



**SOUTH
KESTEVEN
DISTRICT
COUNCIL**

Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

18 June 2020

Report of: Councillor Annie Mason

Cabinet Member for Communities



SK Community Hub

This report provides a brief overview of the SK Community Hub and considers how the Council can use this as a positive launchpad to ensure community engagement, infrastructure support and volunteering opportunities are maintained and developed beyond the COVID-19 lockdown period to build a lasting legacy.

Report Author

Carol Drury, Community Engagement and Policy Development Officer



01476 406 161



c.drury@southkesteven.gov.uk

Corporate Priority:	Decision type:	Wards:
Administrative	Administrative	All Wards

Reviewed by:	Paul Stokes, Corporate Operations Lead	27 May 2020
Approved by:	Gary Smith, Strategic Director Commercial and Operations	29 May 2020
Signed off by:	Councillor Annie Mason, Cabinet Member for Communities	5 June 2020

Recommendation (s) to the decision maker (s)

1. It is recommended that Members of the committee note the contents of this report and agree to participation in a workshop to explore future working with the voluntary and community sector.
2. Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to recommend to the Cabinet Member for Communities the approval of the transition of the inbound call handling element of the SK Community Hub to the Customer Service Centre.

1 The Background to the Report

- 1.1 The SK Community Hub was established in the third week of March 2020 when guidance from Government advised that people should not travel to work unless they worked in essential, front-line services. The guidance also advised that the vulnerable in society, which included people identified by the NHS as clinically vulnerable (i.e. those 'shielding' and people aged 70 and above (i.e. those in social isolation), should remain at home.
- 1.2 Originally operating between the hours of 8am and 10pm (reduced to 8am to 7pm in the third week of operation) the SK Community Hub was collectively staffed seven days a week by a team of seventeen people redeployed from across Corporate Operations, Arts and Leisure Services.
- 1.3 Prior to lockdown, communication went out to our communities to determine the level of local support available. Response from communities was swift. From the first weekend of operation for the SK Community Hub we began to develop a register of Mutual Aid and Community Groups so that we had a means of directly responding to the needs of our vulnerable residents during lockdown.
- 1.4 A process flow and an internal frequently asked questions document was developed with customer services, to ensure consistency of responses with one shared version kept up to date with the latest information.
- 1.5 The SK Community Hub worked in collaboration with the Lincolnshire Resilience Forum which was tasked with coordinating the County's response.
- 1.6 The Resilience Forum had contacted all of the town and parish councils in Lincolnshire to determine the level of community support available and worked with the Lincolnshire County Council's Wellbeing Service to coordinate that support.
- 1.7 The clinically vulnerable were identified via the NHS and provided with emergency food parcels and other practical and social support. This was mobilised and managed by the LRF.
- 1.8 The role of the SK Community Hub was to provide advice and signposting as well as assist those in immediate need of assistance that fell outside of the formal classification of clinically vulnerable, so although the focus was on those isolating, support was available to anyone who required it. The vulnerable and their needs for support were varied and there are case studies at appendix A to provide a small insight into some of the interventions that were needed.
- 1.9 The incredible response from the community meant that the SK Community Hub had 55 groups from across the district to direct people to for help. Pre-existing and new COVID-19 support groups were identified covering all four of the district's towns and 61 of our 80+ villages with provision across 29 of our 30 electoral Wards. The only Ward with no support group registered with either the SK Community Hub or the Lincolnshire Resilience Forum was Belmont Ward. This, however, does not mean that support was not available for its residents. This Ward, as with many throughout the district, could have groups working independently and, given its proximity to Grantham, would also be covered by the town's community provision.
- 1.10 Individual volunteers also came forward and, in the early days, we utilised these volunteers to do shopping and collect prescriptions etc for people that had no support network around

them. As much as possible and practicable we tried to match these volunteers with an already existing, established group, that had registered with the LRF through the SK Community Hub. This gave the volunteers greater support and, through the umbrella of that group were covered by LCC indemnity insurance. We quickly identified a gap in Grantham as, initially, there was no community coordinating group for volunteers to operate through in the town. Working collaboratively with the South Lincolnshire Blind Society we were able to effectively fill this gap and the Society's B Hive operational arm became the coordinator for Grantham and many of its volunteers. Across the district we had a pool of around 1500 volunteers and as of the end of May had responded to more than 1700 requests for help and information.

- 1.11 However, this is only part of the picture – not every group or individual volunteer registered with the SK Community Hub. Faith groups, parishes, neighbours and local Councillors from across our district all stepped up to provide stand-alone community aid and many communities had no need to contact the SK Community Hub for help because it was right there, on their doorstep.
- 1.12 Faith groups in particular picked up many of the people who weren't officially identified as vulnerable – from those in financial crisis requiring the support of a Foodbank, migrant communities employed in restaurants, car washes, nail bars etc not able to work because of lockdown through to circus performers not able to work because of visa restrictions who were kept in food and toiletries by the good will and generosity of local unsung heroes.
- 1.13 As lockdown is eased the need for the SK Community Hub, in its current form, will be lessened. It will be necessary to maintain reactive support for vulnerable residents and community enquiries and this can be transitioned through our pre-existing customer service centre and out-of-hours offer. Officers will have access to the database and information held by the SK Community Hub of support services available to residents to ensure continuity and we are working with community organisations to ensure the befriending service is developed and maintained once council staff return to their usual roles within the Authority. This will require sensitive handling of information and strict adherence to GDPR requirements.
- 1.14 Since its inception the SK Community Hub has taken an average of 19.82 calls per day. The greater volume of calls occurs during weekdays. An average of 4.9 emails have been received per day. Again, the greater number of email contacts takes place during weekday opening hours. Analysis of call volumes and a snapshot of averages of calls handled at 15 minute intervals can be found at appendix B.
- 1.15 The transition of inbound call handling from the SK Community Hub to our Customer Service Centre will be planned and managed carefully. This will also align with the release of redeployed staff back to their substantive posts as their services recommence or to redeploy them to other COVID-19 related activities.
- 1.16 As our customer offer moves to this transitional position, we must remain mindful that, should a second wave of COVID-19 outbreak occur and lockdown rules reintroduced, the SK Community Hub and its operating hours may need to be reinstated to continue to meet the needs of our communities.
- 1.17 Crucial to the continuation of effective community engagement is the need to stay connected to the groups we have built a database of and relationships with during the pandemic. It is accepted that some of the groups – specifically those borne out of the crisis may cease once support for communities is no longer needed. It is also envisaged that some of these groups

will remain but adapt and grow with the changing needs of the communities they have served. Many will go back to 'business as usual'. The voluntary and community sector will remain at the forefront of local activity and now, more than ever, is the perfect time to review our working relationship with this sector to explore opportunities to increase collaboration in the delivery of local services.

- 1.18 To aid a sustainable legacy for the SK Community Hub that can adapt and grow we need to cement the connections already made and build new connections to create an ecosystem of the groups and the types of support available within our communities. Intelligence gained during the development and operation of the SK Community Hub will be the starting point of the ecosystem. Mapping the provision will enable us to identify gaps; duplication of effort; opportunities to partner and gateways to volunteering. As part of this, the Council will want to review and realign its existing voluntary and community sector grants and funding sources.
- 1.19 There is also an opportunity to further strengthen relationships with parish and town councils, many of which have also played an active role to support their communities during COVID-19.
- 1.20 Consideration can be given to establish some kind of voluntary and community sector forum to enable a strategic, sector wide dialogue that can help to shape this relationship, joint working and support. Such a forum could also be used to identify areas of support needed by groups (governance, funding, etc) and to promote volunteering opportunities for groups and individuals to complement the work of the Council and also for Council employees to be made aware of community volunteering opportunities.
- 1.21 As community advocates, elected Members are at the heart of this process and have local knowledge at a grassroots level that can help identify the gaps and determine the direction of travel toward a stronger, more sustainable connection with the voluntary and community sector across South Kesteven.
- 1.22 There is also a need to recognise the personal impact the lockdown, required to manage the COVID-19 crisis, has had on individuals. Enforced social isolation has resulted in increases in loneliness. The befriending service that has provided a lifeline for many during lockdown has helped to ease the impact of loneliness, however, as lockdown eases people will need to physically reconnect within their own communities and beyond and many may be nervous of doing so.
- 1.23 Prior to lockdown officers were working with a local faith group on a funding application to support the operation of a chat café. The provision of a chat café was, in this context, to provide opportunity for people whose first language is not English to practice the language outside of their formal lessons. The funding application for this project is currently on hold as funders concentrate their resources towards the COVID-19 community response. The group has been assured however, that the application will continue its journey once restrictions are eased.
- 1.24 Going forward, we may want to consider exploring ways of developing chat café-style initiatives utilising already established facilities across the district and working with local businesses, social prescribers and the voluntary and community sector to ease people back into society.

1.25 The Committee is therefore asked to participate in a workshop to explore this topic. The workshop would be held virtually and will require information and intelligence gathering with Members prior to the committee workshop taking place. Potential topics to explore include:

- **Councillors:** Considering the important role that Members play
- **Voluntary and community sector forum:** Could enable a strategic dialogue to help to shape the relationship
- **Regular communications:** Could provide a regular newsletter or similar to voluntary and community sector groups to provide updates
- **Volunteering:** Consider ways to promote volunteering opportunities, particularly where there are gaps
- **Voluntary and community sector groups:** Considering ways to support and enable groups, particularly where there are gaps
- **Grants and funding pots:** Options to streamline and refocus the Council's grants and funding pots
- **Innovation:** Explore opportunities to better integrate the delivery of services between the local authority and the voluntary and community sector
- **Celebrating community heroes:** Considering ways to recognise and thank community heroes and good neighbours to complement and build on the acknowledgements made during Volunteer Week 2020.

2 Consultation and Feedback Received, Including Overview and Scrutiny

2.1 To be gathered through the suggested workshop with Members of Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

2.2 Consultation has begun with some of the key voluntary groups in the district to determine how we can continue to collaborate throughout the transition from response to recovery and beyond.

3 Available Options Considered

3.1 The SK Community Hub could simply be disbanded when redeployed staff return to their substantive posts and services, but this would risk vulnerable residents in need not getting the support they require. It would also fail to take advantage of the unique opportunity to build on the renewed and strengthened relations with the voluntary and community sector and local volunteers to reshape the Council's ongoing relationship and consider how best the Council can continue to support or enable the voluntary and community sector and volunteers as the district moves from 'response' to 'recovery' and beyond.

4 Preferred Option

4.1 To mainstream the inbound call handling aspects of the SK Community Hub by transitioning this to Customer Services. In addition, to explore opportunities and to get a steer from Members as to how to continue to build on the positive relationship, befriending service and joint working with the voluntary and community sector and volunteers.

5 Reasons for the Recommendation (s)

- 5.1 To respond to the changing needs and to consider how best to transition the successful elements of the SK Community Hub to put them on a sustainable footing when redeployed hub staff return to their substantive posts and services.

6 Next Steps – Communication and Implementation of the Decision

- 6.1 Subject to agreement, a virtual Member workshop will be scheduled in July for the Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

7 Financial Implications

- 7.1 The financial considerations of the migration of the Community Hub to Customer Services will be met from existing budgets and therefore there will be no additional financial implications arising from the recommendations that are set out in the report.

Financial Implications reviewed by: Richard Wyles, Interim Director of Finance

8 Legal and Governance Implications

- 8.1 There are no legal implications. The Council has led good practice to address the challenges brought by Covid-19, pooling its resources, responding to new problems and innovate solutions. It is essential to consider future support for the community as we move from the lockdown period and beyond.

Legal Implications reviewed by: Mandy Braithwaite, Legal Executive

9 Equality and Safeguarding Implications

- 9.1 Equitability and the safeguarding of vulnerable individuals from harm is at the forefront of the services delivered through the SK Community Hub and will continue throughout transition and beyond. In order to ensure that equality and safeguarding considerations remain at the heart of our service delivery, impact assessments on individual projects and evolution into business as usual will be conducted throughout transition and into the legacy of the SK Community Hub.

10 Risk and Mitigation

- 10.1 No high-level risks identified.

11 Community Safety Implications

- 11.1 None.

12 How will the recommendations support South Kesteven District Council's declaration of a 'climate emergency'?

- 12.1 Not applicable to this report.

13 Other Implications (where significant)

- 13.1 None.

14 Background Papers

- 14.1 None.

15 Appendices

15.1 Appendix A – Case Studies.

15.2 Appendix B – Call Volumes

Report Timeline:	Date of Publication on Forward Plan (if required)	Not applicable
	Not previously considered by another Committee	Not applicable
	Final Decision date	18 June 2020