service in East Sutherland in the coming months, something that is needed more than ever due to the current pandemic.

The Care Inspectorate approval will also allow us to begin providing a new pilot project called 'Caring for the Carer'. This is a project we have already secured funding for that aims to give carers extra support, allows them to get a vital break and helps them to avoid reaching crisis point. The pilot is one of a small number in the Highlands currently looking into how carers can be effectively reached and supported at a grassroots level. Hub staff will also possibly re-deploy to this service once it is up and running in the coming months.