



Connecting Communities response to Covid-19

Last updated: 27th November 2020

We have faced several challenges 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 initially, 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 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. We have now managed to re-open the office for those who were struggling at home.

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.

One of the cancelled events this year was the annual Christmas dinner for our Hub members. This year we have been fortunate to receive a donation from SPAR which has enabled us to provide a free Christmas meal for our Hub members in their own home through our Dinner To Your Door service. Our regular Dinner To Your Door customers will also benefit from this.

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

Where we are now.

We are continuing to run Dinner To Your Door and Grab 'n Go 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. Dinner To Your Door orders have now levelled out and staff have settled into their roles.

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. When restrictions allowed, our Hub staff were meeting members to provide them with some much needed social contact.

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 have been 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 became particularly busy during the early months of 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 worked 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.'
- From the end of November we will begin a weekly walking group, initially beginning with short walks and the possibility of longer walks depending on participant abilities. We may also look to introduce walks in other areas as well.
- A donation from SPAR has enabled us to provide a free Christmas meal for our regular Dinner To Your Door customers as well as Hub members who would normally be invited to the annual Hub Christmas dinner.

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 are seeking funding for that aims to give carers extra support, allows them to get a vital break and helps them to avoid reaching crisis point.

As we enter winter and the 9th month of COVID-related restrictions we realised that everyone is really beginning to feel the strain, particularly those who live alone with little support and those who care for a loved one at home. We realise that it will not be possible for us to run those of our projects that have been suspended for some time and so we are looking at a way to adapt our work to ensure we can provide the much needed support our local folk need in a way that is compliant with the restrictions.

Circle of Support at Home

To combat the above challenges, we plan to work towards moving our Circle of Support from a community setting to people's homes during this trying period. If folk can no longer come into a community setting to get some respite, do group activities like art, music, play games or even just have tea and a chat, then our *Circle of Support at Home* will take those activities to them on a one-to-one basis, providing not only social interaction for isolated and lonely older folk but also a listening ear for those who need that extra bit of support until COVID-19 becomes something in the past. Our Circle of Support at Home will fall into three main areas:

Blether at Home: a member of our staff visits someone in their home to provide company and emotional support. This would be particularly beneficial to those who live alone and have had very little social interaction in recent months. In some cases it may be that local residents have family living far away who they have not seen and our staff could support them to speak to their loved ones using an online platform either on the individual's own device or one of ours. Blether at Home would also provide a good opportunity for those who could benefit from other areas of our Circle of Support to find out a bit more about the other services we offer.

Activities at Home: a member of our team visits someone in their own home to support them with activities they enjoy. This would include one-on-one art classes with our Art 'n Blether tutor and some of the activities previously carried out at our Village Hubs such as collaborative writing, exercises, games and crafts. This will also include walking groups, which we will begin running at the end of November 2020. This enables those who have not had the opportunity to enjoy existing hobbies or take up new ones to develop their skills, giving them a real confidence and sense of pride.

Support at Home (NHS Caring for the Carer): this service will be aimed at supporting carers and those who require some level of physical care or support who have really struggled through lockdown with little or no help. Our team will offer to help with various tasks, ranging from sitting with and chatting to the person who is being cared for while the carer gets some respite, right through to providing personal care and physical help with activities of daily living.

In addition to the above, we will also promote our Dinner To Your Door and Grab 'n Go Bag services as they will continue to be part of the Circle of Support at Home effort.

We should highlight that, in the interests of protecting the local community from COVID-19, we would limit the number of members of staff entering one individual's house each week to just one. It should be noted that Dinner To Your Door staff are not presently entering our customers' houses, which was a new restriction announced at the start of the pandemic.

COVID-19 restrictions and how they impact on our plans

From Monday 2nd November the Scottish Government's approach to addressing COVID-19 will change to a more geographical system using a number of Levels based on the risk in those particular areas. These Levels are outlined in their COVID-19 Strategic Framework. These Levels are currently in draft form but will hopefully be approved by Parliament on 27th October. The Level in our area will determine which of our project areas can run and to what degree.