

## SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held Online on Tuesday, 7 July 2020.

PRESENT: Mr A Booth (Chairman), Mr J Wright (Vice-Chairman), Mr M A C Balfour, Mr P V Barrington-King, Mrs P M Beresford, Mrs R Binks, Mr R H Bird, Mr G Cooke, Mrs T Dean, MBE, Mr D Farrell, Mr R C Love, OBE, Mr A M Ridgers and Dr L Sullivan

ALSO PRESENT: Mr R W Gough, Mr P M Hill, OBE, Mr R L H Long, TD and Mr M E Whybrow

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr N Abrahams (Area Education Officer – West Kent), Mrs B Cooper (Corporate Director of Growth, Environment and Transport), Mr M Dunkley CBE (Corporate Director for Children Young People and Education), Mr T Harwood (Resilience and Emergency Planning Manager), Mrs S Holt-Castle (Interim Director of Environment, Planning and Enforcement), Mr M Overbeke (Head of Public Protection), Mr M Rolfe (Head of Kent Scientific Services/Interim Head of Kent Resilience Team), Mrs A Taylor (Scrutiny Research Officer) and Mr B Watts (General Counsel)

### UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

#### **1. Minutes of the meeting held on 9 June 2020 (to follow)**

*(Item A4)*

1. Referring to the minute of the call-in item Dr Sullivan asked for a written explanation of the constitutional basis for the Cabinet meeting held on 29 June 2020. POST MEETING NOTE: This was circulated to Members of the Committee on 14 July 2020.

2. Referring to the finance item discussed on 9 June Mr Watts would liaise with Ms Cooke to ensure Members received an update on providing the funding table as a live document on a monthly basis. POST MEETING NOTE: Mr Watts will provide an update for Members at this meeting.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 9 June 2020 were a correct record and that they be signed by the Chairman.

#### **2. KCC's response to the COVID-19 emergency via the Kent Resilience Forum (to follow)**

*(Item C1)*

Mr Hill introduced this item and explained that the Kent Resilience Forum (KRF) was a partnership bringing together Category 1 and Category 2 responders in the county.

Barbara Cooper explained that the KRF had a specific responsibility in planning for and responding to emergencies and, it was important to remember the monumental

effort put in by all partners within the KRF and the changing landscape within which all partners had been working since March 2020.

In response to a question around lessons learned officers explained that work was underway to identify lessons learned from both the KRF and KCC.

Members commended the work of the KRF and one member asked about the democratic processes surrounding the KRF. Mr Hill explained that the Recovery Plan was led by KCC and the work on the recovery plan would be reported via the Council's democratic processes. Mrs Cooper explained that the KRF was not running the recovery process but because of the scope of the coronavirus pandemic and the emergency situation, recovery involved more partners than would be the case in normal circumstances. KCC would then have its own plans going forward.

Following comments about the local outbreak plan Mrs Cooper confirmed that this was led by Andrew Scott-Clark, Director of Public Health and his colleagues in Medway.

Members thanked Tony Harwood and his team for their considerable efforts providing PPE across Kent.

In response to questions Mrs Cooper explained that each individual organisation would take into account lessons learned and these would be shared as appropriate.

Members asked that KCC's Director of Public Health be invited to a future meeting of the Scrutiny Committee to discuss with Members the Local Outbreak Plan.

In response to a question Mrs Cooper explained that Multi Agency Information Cell (MAIC) was led by Kent Fire and Rescue but involved officers from other organisations including KCC. It brought information together in one place providing a central repository for information feeding into tactical and strategic operations. It was now a standard part of emergency response in Kent and Medway.

The Cabinet Member commented on the community wardens, they were a valuable resource and had been invaluable throughout the coronavirus emergency.

The Chairman thanked the guests for their attendance at the meeting.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committee note the contents of the report.

### **3. Free School Meals Vouchers - verbal update** *(Item C2)*

Mr Long introduced this item and explained that KCC was not the decision maker on free school meals vouchers nor virtual schooling.

Mr Dunkley explained that during the coronavirus outbreak the government had expected schools to continue to support children who were eligible for benefits such as free school meals whilst at home.

A COVID summer food fund allowed any child in receipt of free school meals to benefit over the summer period and KCC had provided advice where appropriate.

Nick Abrahams explained that schools were planning for a role in providing meals to children throughout the summer which they had never previously had to do.

In response to a question Mr Abrahams explained that the Government had confirmed that vouchers issued through the national scheme could not be used to buy age restricted items and had to be used for groceries. All children who were eligible for a voucher could receive them, however families had to inform the school and request a voucher. To ensure that as many eligible families as possible were aware of the eligibility KCC had used a number of communication channels and the number of eligible families had increased.

A Member asked whether parents were made aware of eligibility for pupil premium at the same time as free school meals, Members were reassured that both KCC and schools regularly reminded parents that these two benefits were linked and promoted their uptake.

RESOLVED that Members note the verbal update.

#### **4. Virtual Schooling - verbal update** *(Item C3)*

Mr Long introduced this item and explained that as he had stated previously, this was another area where delivery was within the school's remit and KCC's role was to advise and assist.

Mr Dunkley highlighted the range of virtual schooling methods used by schools. In terms of the digital divide laptops had been provided for children in care and children with a social worker. Disadvantaged pupils were also eligible to receive a laptop but the number requested exceeded the number available from the DfE. It was also possible for schools to pay for broadband dongles for pupils without broadband. A mix of technology at home supported by learning at school was planned for September with flexibility in the case of localised lockdowns affecting schools post September.

Following a question about the disparity between private schools and other schools, private schools often had resources that other schools might not and there also might be a difference in the number of families with IT resources at home. It was considered that there probably was a disparity in education available however KCC's powers in the short term were limited but disparities would be corrected wherever possible, such as the possibility of delaying the Kent Test.

In response to a question about the number of laptops needed to meet any shortfall Mr Dunkley explained that there were around 10,000 children with a social worker in Kent and 3,500 laptops were received. However, this was not an automatic entitlement it also involved an assessment.

There were concerns around children who did not return to school in September and that more parents might continue with elective home education whilst KCC's capacity and power to monitor this was limited. The curriculum and teaching challenge was to produce support for children which was complementary.

The Cabinet Member concurred that KCC, and Government, should do all in its power to support young people and schools and address any disparity in education.

RESOLVED that Member note the verbal update.

At the conclusion of the meeting the Chairman updated Members on the Short Focused Inquiry on the Kent Visitor Economy. It was due to be a short-term inquiry and all members of the council would be contacted to ensure they could put forward any questions.