

From: Roger Gough, Leader
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To: Cabinet

Date: 28 October 2021

Decision No: n/a

Subject: Supporting Kent Residents Through the Covid-19 Pandemic

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary: This report provides an overall briefing on Kent County Council's work to support Kent residents through the Covid-19 Pandemic so far. This includes setting out the key Covid-19 grants and funds received from Government and how they have been utilised. A report setting out the support provided through the Contain Outbreak Management Fund is elsewhere on this agenda. The briefing will then outline ongoing and future programmes of work to continue supporting Kent's most vulnerable populations over the next 12 to 18 months.

Recommendation

Cabinet is asked to note and comment on the report and activity to date and endorse the current and future programme of work.

1. Introduction

1.1 Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, Kent County Council has worked hard to support Kent residents, particularly those most vulnerable in society. Through a multitude of interventions and working closely with key strategic and local partners such as district and borough councils, the voluntary and community sector and Parish and Town Councils, Kent County Council has utilised new and existing mechanisms to provide support to those most in need, to safeguard them and where possible mitigate risk of hardship. This effort has been genuinely cross-organisational, encompassing every Directorate and almost every division and team, resulting in rapid reprioritisation and redeployment of resource, and supported by a number of Government funds and grants.

1.2 In responding to the challenges brought about by the pandemic, partners in Kent have worked even more closely together, with relationships strengthened further by the intense collaboration required, be that between County and District Councils, Police, Fire, Health, Parish Councils, Job Centre Plus, Utilities, Transport Providers, the Voluntary and Community Sector, Private Sector and more. The challenge as we look towards recovery is to maintain these relationships and new ways of working which will be imperative to achieving the shared outcomes prioritised by organisations across Kent.

1.3 This report endeavours to briefly summarise activity to date and the impact of that activity, before looking ahead to key programmes of work over the next 12-18 months.

1.4 Cabinet is asked to note and comment on the report and activity to date and endorse the future programme of work.

2. Winter Grant Fund – Covid Local Support Grant - Household Support Grant

2.1 In November 2020, the Government announced the Winter Grant Fund, a £170m package of support to County and Unitary Authorities to administer direct assistance to vulnerable households and individuals across England. Specifically, this was targeted at those most in need of help accessing and affording food and emergency supplies, energy and water bills and other vital costs, at a time when many people had either lost jobs or were furloughed, those shielding had to remain at home, and household bills were increasing.

2.2 This equated to an initial £4.5m in Kent, which was subsequently topped up by a further £1.5m, making £6m in total. The funding was predominantly split between continuing Free School Meals in the school holidays and providing additional capacity and resource for Kent Support & Assistance Service (KSAS).

2.3 From the start of the pandemic a different approach was taken to the majority of County Councils across the country, with Kent County Council devolving almost £1m to District Councils to support the establishment and operation of a range of crucial community-based initiatives including the Community Hubs, recognising the unique and crucial role District Councils play in their community, their knowledge of key local ground-level organisations and groups, and access to local facilities and staff which could be redeployed at short notice. The Community Hubs supported local people with food, emergency supplies and help whilst isolating (particularly Kent's Clinically Extremely Vulnerable community), help at community centres and youth hubs, ground-level VCS organisations delivering direct to vulnerable people including befriending services, debt advice and support for victims of domestic abuse.

2.4 The support provided by Community Hubs and others was underpinned by Kent County Council establishing the Kent Together helpline and website, utilising Kent County Council's contact centre and website resources and ability to add specialist capacity at short notice. Kent Together provided a central mechanism for receiving requests for assistance, triaging those requests and making referrals to the Community Hubs and other key services. Kent Together remains live, and since April 2020 has triaged over 8,600 requests for support resulting in 6,300 referrals to partner organisations and the Community Hubs.

2.5 On 14 April 2021, the Department for Work & Pensions wrote to say it was renaming the grant to the Covid Local Support grant and extending the period in which the Grant should be spent from 16th April to 20 June 2021 and awarding Kent County Council a further £1.06m.

2.6 The Department for Work & Pensions issued a draft letter to Local Authorities on 21 June 2021 informing them that the Covid Local Support grant will be extended for a final time over the summer break, with funding to be spent by 30 September 2021. The Leader took an urgent decision, 21/00062, accepting the additional grant, confirming spend in accordance with key decision 21/00038, authorising the provision of free school meals support through the summer holidays, and delegating authority to the Corporate Director Finance to take the necessary actions to spend the grant money and implement the decision, together with authority to accept any future grant provided for similar purposes and to spend this in accordance with the governance framework put in place by the decision.

2.7 On 7 October 2021 Department for Work & Pensions issued draft grant determination letters and guidance relating to the new Household Support Grant. Kent County Council's allocated sum is £11.065m. The purpose of this grant is almost identical to those of the previous Winter and Covid Local Support Grants. Accordingly, under existing delegation, the Corporate Director for Finance approved accepting the grant and allocated £750k to the provision of support for benefits related free school meals families during the October half term (21/0090).

2.8 The Corporate Director Finance after consultation with the Leader, made the decision to allocate £750k towards providing free school meals support during October half-term. This would have been the first school holiday for one year which did not have this financial support had this action not been taken. It coincided with the end of furlough, the removal of the additional £20 per week universal credit payment, energy price rises, fuel shortages and general cost of living pressures.

3. Covid-19 Emergency Grant

3.1 Throughout 2020 and into 2021, the Government provided a number of tranches of one off Covid-19 Emergency Grant Funding to Local Authorities across England. This was in recognition of the critical role Local Authorities were playing in responding to the pandemic and protecting the most vulnerable in the community, and the extra cost pressures and loss of income councils were facing.

3.2 Kent County Council received 4 tranches of funding totalling £94.9m. District Councils and Kent Fire & Rescue Service received their own allocations directly from Government. This funding allowed Kent County Council to continue to provide critical front-line services including in social care and public health, absorbing some of the additional cost pressures brought about as a result of responding to the Covid-19 pandemic.

4. Helping Hands Scheme

4.1 In February 2021, Kent County Council announced a local discretionary scheme designed to offer support directly to those Kent residents and businesses most impacted by the pandemic. The Helping Hands scheme would set aside £10m of the emergency Covid-19 monies to underpin a raft of projects and workstreams that would not only offer support now, but aim to provide a sustainable legacy and increase community resilience for the future.

4.2 Building on the support provided to date, the main aims of the Helping Hands fund are as follows:

- To ensure those who most need help receive it, with a focus on equality of access, and consistency of approach to assessing eligibility across the county;
- To provide guidance and advice that supports those seeking help to improve their situation and avoid future dependency;
- To use this opportunity to improve the system for addressing financial hardship across the county, and preparing for what lies ahead
- To support local businesses and the self-employed that have been significantly impacted by the pandemic.
- To ensure that the funding is used for time limited activity with a clear exit strategy in recognition that it is one-off funding

4.3 The four categories of spend and the proposed allocations are as follows:

- a) £4m to support low income households and households in financial distress, including through council services such as the Kent Support and Assistance Service, district and borough councils, voluntary and community sector organisations, such as Kent Community Foundation and utility companies such as South East Water.
- b) £3m to provide a range of support for businesses and the self-employed not in receipt of government funding, including through council services, district and borough councils, voluntary and community sector organisations, and business support organisations such as the Chamber of Commerce.
- c) £2.5m to tackle digital poverty, working with schools and colleges, district and borough councils and voluntary and community sector organisations.
- d) £500k to match-fund crowdfunded community projects and initiatives that support local communities in responding to and recovering from the impact of the pandemic.

Residential

4.4 £4m was allocated to support low income households and those in financial distress. This includes providing support to families and individuals in food and fuel poverty and with other essentials through the Council's Kent Support and Assistance Service, district and borough councils, voluntary and community sector organisations, such as Kent Community Foundation and utility companies such as South East Water. The funding is and will also be used to provide financial advice and support to address debt and financial hardship and capability issues. Funding will also continue to be made available to voluntary and community sector organisations to support them to be more sustainable. Part of the funding will be allocated to enhance existing services, including mental health, suicide prevention, domestic abuse drug and alcohol misuse services and support for both young and old experiencing social isolation, all of which have seen significant increases in need due to the impact of the pandemic.

4.5 A number of projects have been developed to support residents in Financial Hardship which are outlined below:

- Fuel Poverty – the fuel poverty project is looking to support residents across the county with crisis support payments, funding for item support (warm blankets, temporary heaters), debt advice and training for front line professionals to recognise fuel poverty.
- Water Poverty – the water poverty project is looking to support residents in fuel poverty through using water providers across the county to target support to residents most in need.
- Debt Advice – the debt advice work is intending to provide financial advice and support to people in hardship and provide a financial plan to support them and improve their financial resilience.
- Underwritten Loans Scheme – the underwritten loans scheme is a partnership project with Citizen's Advice Bureau and Kent Savers. The project will provide no interest loans to residents in high interest debt. Applicants would need to undertake financial resilience training to improve their financial resilience.
- Support for those who are new to financial hardship – one of the areas of focus for the residential workstream is to support people who are new to financial hardship as a result of the pandemic. The work in this area is currently being developed to

support these people with accessing services where they may be unclear about what support is available.

Business

4.6 Evidence from the Business Help-Line that has been providing advice and guidance to businesses since the start of the pandemic highlights the significant impact on businesses and personal liquidity.

4.7 It was proposed to use part of the allocation to support micro businesses (i.e. with nine or fewer employees) and the self-employed to establish a small capital grants scheme. This will include contributing to the costs of making business premises 'Covid secure', purchasing hardware and software to enable online trading, and funding capital improvements that will enable businesses to respond to changing demand.

4.8 Businesses accessing the small capital grants scheme will be offered business advice alongside their grant support. This will be procured from a third party provider by the Council. It will enable businesses to access up to 6 hours' business advice (depending on need) in business planning, development, diversification, digital adoption, and so on, and signposting to other services as appropriate. This responds to evidence that business advice increases firm resilience and can enable businesses to access further specialist support in the future.

4.9 To deliver the small capital grants scheme, the Council is working closely with district and borough councils and the Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce, building on the excellent joint working that has taken place throughout the pandemic.

4.10 Evidence from a major study by NESTA and SAGE in 2018, highlighted that business productivity depended on access to digital infrastructure but more importantly on digital skills. 38% of small businesses still lack digital skills, so part of the funding aims to address these issues as part of the broader digital inclusion and capability agenda.

Digital

4.11 £2.5m was allocated to tackle digital poverty out of the £10m from the COVID-19 Emergency Grant Funding. In addition, in June 2021, an additional £2.5m was allocated from Contain Outbreak Management Funding (COMF). In total £5m has been allocated to support digital inclusion and capability projects and schemes.

4.12 The digital inclusion and capability workstream is working with partners and stakeholders, such as voluntary and community sector organisations and borough and district councils to ensure that existing successful projects and schemes are scaled-up or enhanced for the benefit of residents, particularly those in financial hardship or at-risk of financial hardship, as well as those, disproportionately affected by COVID-19.

4.13 All projects and schemes supported by the digital inclusion and capability workstream are meeting these key principles:

- Tailored – interventions, projects and schemes are tailored to the beneficiaries to maximise outcomes.
- Holistic – interventions, projects and schemes are providing a holistic solution to beneficiaries to ensure that residents and businesses can continue to be digitally included in a sustainable way.
- Sustainable – interventions, projects and schemes that aim to provide sustainability into the medium and long term for both the beneficiaries and the local authorities.

- Cohesive – interventions, projects and schemes are being developed cohesively with partners and stakeholders, to ensure that the outcomes and successes are jointly shared.

4.14 The workstream has made strong links with borough and district councils and will continue to do so, but has also made positive working relationships with the NHS CCG, other local authorities outside Kent and national organisations both public and private, such as Citizens Online, Good Things Foundation and Dixons Carphone.

4.15 Internally the workstream continues to engage and work collaboratively with Growth & Communities, particularly with the Broadband team, as well as the Strategic Reset Programme, Digital Accessibility Group, Digital Transformation Group and divisional teams such as the innovation units within Adult Social Care & Health and Children, Young People & Education.

4.16 The workstream is developing several projects and schemes, which aim to support the key elements of digital inclusion and capability (equipment/connectivity, skills, accessibility, motivation/awareness), as well as support the levelling-up agenda for residents and businesses. The projects/schemes being developed are outlined briefly below:

- **Engagement, Skills and Training Project:** A new team is being recruited to deliver over 200 engagement and skills sessions on digital inclusion and capability, as well as, recruit, onboard and retain over 350 volunteer digital champions.
- **Device Recycling Scheme:** We are currently developing a recycling scheme to enable us to provide hardware to residents that are in financial hardship or at-risk of financial hardship. This scheme will also enable our local authority partners to donate their retired equipment for the benefit of the community and we have already had several organisations interested in donating their devices to this scheme.
- **Community Wi-Fi Scheme:** There are a few strands to this scheme as outlined below:
 - **Rural Community/Village Facilities:** We are currently in discussion with Rural Kent to investigate how we can improve connectivity in rural locations, particularly those identified by the digital exclusion report, with Kent Public Services Network (KPSN).
 - **Residential/Community Wi-Fi:** We are currently at the feasibility stage with three district areas (Folkestone & Hythe, Swale and Thanet) to extend the current KPSN network into residential or community areas. Longer term maintenance of the infrastructure is being brokered with other organisations for sustainability.
 - **Care Home Wi-Fi:** Adult Social Care & Health are leading on this COMF funded project to improve Wi-Fi in care homes. The workstream is supporting this project, to ensure that we cohesively tackle this issue, alongside the other projects listed above.
- **Digital Enhancement Fund (Kent Community Foundation):** The workstream is working with the Kent Community Foundation to establish a one-off match funding to support the voluntary and community sector to improve digital inclusion for the sector's beneficiaries from device loaning schemes to intensive skills training (including English as a second language).
- **Digital Inclusion Platform:** The workstream is attempting to use best practice to aggregate all digital inclusion and capability schemes to help professionals both internally and for our partners and stakeholders to share the schemes and projects available, including those delivered by the private/corporate sector. This platform will

also enable residents and business (particularly SMEs) to upskill having access to bitesize courses and skills training to improve their digital skills and capabilities.

- **Broadband Connectivity (Social Housing and MDUs):** The workstream is working closely with the Growth & Communities Broadband team to improve market-led investment in connections to social housing and multiple dwelling units/housing of multiple occupancy.

4.17 In addition to these projects, we are also supporting various district-led projects, such as the Pyramid Project's Isle of Sheppey digital inclusion project, Citizen's Advice North West Kent project and Dover's Community Engagement team's outreach project and we are continuing to do this. We have also supported Swale Borough Council in spending their COMF allocation.

4.18 For reference, we have identified or allocated the following from the various funds with the majority of the remaining funds likely to be fully spent over the next 12 months:

Fund	Allocated	Notes
Helping Hands Digital (£2.5m)	£467,904	
COMF Digital (£2.5m)	£1,768,500	
Additional Funding	£285,000	Funding from district allocated COMF funding, as well as, potentially funding secured from partners/stakeholders.

4.19 Due to the limitations and requirements around the different funding, our strategy is to utilise the COMF funding allocated (where it meets the funding criteria) as a priority.

Crowdfunding

4.20 The council's draft Civil Society strategy committed £100k to developing crowdfunding as one of a range of ways to support local grass roots voluntary and community sector organisations. As part of the response to the impact of Covid £500k was allocated to enable local groups to come forward with crowdfunding projects and initiatives that will support local communities impacted by Covid-19 and build towards the recovery from the pandemic.

Data Sharing

4.21 Across local authorities, at both County and District level, we cannot effectively identify individuals at risk of crisis. As such there is a strategic need to develop a solution which allows frontline teams greater visibility of individual vulnerability, both financially and socially to enable a proactive response in providing support.

4.22 The Data Sharing Workstream within the Financial Hardship Programme aims to test two systems which specialise in extracting, combining, and representing data in a more useful way – *Policy in Practice* and *Xantura*. These systems are being implemented across Kent, in partnership with District level authorities.

Policy in Practice (PIP)

4.23 PIP's 'Low-Income Family Tracker' dashboards combine existing financial data held by a District Local Authority. This data is then re-presented to support targeted campaigns in

local areas. Campaigns may be focussed on areas such as improving pension credit uptake, discretionary housing payments, tv licences and free school meals etc.

4.24 All 12 districts have committed to the pilot of the LIFT software and the campaigns that will be focussed on identifying and supporting low income households and those experiencing financial hardship.

Xantura

4.25 Xantura's 'One View' system takes the data sharing process a step further, with the capacity to incorporate health and social care data as well as produce automated risk alerts for someone entering into crisis.

4.26 A number of councils across the country are using the One View system and have used it as part of the support offered in response to Covid-19. Locally, Maidstone Borough Council has been using Xantura's system since 2019 and have achieved significant social and financial benefits, targeting the system towards homelessness prevention.

4.27 All Kent District and Borough Councils have committed to working together to implement the pilot of the One View system across the county.

Outcomes

4.28 Through trialling these data sharing systems, we expect to be able to prevent vulnerable people from entering into crisis, whether that be through preventing homelessness, consolidating debts, or supporting people to access benefits. Once the systems are in place there is the potential to tackle broader social issues such as domestic violence and avoidable hospital admissions. In order to evidence the outcomes and impacts for both residents and the local authorities, there will be an independent evaluation of both systems.

Referrals

4.29 When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, many individuals were furloughed, lost their job or had to stay at home. This resulted in an increase of pressure on personal finances. While the government set up support for individuals, who needed support for a range of issues during the pandemic, it was recognised that most people calling for help were being signposted.

4.30 Signposting is not an ideal process for people who need help, as it is entirely reliant on the individual making onward contact with the organisation or service they have been signposted to, and they may feel demotivated or that 'it is a waste of time' trying to access support when they feel their first attempts were unsuccessful.

4.31 In contrast to signposting, referring an individual to a support service places the ownership of contact on the referring agency, and ensures the individual is not left to initiate contact at a time of crisis or hardship.

4.32 To resolve the limitations of signposting, it was agreed with stakeholders that we should look to implement a secure referral system across the county for organisations to refer individuals through to provide financial advice (and wider holistic support) and that there is a county-wide website or database providing a repository of financial advice and wider support in each area.

4.33 Refernet is an online platform that will support building a referral network across Kent. Refernet is an existing and low-cost network system currently being used in North West Kent by the voluntary sector and run by Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB). The Refernet system is to be scaled up across Kent for all organisations to use who make or receive referrals. The Refernet system will also provide the ability to track referrals and generate reports on aggregated data relating to the referrals made - meaning more targeted services can be developed.

Money Advice Service

4.34 The Money Advice Network Service is a free, existing service that taps into resource across the country to give financial advice. The system is provided by the Government and allows reporting to enable the success of the system to be measured. The Money Advice service will link in with Refernet to offer financial support to financial advisors nationwide at no cost.

Online county wide repository of information

4.35 We are linking in with the NHS Sustainability and Transformation Partnership (STP) in their work to create a county-wide repository of information and promote the website. The STP is currently putting together a county-wide repository of support information and so Kent County Council could benefit from this work and avoid duplication.

4.36 The intended outcomes of the referrals workstream, is to provide professionals who are supporting those at risk of or experiencing financial hardship access to a robust referral system. By providing the robust referral system, we aim to support those who are already in or at risk of financial hardship to overcome their personal challenges to achieve economic well-being.

5. Next Steps

5.1 As both nationally and locally the transition continues from response to recovery, uncertainties remain about the ongoing impression the pandemic and the subsequent impact it has had on the economy, residents' way of life, how communities interact as well as how any future health implications may affect our most vulnerable communities.

5.2 Over the last 18 months, the cohorts of people within the community most impacted by the pandemic, and the types of support most needed as a result, have evolved considerably and are anticipated to continue to do so. The future work programme therefore requires Kent County Council to maintain a degree of flexibility in how it manages and utilises resources such as the Household Support Fund and the Helping Hands scheme, to ensure the response effort is as efficient and as effective as possible to meet the rapidly changing needs and demands.

5.3 There is a commitment within Kent County Council and partners to achieve as much of a sustainable legacy as is possible with the one-off time-limited funding from Government, increasing community resilience whilst ensuring a clear exit strategy is in place.

6. Recommendation(s)

6.1 Cabinet is asked to note and comment on the report and activity to date and endorse the current and future programme of work.
