

From: Roger Gough, Leader of the Council

David Cockburn, Head of Paid Service and Corporate Director,  
Strategic & Corporate Services

To: County Council, 11 March 2021

Subject: **COVID-19 – Delivering through the Pandemic**

Summary: This report updates Members on the work Kent County Council (KCC) has undertaken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic over the past twelve months and looks forward as restrictions are eased.

**Recommendation:**

**County Council is asked to:**

**(1) Note and comment** on activity undertaken by KCC and partners to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare for recovery.

**1. Introduction**

- 1.1 Members will recall that it is almost a year since the country went into a national lockdown in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic and the restrictions and measures put in place to control it have had an impact on virtually all aspects of life. From the start of the pandemic, Kent County Council (KCC) has needed to respond to a huge number of unprecedented challenges, urgently adapting how it works and working with our partners to find new ways to continue to provide our services and meet people's needs across the county.
- 1.2 In the summer of 2020, the challenge for KCC shifted from that of immediate response to starting to address the economic and social consequences of COVID-19 and planning a route to recovery.
- 1.3 The period from October 2020 to early January 2021 was characterised by a much larger upswing in COVID-19 cases than in the first wave. Our focus had to switch again, and huge efforts were put into contact tracing activity and asymptomatic testing as well as supporting the county through another lockdown. The detection of the 'Kent variant', resulted in a period of intensive partnership work as authorities took action to minimise its impact.
- 1.4 Responding to COVID-19 has, and continues to be, a huge challenge for Kent, which is only being achieved due to the monumental effort from County Council staff and our partners. Staff have been innovative and flexible in adapting to continue providing services, and new approaches have emerged during the crisis that have proven to be highly effective.
- 1.5 The County Council's four crucial actions for responding to COVID-19, which form the pillars of the 'Protect Kent and Medway' campaign, are:
  - Reminding residents of the importance of adhering to rules and guidance;

- Developing widespread testing, both for people who are symptomatic and symptom free;
- Effective contact tracing; and
- Explaining and enforcing rules for businesses.

1.6 Partnership working has been key, and a strength, to tackling COVID-19 in Kent. There is no doubt that operational and strategic relationships have been strengthened during our response, and finding pragmatic and timely solutions to the challenges of the pandemic has presented lasting opportunities to work together in new ways. Partners have come together to deliver against the common challenge of COVID-19 which has resulted in improvements in systems, communication, trust and speed of decision making.

1.7 This paper can only highlight some of what has been achieved to date. Members will be aware that Cabinet Committees have received regular updates on COVID-19, which will continue to be the case as we move into recovery. The paper also outlines some of the potential challenges and opportunities for collaboration with key partners in the months and years ahead as both local and national policy objectives develop.

## **2. Infections and testing in Kent**

2.1 The rates of Covid-19 infection have fallen considerably in the last few weeks. At the peak of the pandemic in Kent (4 January 2021), the 7-day rolling (weekly) average rate per 100,000 was 869. This has now (as of 25 February 2021) fallen to a 7-day rolling (weekly) average rate of 52 per 100,000 population, which compares with 7 day rolling averages of 69 per 100,000 population for the South East region and 103 per 100,000 population for England.

2.2 As of the 23 February, 353,474 lateral flow tests for residents of Kent have been delivered, identifying 2388 positive cases which is a positivity rate of 0.69%.

2.3 NHS and partners are spearheading the vaccination programme and, as of 1 March 2021, 511,702 people in Kent had received their first dose of the vaccination and 26,223 people had received their second dose.

## **3. Adapting how we deliver**

### **3.1 Virtual working and making buildings COVID-secure**

Due to previous investment to KCC's flexible working capacity, A2K (Access to Kent) was able to handle the additional staff having to work from home from the start of the first lockdown. Before this, the average number of staff working remotely was around 400 each day. This has increased to around 6000, which means that over 80% of staff are working from home.

- 3.2 Hardware including monitors, chairs and over 1000 laptops have been distributed to staff to support them to work from home efficiently and comfortably.
- 3.3 15 KCC buildings have been made COVID-secure for staff who are unable to work from home and a booking app has been developed to control the number of staff in buildings. In addition, new information pages have been provided on KNet to advise staff on all ICT, health and safety and property related issues.
- 3.4 Virtual governance and decision-making  
The restrictions brought in due to Covid-19 gave rise to several governance challenges and Government introduced regulations that allowed us to meet and take decisions virtually. Virtual meeting protocols were designed to complement the Constitution and the use of the Microsoft Teams platform for formal meetings ensured that decisions could continue to be taken in a legal and transparent manner while remaining accessible to the public. New powers given to KCC around enforcement went through the proper decision-making processes and actions taken under the new regulations were reported to the Scrutiny Committee for review and to ensure the right lessons were learned.

#### **4. Delivering with our partners**

- 4.1 Kent Resilience Forum  
The Kent Resilience Forum (KRF) is a multi-agency partnership required by the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 to plan for and respond to emergencies. It includes representatives from key local public services and facilities such as Local Authorities, Police, Fire, NHS, Environment Agency and many others. Kent County Council is a lead agency within the KRF.
- 4.2 From March 2020, KRF's strategic command structures were activated to oversee vital workstreams to respond to the pandemic as it took hold. This enabled partners to be able to leverage in support locally and from Government and apply a programme management approach to what were diverse tasks and responsibilities. This included the convening of Cells and workstreams, many of which are referenced throughout this paper. Further information about the KRF structures is provided in Appendix 1.
- 4.3 In December, KRF was able to utilise its member agencies' resources to respond to significant delays and disruption in the county caused by France temporarily closing its border due to the COVID-19 variant first detected in Kent. KCC and partners ensured that local supplies and services such as food, medicines, health services and domiciliary care could get through to the local vulnerable population. It deployed significant resource and staff to co-ordinate HGV parking and queueing, set up COVID-19 testing facilities, and worked with partners, military and the voluntary sector to provide food and supplies to drivers. KRF will look to identify lessons learnt to inform future responses, and ensure it has the fluidity and flexibility to be resilient to future challenges.

- 4.4 The KRF's Covid-19 recovery planning work was led by KCC, who convened the KRF's Recovery Coordinating Group (RCG) and seven supporting recovery cells (see Appendix 1). Approximately 150 individuals across 55 organisations worked together across these cells to produce impact assessments, an overarching Recovery Strategy and action plans, which were launched in September 2020 and are monitored for progress by the RCG on a quarterly basis. The Strategy and action plans have a multi-agency focus that adds value to organisations' own recovery priorities, and focuses on key themes such as resilience, vulnerabilities, digital access/poverty, and restoring services. This work has been steered by Kent's Council Leaders and KCC Cabinet.
- 4.5 District Councils, Community Hubs and local civil support  
On 22 March 2020, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government directed upper-tier Local Authorities and Resilience Forums to determine how councils would provide food and other essential items to vulnerable residents and those required to shield, directing them to establish Community Hubs.
- 4.6 A decision was taken very quickly through the Kent Resilience Forum (KRF) and Joint Kent Chiefs that the Community Hubs response in Kent and Medway would be best led by the District Councils and Medway. This was due to the links they already had into the local voluntary sector, their ground level intelligence on local community need, and the facilities and staff they were able to requisition at pace. Most Districts had set up hubs, phone lines, websites and redeployed staff to manage them within 3 days of the initial announcement, and all within a week.
- 4.7 This was a different approach to almost every other two-tier area where the County Council took the lead for establishing and managing hubs centrally. However, given the size and diversity of Kent, the strength of trust and collaboration between all partners and the structures already in place, partners were able to design a flexible, joined-up response that quickly became recognised as best practice by MHCLG, Cabinet Office and the Local Government Association (LGA).
- 4.8 The Vulnerable People & Communities Cell (VPCC) was established to oversee the hubs and wider efforts to safeguard Kent's vulnerable residents, with leads from all 14 of Kent's Local Authorities, as well as emergency services, social services, utilities, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Community Safety, Kent Community Foundation (linking into the VCS), Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC) and many more.
- 4.9 KCC officers also received and processed the regular 'data dumps' of shielding lists from Government alongside our own collective client lists, which required proactive contacts. By June 2020, 167,029 contacts had been made to vulnerable people in Kent and Medway, and at the peak 70,687 people were being actively supported in some way, ranging from advice on the telephone through to physical interventions and food parcels.

4.10 Kent Together

Whilst the Districts were leading on the co-ordination and provision of Community Hubs, KCC added resilience and capacity to the process by developing the Kent Together webpage and phone line. This enabled the efficient promotion of a single phone line, website and brand across the county on social media, newspapers, radio, press releases, leaflets and media interviews to increase awareness of the support available, whilst also enabling KCC to identify and triage any social care and safeguarding referrals internally. As of 28 February 2021, 5944 requests have been made to Kent Together.

4.11 Other work to support vulnerable people and families in financial hardship

The Vulnerable People & Communities Cell's work expanded as the pandemic evolved and has included many other actions including working with District Councils and partners to reopen town centres safely last summer, working with Housing teams to accommodate all rough sleepers and engaging with Kent & Medway Domestic Abuse Executive Group to ensure their planning addressed lockdown risks.

4.12 As the impact of the pandemic on Kent's communities has progressed and compounded, KCC and partners have witnessed an evolution of need, from initially being centred around food and emergency supplies, to increasingly households in financial crisis, as the consequences of lost or reduced incomes, furlough, redundancies, and interim protections on loans, mortgages and bills come to an end. Not only have some low income, or 'just about managing' families been tipped into financial difficulties, but some who have never faced financial hardship before are in financial crisis because of loss of income.

4.13 Kent Support and Assistance Service (KSAS) have been instrumental in addressing this need, working with the Districts and other statutory partners to provide discretionary support in the form of supermarket vouchers, school uniforms, white goods, school meal vouchers, and much more. Demand has increased significantly as has capacity to meet it, but need is expected to continue.

4.14 KCC has worked with the district councils, the voluntary sector and DWP to ensure that Government grants for families and individuals such as the Emergency Assistance Grant and Covid Winter Fund, and those elements of Contain Outbreak Management Fund which support social isolation have been well targeted. A multi-agency Financial Hardship Task & Finish group has been established, feeding into the Vulnerable People & Communities Cell, which has a number of workstreams including building better understanding of the nature and location of financial hardship and action around fuel poverty, digital exclusion and improved referrals for complex needs.

4.15 Communications

KCC has worked with partners through KRF to coordinate communication messages to the public through the pandemic, with the approach and

messaging evolving as needed. The aim of communication messages has been to remind and support residents to adhere to guidelines and to inform residents about the local situation in Kent. A Coronavirus hub has been developed on the kent.gov website to inform residents of changes to service delivery, answer frequently asked questions and provide support and advice to Kent businesses, and this has been developed and maintained throughout the pandemic.

4.16 The '*Protect Kent and Medway*' brand identifier has been developed and messages have been targeted to specific groups, including to encourage young people to use of the NHS Test & Trace app and to help reach Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities. During the easing of restrictions over the summer and autumn, an economic recovery campaign '*Moving forward for Kent*' was run to promote Kent businesses and restore economic confidence, with a toolkit and resources available for businesses to in their own marketing. The '*Don't be the Reason*' campaign (*Don't be the reason someone catches COVID-19*) was developed to encourage compliance over the winter, and Communications will support the forthcoming national campaigns and a new asymptomatic testing campaign for the next stages out of lockdown.

4.17 Voluntary and Community Sector

The voluntary and community sector (VCS) has played a central part in supporting individuals and communities during the pandemic. In the early stages of lockdown, the decision was taken to award £200K to Kent Community Foundation's (KCF) Emergency Fund. This was in recognition of the need to provide support to VCS organisations facing financial difficulty due to lost income. A range of organisations was supported, including those that provide food distribution and support for older people, children and families.

4.18 Part of the invaluable support from the VCS has been through the contracted services that the sector provides to some of our most vulnerable people. KCC has provided £8 million additional funding to the VCS through payments to VCS providers to support cash flow (e.g., payments in advance or payments where services were not being delivered) and payments to cover additional services the sector were delivering for KCC in response to COVID-19. We have also worked with the sector to distribute funding to organisations that can support those most in need including hardship grants.

4.19 Wider VCS networks across the county have stepped up independently of the public sector to support communities and individuals through the pandemic. The increase in volunteering and social action across the county has shown the strength and resilience of our communities and the ability of local support networks to rapidly respond to local needs. We are now looking to build on this through our £500K CrowdFundKent platform.

4.20 In December KCC launched a Strategic Recovery Fund to provide grants to the VCS to support adaptation and recovery post COVID-19. 145 applications were received, and it is hoped that all eligible applications can be funded.

- 4.21 Partnership working across the sector and with public sector partners has been strengthened and proved invaluable not only in understanding the impact of COVID-19 on the VCS but opening up new partnership arrangements. We have now established a VCS Strategic Partnership Board which provides a forum for strategic discussion between the sector and statutory partners on key strategic issues impacting on the VCS in Kent and its resilience. Alongside this, a VCS Steering Group has been established to provide representation across the VCS.
- 4.22 Kent and Medway NHS  
Building on a strong history of partnership working, KCC has worked closely with NHS colleagues throughout the pandemic, including through the Health and Social Care Recovery Cell to coordinate response and recovery actions. Further information about the extensive response across health and social care is provided in section 6 of this paper.
- 4.23 A number of common issues have been identified through this work, as well as opportunities to work better together. These included the need to support the shared health and social care workforce whose response to the pandemic has been exemplary but may have had a negative impact on their mental and emotional wellbeing.
- 4.24 It has also become clear that the differing impact of the pandemic on different groups of people is likely to lead to widening health inequalities that we need to tackle. A system-wide Health Inequalities Action Plan to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 is now in development, supported by Kent and Medway Public Health Teams and overseen by the Kent and Medway Joint Health and Wellbeing Board (KMJHWPB).

## **5. Delivering for business**

- 5.1 Impact on business  
The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been severe: the UK economy contracted by around 11.4% in 2020. Within this, the sectoral impact has been diverse, with 'shutdown sectors' in hospitality, retail and the creative arts especially badly hit.
- 5.2 The Government's emergency response has been substantial. It is likely that total Government financial support to businesses in Kent and Medway amounted to around £2.5 billion in 2020, or about 6% of the county's GVA. This is in addition to payments made to employers to retain staff furloughed under the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme.
- 5.3 Renewal & Resilience Plan and Employment Task Force  
In August 2020, Kent and Medway Economic Partnership adopted the Kent & Medway Renewal and Resilience Plan. The Plan sets out principles to support the county's recovery and outlines five workstreams through which activity is being driven to support business and jobs. Some of the key areas of work are set out below.

5.4 Business: Supporting resilient and innovative businesses to drive future growth

Much of the central Government financial support made available to business, has been delivered via the Kent Districts and Medway including around £373 million in grant payments during the first lockdown. Locally, this has been supplemented by the Kent & Medway Growth Hub COVID-19 Business Helpline which has taken almost 16,000 calls and 4,000 webchat interactions from businesses seeking support or advice since March 2020. It is funded by KCC and other partners, and funding was extended due to the positive take up from local businesses. KCC has ear-marked funds in 2021-22 to extend the Helpline until September 2021.

5.5 The Kent & Medway Business Fund has also supported businesses by offering a repayment holiday to the 165 companies with outstanding loans, providing £5.8 million of support for their cashflow over 12 months. The repayment holiday will be extended for a further six months until September 2021 which will give another £3 million relief.

5.6 An additional £3 million of interest free loans are now being paid to companies which have successfully met the criteria announced in August 2020 for Recovery Loans, Capital Growth Loans and Investment Loans. Bespoke support and funding has been provided for individual sectors that have been particularly impacted, including the creative sector.

5.7 People: Enabling people to access work and skills to reach their full potential  
A Kent and Medway Employment Task Force was established in October 2020 and agreed an Employment Plan in December, which identifies the four priorities: supporting young people into work; supporting the existing workforce; responding to redundancy and driving future demand.

5.8 The key short-term action has been supporting the delivery of the Government's Kickstart scheme. This includes the establishment of Kent Invicta Chamber as a 'Gateway' through which SMEs in Kent and Medway can access Kickstart places, and commitment by KCC and several other local authorities to employ Kickstart beneficiaries.

5.9 Investment: Planning and investing now for a sustainable future  
Kent and Medway has secured £37 million for key infrastructure schemes through the Government's Getting Building Fund to deliver jobs, skills and infrastructure across the UK. These include the project Digitally Connecting Rural Kent and Medway which will improve connectivity for residents and businesses in the 'hardest to reach' parts of the county, benefiting over 1,000 homes with the worst broadband, in addition to 5000 homes and businesses that will benefit from the next stage of the Kent BDUK Project. Other schemes include creating employment hubs and incubators to stimulate business growth and innovation and their delivery will create hundreds of local jobs in construction.

5.10 Longer-term investment opportunities are also being supported including the £30m Accelerated Medicines Design & Development project at Discovery

Park to create a stronger cluster of commercial activity using advanced digital technology.

- 5.11 As we move towards recovery, businesses and the self-employed will continue to need support, and a further £3 million of emergency funding for businesses and the self-employed was announced by KCC last month as part of a £10 million package for those hardest hit by the pandemic. Working with our partners, a programme of immediate and recovery support for business is currently being developed and other funding sources including from the South East LEP and European ERDF programmes will be explored.

## **6. Delivering our services**

### **6.1 Public Health**

KCC's Public Health team have been working closely with the NHS and Public Health England (PHE) at both local and regional level since the beginning of the pandemic. Public Health consultants have provided expert advice on response and recovery planning and work closely on a daily basis with NHS colleagues to address regional issues across the health system. Consultants were involved in the initial rollout of vaccinations to health and social care workers (particularly in care homes) and are now working with partners to address vaccine uptake.

- 6.2 Alongside the KRF structures for response and recovery to the pandemic, KCC is also a key partner on the Health Protection Board for Kent and Medway which has overseen the development and implementation of the COVID-19 Local Outbreak Control Plan that sets out how we aim to protect Kent and Medway's population by preventing the spread of COVID-19, identifying early and proactively managing local outbreaks, coordinating capabilities across agencies and stakeholders and communicating with and assuring the public and partners that the plan is being effectively delivered. Public Health will continue to participate in investigations into variants of the SARS Cov-2 virus as required.

- 6.3 The Kent Local Tracing Partnership was set up to improve contact tracing across the County. Working with partners, a call-centre service has been developed which provides contact tracing and a signposting service to help residents who require assistance to self-isolate.

- 6.4 Testing of symptomatic and asymptomatic individuals is key to managing infections. The Testing Cell provides leadership in all aspects of testing, including the setting up of ten Local Symptomatic Testing Sites (LTS), two Regional Testing Sites (RTS) and the direction of Mobile Testing Units (MTU) where needed. Additional MTUs have been sent to assist with outbreak investigations and there has been additional testing arranged for care homes where outbreaks are suspected. Asymptomatic testing for COVID-19 was initiated in December and with initial military assistance, 24 sites have now been set up across the County using Lateral Flow Devices.

- 6.5 Within one week of the notification of PHE investigations into a case of the new South African variant (VOC2) in Kent, KCC Public Health and partners had distributed 10,000 PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) testing swabs via door-to-door visits in the ME15 postcode. The exercise was completed in 3 days and achieved a return of well over 80% of kits. The Testing Cell will now consider how new testing including for schools can be integrated into the testing landscape across the county.
- 6.6 Key Public Health services including sexual health and health visiting have been maintained through the pandemic, adapting service delivery as required.
- 6.7 KCC and partners have worked together to understand the impact of the pandemic on both public mental health and mental health services. Advice and support has been provided on KCC's website and a 'One Stop Shop' for mental health information has been developed with partners. Suicide prevention work has been enhanced through monitoring and modelling of risk. Vulnerable groups have been identified and offered psychological and emotional support including for those with existing mental health problems, carers and frontline workers. Support for people who have been suddenly bereaved has also been commissioned.
- 6.8 As restrictions ease, testing and tracing and enforcement activity will remain critical, and Public Health will play a central role in activity to address health inequalities and health impacts of the pandemic.
- 6.9 Adult Social Care and Strategic Commissioning  
Adult Social Care, along with other KCC frontline services took immediate steps in responding to the enfolding challenges associated with the COVID-19 crisis. It did so by focusing on important services issues, by adapting and maintaining the delivery of necessary services provided or managed by KCC as well as those it commissioned from private and independent providers. For instance, the Kent Enablement at Home (KEaH) service, was mobilised and worked differently, often together with third party care providers, to meet urgent needs regarding hospital discharges support provision. Adult social care has continued to discharge its statutory responsibilities unflinchingly. It is important to emphasise that the safeguarding responsibilities including making safeguarding enquiries and investigations were maintained throughout the crisis, working in partnership with key agencies. The Directorate worked tirelessly with other KCC functions, such as Public Health, Strategic Commissioning and Finance to ensure that there was appropriate support in place for all providers, including the distribution of much needed Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).
- 6.10 KCC mandated Kent Commercial Services (KCS) to source PPE to help address urgent PPE needs of all providers in Kent. The combination of the sensible use of all the available capability and capacity, including the commercial knowledge of KCS, meant that a great deal was achieved in terms of the council's delivery of timely support and meaningful engagement with the sector and partners. Supplies worth over £5 million had been sourced

and underwritten by the council so far. Working closely with the Kent Resilience Forum (KRF), this service delivered over 4.4-million items of PPE, including 800,000 face masks, in over 2,300 separate deliveries.

- 6.11 KCC understands the role social care providers play in assisting the council to discharge its statutory responsibilities via commissioned services. As care providers in the county came under financial pressures as elsewhere, and to help maintain the resilience of the local market, KCC stepped in and responded with practical financial support by making two payments totalling £13.5 million, to all residential, nursing, homecare and supported living and supporting independence providers, (including providers located outside Kent) looking after people placed by the council. This is additional funding over and above the care fees we pay and is the equivalent of an additional two weeks of care and a 15% increase over a three-month period. This payment was made in recognition of the increased costs faced by providers in respect of staffing, transport costs and food purchases.
- 6.12 KCC also administered two tranches of Infection Control Fund direct to providers. The primary purpose of the fund is to support adult social care providers, including those with whom the local authority does not have a contract, to reduce the rate of COVID-19 transmission in and between care homes and support wider workforce resilience. KCC passported £32 million Infection Control Fund to care homes and community providers to support them with infection control measures and additional staffing costs. KCC also made available £4.1 million Rapid Test Funding to support Care homes implement lateral flow testing and £3 million Workforce Fund to support providers with staff development, recruitment, and redeployment.
- 6.13 In common with Kent Public Health, Adult Social Care played a key role in the Health and Social Care Response Cell established by the Kent Resilience Forum. The Directors of Public Health for Kent County Council and Medway Council chair the response Cell, which has been instrumental in driving activities during the pandemic response and recovery phase. This cell has had the effect of bolstering the care homes and other providers in the sector. A weekly meeting (known as the 'Care Home Hub') which is attended by all partners and discusses infection control, outbreaks of COVID-19, workforce issues and any other COVID-related issues in care homes. Where issues are identified, the meeting discusses mitigating actions, which might include infection control support, support with testing and other measures. Additionally, a designated settings scheme has been set up, whereby a designated care home will receive COVID-19 positive patients who are fit for discharge from hospital. There are four designated settings which have been approved by CQC.
- 6.14 The annual winter pressures plan took on added significance at the start of the winter months. In response to the DHSC COVID-19 Winter Plan requirements, KCC worked with NHS organisations and social care providers, including the voluntary and community sector to put in place robust Winter Pressures Plan 2020/2021. The plan serves the purpose of providing a clear and concise summary on all the key activities in place, as part of winter

preparedness and how any expected surge in demand because of cold weather, the impact of seasonal influenza and COVID-19 would be managed. This plan is kept under review during winter and updated as appropriate and has proven useful in providing assurance to the national and local system as to how KCC, working with NHS colleagues have been able to ensure that there were no avoidable delays in discharge that might impact adversely on the capacity of acute hospitals.

- 6.15 COVID-19 has altered the normal demand patterns across the different care settings such as, day care, care home, domiciliary care, supported living and shared lives. It is thought that some pent up or hidden demand may become clear over the next few months and years as a direct impact of COVID-19. It will be necessary to take action to ensure that health and social care modelling can forecast demand. In contrast, health and social care organisations are already experiencing increased demand for certain services, many of which relate to mental health issues including domestic abuse.
- 6.16 Children's social care  
Throughout the pandemic, keeping vulnerable children safe and supported has continued to be a key priority. Integrated Children's Services have adapted their service provision as required and in the early stages of the pandemic made thousands of calls to vulnerable children and young people to check on their welfare as well as maintaining face to face visits where needed. Since September, routine face to face visits have resumed across all children's social work and early help units, taking care to follow infection prevention and social distancing measures. Between April and December, 85% (25,808 out of 30,318) of statutory child protection visits and nearly 80% (17,555 out of 22,096) of statutory children in care visits took place in person.
- 6.17 Where appropriate, technology has been used to adapt to virtual provision and keep key activity going. This has included a new way of delivering Child Protection conferences virtually and developing a collaboration tool to make it easier to share documents in a format that families prefer. The Fostering and Adoption service has also held panels virtually to help maintain service delivery and to make decisions without delay. Fostering teams continued to provide a high level of support to foster carers remotely and wraparound support was provided to young people who were particularly struggling in order to try and avoid the breakdown of placements.
- 6.18 At the peak of the first lockdown, staff stepped up the level of contact they had with care leavers, especially those who had more limited support networks. Where young people struggled because of loss of income through being furloughed, the service provided emergency food parcels and additional support where needed. As a result of some tragic unexpected deaths of young people, the service, with the support of colleagues, reviewed all of its most vulnerable young people aged 18-25 and audits were commissioned through safeguarding and quality assurance to look at the learning to improve support to our most vulnerable young adults.

- 6.19 The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the pre-existing pressures on the county to receive Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC). KCC was forced to take the difficult decision in August that it was unable to accept new arrivals until a solution could be found by the Home Office to fairly distribute the children to other councils. As numbers of new arrivals dropped going into the winter, and some young people were transferred, these duties were resumed on 7 December.
- 6.20 KCC has worked with vulnerable children and their families to encourage them to continue to access education through the lockdown. As with most other local authorities in England, less than 20% of Kent's vulnerable children or those with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) attended school during the first lockdown. This was primarily driven by parental anxiety about the risk to children and their families if they were to attend school. Social workers worked with foster carers to put home schooling arrangements in place where possible. In addition, Virtual School Kent (VSK) created a Home Learning resource for vulnerable children which covered academic learning as well as COVID-19 information and resources to support emotional health and wellbeing.
- 6.21 Schools and education  
KCC has provided information, advice and support to schools throughout the pandemic to assist them in adapting with the changing circumstances. There has been a constant dialogue between KCC and Headteachers through regular letters and updates on Government guidance and to allow any issues or concerns to be raised, and importantly to demonstrate thanks and appreciation to education staff in exceptionally difficult circumstances. Schools have also received support from their Area Education Officer as required.
- 6.22 KCC has offered a wide range of support to help schools and families adapt to home learning. Each school has access to an allocated School Improvement Adviser who provides advice and support on resources, connectivity and quality of remote working and teaching. KCC has helped to allocate IT devices to vulnerable Kent children through the Government's IT devices initiative to support remote learning. This included 3,563 devices and 502 4G routers for young people with social workers and care leavers and 437 devices and 281 4G routers for vulnerable year 10 pupils who attend local authority-maintained schools. All schools that are part of an academy chain received their own allocation of devices.
- 6.23 From the start of the first lockdown, it became apparent that a number of families with children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) were struggling to cope without their usual routines and support. Although special schools were permitted to stay open, access to educational activities was varied for many children and young people. The service worked with Short Break providers to develop a range of provision that families could use, as well as promoting the virtual Youth Service offer where appropriate, whilst Social Workers kept in touch with families that were under greatest stress. All families open to the Disabled Children & Young People Service are being

offered £250 per child to purchase sensory equipment, toys and activities, following the success of the previous toy scheme.

- 6.24 KCC also supported education settings to carry out risk assessments for children with an EHCP to determine whether their needs could be met safely in the education environment. Where children with EHCPs were being home schooled, SEND Provision Evaluation Officers checked with families that the provision from their school was meeting the child's needs and worked to overcome any issues.
- 6.25 Additional capacity has been made available for the writing of 150 EHCPs per month for a 4-month period to help reduce the backlog in processing EHCPs that had built up due to the pandemic, with an option to extend this if needed.
- 6.26 Education and Transport teams have worked together to ensure that home to school transport has continued to be available for children attending school throughout the pandemic. This included hiring 130 coaches a day from September to ensure that social distancing on school transport could be achieved. A transport protocol has been developed by KCC and adopted by transport operators to ensure a sufficient and safe service. During the reduced demand for school transport, KCC has maintained the number of operators available using continuity payments, ensuring providers are ready to operate as lockdowns have ended. All transport provision is ready for the return of schools on 8 March.
- 6.27 Kent Travel Saver (KTS) received 70% of the normal uptake in September. During the pandemic, the Public Transport team have converted the process for applying for KTS to a near 100% online process and have also managed KTS refunds and goodwill payments.
- 6.28 Due to the disruption to schooling caused by the pandemic, proposals were made to delay the Kent Test by one month to allow pupils to return to school. The number of preferences parents were offered in the school admissions process was also extended to provide greater flexibility. The test took place in COVID-safe conditions, which significantly increased the required number of test centres and the timescale over which testing took place. 33-34,000 test papers were marked in a little under one week. Appeal processes were redesigned to take place virtually and consideration was taken of each child's individual COVID-19 related circumstances. Preparations are underway for the forthcoming Kent Test process for 2022.
- 6.29 At the start of the pandemic and through the summer holiday, provision of food parcels or vouchers for children eligible for free school meals was provided by schools through centralised funding from the Department for Education. Government announced shortly before October half term that it would not extend this funding. In order to support families over the half term, KCC rapidly put in place arrangements to use the Emergency Assistance Grant to provide supermarket vouchers. A dedicated telephone line for queries was set up and staff from Cantium Finance and Strategic Commissioning quickly put processes in place to respond to queries, check

eligibility and purchase and dispatch vouchers. Over £381,000 of supermarket vouchers were purchased and over 25,000 vouchers were distributed over this time.

- 6.30 The scheme has since been adapted and improved to cover the Christmas and February half term holidays, working with schools and third-party providers to ensure that eligible families received vouchers. Additional steps were taken to encourage families to apply if they were eligible but not yet in receipt of free school meals. Information from health visitors and providers was used to identify vulnerable and hard to reach households that were eligible.
- 6.31 The pandemic and necessary restrictions have had a significant impact on the lives of children and young people and providing emotional and mental health support is an important priority. HeadStart Kent is an existing scheme that offers a wide range of advice, information and toolkits to parents, staff and schools to improve the emotional and mental wellbeing of children and young people. The HeadStart Resilience Hub provides a dedicated section full of COVID-19 resources to support young people during these unprecedented times. Additional National Lottery funding has been made available to allow the scheme to continue until 2022. HeadStart Kent will receive £1 million, bringing its total funding for the six years to £11.2 million.
- 6.32 Since the start of lockdown, KCC and partners have developed a virtual youth offer, delivering a range of exciting and innovative activities to young people and helping them stay connected to other young people. This has included support on anger management, emotional wellbeing and self-esteem. KCC Open Access services use and promote a range of apps and resources to support young people to cope and manage issues such as anger, anxiety, depression and stress.
- 6.33 Going forward, the impact of the pandemic on services for children and young people will continue to be modelled. Data for children's social care so far shows that while contacts into the Front Door are lower compared to the previous year, the cases coming in have tended to be more complex with entrenched issues, indicating that they are being picked up later than would normally be the case. It is essential that we understand and plan for the changes in patterns of need and demand.
- 6.34 Helping children and young people to recover and make up for the learning, developmental and social activities they have missed out on due to the pandemic will be a complex and long-term challenge. A new programme *Reconnect: Kent Children and Young People* is being developed for all children and young people from the age of 2 to 19 (or 24 for those with disabilities) who have missed opportunities. The programme covers health and happiness, missed learning, friends, family and community, sports, activities and the outdoors and economic wellbeing. The programme will involve all parts of KCC and a wide range of partners from the public, voluntary and private sectors. The programme is currently being further developed and will be presented to Cabinet on 15 March.

## 6.35 Community and Infrastructure Services

### 6.36 *Community Wardens*

During the past 12 months of the pandemic, the KCC Community Warden Service has been reprioritised to support the most vulnerable in our communities, working alongside the Community Hubs. Community Wardens have supported between 3,600 and 4,500 vulnerable individuals during the lockdowns. This is in addition to their role of providing information, advice and guidance to their communities on the frequently changing/evolving COVID rules and more recently, working in partnership to support the new COVID-19 variant surge-testing in Maidstone.

6.37 The KCC Community Warden service has also been building its cohort of volunteers and currently has over 80 volunteers whose role includes sharing Public Protection's social media messages with their families, friends and communities, and helping to raise awareness of scams and safety issues. The volunteers have also been contributing even more directly within their communities, supporting Wardens or taking part in the 'Knock and Check' campaign.

6.38 It is anticipated that the demand for the Community Warden Service will increase as restrictions begin to ease and the warden role begins to broaden out again, as the associated issues with public spaces reopening and a return to group gathering will require close multi-agency working to resolve.

### 6.39 *Trading Standards*

Since March 2020 Trading Standards has been given additional responsibility for the enforcement of the Regulations covering the restriction and closure of businesses, to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Over 4,000 referrals have been received from the public covering issues such as scams, fake PPE, and prohibited shops trading.

6.40 The service is providing advice and guidance to the public and businesses on COVID-19 restrictions and compliance has been high, with 1,671 businesses visited but only 23 prohibition notices needing to be issued. The service has run a Covid-19 'Ask the Expert' events for businesses about lockdown rules and trading safely, and created a series of business advice videos, which have been viewed over 35,000 times. The Ports team has continued to tackle illegal imports with Border Force including non-compliant PPE and hand sanitiser, dealing with 1,007,594 items.

6.41 The service is tackling the proliferation of COVID-related scams and financial abuse by implementing a social media and digital plan to inform and help protect residents and businesses. We have intervened to support 126 victims of scams and doorstep crime, who had lost collectively £672,000, preventing them losing a further £251,000. Other areas of service have continued, such as providing animal health and welfare enforcement, pursuing ongoing investigations and progressing court cases.

- 6.42 *Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs) and Waste*  
During the initial closure of the HWRCs, contracted personnel were diverted to assist District Collection Authorities. All Transfer Stations remained open as usual, and KCC secured and funded additional contractual resources to assist some Districts to maintain their weekly collection services. Social distancing measures and a booking system have been installed at the HWRCs, to provide a COVID-safe environment for employees and residents. KCC also supported Districts to provide waste collection services to those who were particularly vulnerable.
- 6.43 The booking system, which allows residents to plan their time and reduce queuing has been very positively received by residents: a survey of 9,500 residents recorded over 96% satisfaction. The system now offers 40,000 slots per week, and utilisation at sites is at approximately 63%. The number of slots will be increased further as social distancing is eased, and further improvements can be made to support an improved customer experience that also reduces traffic congestion and improves air quality.
- 6.44 *Libraries and Registration Services*  
During the closure of libraries, work was quickly undertaken to develop and promote digital library services and enable easy online joining so customers could gain immediate access to e-books, e-audiobooks, e-magazines and e-newspapers. Use of these resources has increased by 94%. A varied programme of virtual activities has been delivered throughout the year via our social media platforms, including story and craft activities, with over 20,000 people engaging with these events, and the popular Summer Reading Challenge was delivered entirely digitally for the first time.
- 6.45 As the initial lockdown eased, Home Library and Postal Loan services returned and a new book service 'Select and Collect' was developed so people could get books without having to enter a library. When possible, use of computers has been provided where essential.
- 6.46 A phone befriending service was quickly established from April for vulnerable libraries customers. It was offered initially to Home Library Service customers, followed by Postal Loan and Mobile Library customers, with LRA staff making over 3,500 calls in total to these customers to offer companionship, support and signposting to other support networks. The impact of the service was significant in helping to combat social isolation and check on the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable people and has received extremely positive feedback.
- 6.47 In March 2020, all Registration services were suspended with the exception of death registrations. As key workers, the Registration teams across the county have delivered 16,247 death registrations since 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020, a 26% increase on last year's figures. Face to face birth registration appointments were re-established in June, working to clear the backlog of 4,000 outstanding births. Socially distanced wedding ceremonies were introduced in July, although from November's lockdown only emergency ceremonies were allowed to continue and birth registrations were again suspended.

6.48 *Country Parks and Public Rights of Access (PROW)*

KCC's Country Parks were able to stay open throughout the pandemic, with only a brief 6-week closure of the carparks during the first lockdown. Staff adapted the facilities (e.g. visitor centres, cafes and play areas) to ensure they were COVID-safe. Individual Parks have been between 50% and 220% busier than normal, even during the 'offseason' of December 2020. PROW have experienced up to a tenfold increase in users on certain routes. Both Parks and PROW attracted a considerable number of new users across the year, which reflects the value of these local assets particularly in contributing to the wellbeing of our residents during this challenging time.

6.49 *Coroner Service*

There has been a significant increase in numbers of new death referrals to the Coroner Service. Changes to death certification, arising from the Coronavirus Act (to enable doctors to focus on patient care), inadvertently further increased referrals to the coroner service. Straight-forward inquest hearings have been conducted virtually, but a substantial backlog of more complex inquests (with or without a jury) has developed. Existing court facilities were not COVID-19 compliant for jury cases and so an additional venue was established. The increased workload is expected to continue through summer 2021 and may run into the next winter period. Courts have resumed a full timetable to address the backlog. The Service has introduced several service improvements to improve efficiency.

6.50 *The death management process*

The Kent Resilience Forum Death Management Process Group meets weekly and has been very closely monitoring the death statistics over the past months to implement both proactive and reactive responses. The new variant of COVID-19 put significant pressure on the NHS and in turn, its mortuary capacity, creating some delays from point of death to releasing the deceased into the care of a Funeral Director. In response to the escalating death rates in December, Aylesford Temporary Place of Rest (TPoR) was set up to provide additional capacity to support the hospital mortuaries across the County. It was mobilised within 48 hours and for the first six weeks of 2021, the facility held between 130 and 200 deceased at any one time. Over the course of its operation, KCC has closely monitored and responded to the NHS Trust and funeral directors' needs for chiller, bariatric and freezer provision at Aylesford TPoR. Modelling analysis indicates that, by mid-March, hospitals will be back within their mortuary capacity and Aylesford TPoR will no longer be required.

6.51 *Transport*

The Department for Transport (DfT) allocated the County Council £1.6m for Emergency Temporary Active Travel schemes in June 2020 to encourage walking and cycling. The aim was to create safe spaces for these activities to continue the significant growth they experienced during the first lockdown. Due to the deadline imposed by DfT and the prospect of losing significant inward investment in the County, twenty-four schemes were implemented in the first tranche without it being possible to undertake the usual public consultation. Subsequently a number of these schemes were dropped in response to the feedback received about them. However, the majority remain

in place and KCC was successful in gaining a further £6.4m for larger, permanent schemes for the second tranche of the programme, which are now the subject of full public consultation and engagement in order to implement them successfully. As we emerge from lockdown, the challenge will be to provide safely for the increased demand for walking and cycling facilities set against rising traffic levels, increasing speeds and a reluctance to use public transport. Our emerging Vision Zero Road Safety Strategy will be a key component of this.

#### 6.52 *Buses*

Alongside the extensive efforts to provide sufficient and safe school transport, the Public Transport team have supported bus operators to adapt to reduced demand and new restrictions. This has included supporting them to develop new cleaning and operating processes to keep users safe and adapting network provision to changing demand over the last year. Fare payers on buses have dropped to around 30% of normal rates, although this improved when restrictions were eased during the summer. KCC has supported bus operators with continuity payments to keep the network stable. It is anticipated that demand for local bus services will increase as lockdown restrictions are eased. A national bus strategy is expected shortly which will set out further recovery funding for bus services.

#### 6.53 *Emergency Planning*

Emergency Planning drew on knowledge and experience to anticipate potential service impacts from the emerging novel coronavirus from January 2020 and went on to develop the KRF Gold Strategy for the outbreak. A bespoke KCC Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic Contingency Plan, setting out key principles and response structures, was created and published in electronic format in April 2020 and has been updated dynamically as the pandemic response evolves. Full legal and regulatory compliance on other key areas of emergency planning activity has been maintained throughout the pandemic as well as operational response to severe weather, animal and plant health and other emergencies.

## 7. **Conclusion: Delivery into the future**

7.1 This paper sets out the scale of the effort made by all parts of the council in responding to the pandemic. Whilst no one would have wished for the pandemic and the tragic loss of life, livelihood and liberty that has been its consequence, the breadth and scale of the effort by partners across all sectors to the coronavirus response in the face of historic adversity has been ground-breaking. Whilst KCC's relationships with partners have always been strong, meeting the challenges of coronavirus and the outbreak of the 'Kent variant', alongside EU transition and winter pressures have brought organisations, Members and officers closer together, prioritising the support of Kent's vulnerable population, wider community and local businesses above all else whilst dealing with unprecedented pressures and demands. The responsiveness and resilience of public services when they have clear common objectives and a focus on working together at both the operational

and strategic level is likely to lead to a significant increase in expectations by Government and the public alike.

7.2 As the removal of restrictions supports a return to a new normality, the scale of the future challenge comes sharply into view – namely how do we embed these new ways of working so that we can deal with the inevitable long-term financial, social and economic impacts that will remain long after the virus has been brought under control. Many of these challenges were laid out in the Interim Strategic Plan agreed by County Council in December 2020 but some immediate challenges as we remove lockdown restrictions include:

- how we continue to seek new opportunities for business growth and employment to drive the economic recovery, recognising the opportunity for new digital and green infrastructure;
- how we make the generational leap forward in joint working driven by the pandemic sustainable and embed it as the normal way of doing business across local public services;
- the likely increase in complex service demand for adults and children's social care;
- how we can support the social care system through embedding stronger relationships with providers and lobby government for a new and sustainable financial settlement for social care alongside the wider reforms to the health and care system;
- how we support schools to help children to recover lost learning and how we support the many adults and young people who have suffered mental health issues as a result of the pandemic and lockdown.

7.3 As the economy and society finds a post-pandemic normality, how we deal with these issues will almost certainly become the backbone of a new 5-Year Plan for the County Council from 2021 onwards. But there are two priorities which specifically stand out as needing particular focus of KCC Members over the coming months.

7.4 Firstly, the pandemic has brought into sharp focus the vulnerability of many of our residents which is often the result of economic insecurity but also the shift towards an aging society as people face living longer with multiple health conditions and are often isolated from friends, family and other support networks. This vulnerability often drives long-term demand for public services, and particularly social services. Much of the support through the pandemic has been through one-off additional monies or one-off arrangements, such as the Community Hubs and far stronger operational working with the VCS sector. Our immediate challenge is how we can increasingly bring these two issues together, with more structured working with the VCS sector alongside new thinking about how we sustain support for the most vulnerable in our county.

7.5 Secondly, the working relationship between KCC and the NHS has been critical to our collective pandemic response. What are sometimes impediments and barriers to joint working in normal times have been put aside to simply get things that needed to be done, done. The pandemic has given

us a vision of what can be achieved when the NHS and local authorities place aside those normal impediments and barriers and focus on the needs of our residents and patients, particularly on issues of population health management, where KCC Public Health teams and Kent and Medway NHS have shared priority to tackle the significant health inequalities within our communities that have been identified through the pandemic.

- 7.6 It is important that this opportunity is not subsequently lost by the everyday challenges that will quickly return for both organisations. Members will be aware that the Government have issued a White Paper on health and social care, which will provide the opportunity to frame the debate about what the future relationship between the council and the NHS in Kent will be within the Integrated Care System. But it is also important that we are not limited to what the White Paper says but instead focus on what is the right approach for Kent going forward, focussing on the very practical and very real benefit that stronger working between health and social care can bring.

## 8. Recommendations

### **Recommendation:**

#### **County Council is asked to:**

**(1) Note and comment** on activity undertaken by KCC and partners to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare for recovery.

## 9. Appendices

- 9.1 Appendix 1 – Diagram showing Kent Resilience Forum Pandemic Coronavirus Command and Control Structure

## 10. Contact Details

David Whittle, Director of Strategy, Policy, Relationships and Corporate Assurance

[David.Whittle@kent.gov.uk](mailto:David.Whittle@kent.gov.uk)

03000 416833