

**From:** Roger Gough, Leader  
Zena Cooke, Corporate Director for Finance

**To:** Cabinet

**Date:** 30 March 2023

**Decision No:** n/a

**Subject:** Update on Supporting Kent Residents with Financial Hardship

**Classification:** Unrestricted

**Summary:** This report provides an overall briefing on Kent County Council's work to support Kent residents with the cost-of-living crisis. This includes an overview of the work delivered through the Household Support Fund, as well as work undertaken through the Financial Hardship Programme.

**Recommendation:**

Cabinet is asked to:

- Note and comment on the activities being led by the Financial Hardship Programme funded through the Helping Hands Scheme
- Note the latest allocation of the Household Support Fund and the approach proposed in section 3.12 to be delivered under key decision 21/00107
- Comment and discuss if there are additional areas of financial hardship which are not currently being supported that should be explored

## 1. Introduction

1.1 The Helping Hands Scheme was created in February 2021 by KCC's Leader using £10m of the Covid Emergency Grant to support projects aimed at helping residents experiencing, or at risk of, financial hardship. The scheme has four key areas: Residential, Digital Inclusion and Capabilities, Crowdfunding and Business.

1.2 The Financial Hardship Programme includes the Helping Hands Scheme (Residential and Digital Inclusion and Capabilities) and expands on this work to utilise funding from other sources. As a result of this, three additional workstreams are included in the Financial Hardship Programme; Data Sharing, Referrals, and Free School Meals and Healthy Start.

1.3 The cost-of-living crisis presents a significant challenge to the county and its economy, KCC and district and borough services, our partners and the people of Kent as the impacts of inflation and rising costs are felt by households and organisations.

1.4 This paper is intended to provide a high-level overview of the support for residents provided in response to the cost-of-living crisis.

## 2. Task & Finish Group

2.1 In September 2022, a paper was prepared for the Kent Council Leaders on the cost-of-living crisis and an urgent multi-agency summit was held to discuss coordinated activity in Kent and Medway in response to this crisis. As a result of this and subsequent meetings, officers were tasked with reinvigorating the Financial Hardship Task & Finish Group through coordinating a bottom-up response with district colleagues and partner agencies.

### **3. Household Support Fund**

3.1 On 30 September 2021, the government announced that vulnerable households across the country would be able to access a new £500 million support fund to help them with essentials over the winter. The Household Support fund was distributed by councils in England to directly help those who needed it most. The fund has been extended and is currently coming to the end of its third round, with an announcement of round 4 confirmed.

3.2 The fund aims to support vulnerable households and families with children, where alternative sources of assistance may be unavailable. It should be used to meet immediate needs and help those who are struggling to afford food and utility bills (heating, cooking, lighting) and water for household purposes. The upcoming fourth round has also allowed funding for supplementary advice services, including debt and benefit advice, however, the amount allocated to this is expected to be limited and linked to the provision of practical support.

3.3 The fund has strict monitoring requirements and very limited criteria which restrict the ability of local authorities to deliver schemes which provide sustainable benefit to communities. Through the delivery of the Household Support Fund, Kent County Council has strived to achieve maximum sustainability within the limitations of the grant.

3.4 Throughout the first two rounds of funding, over 450,000 awards have been issued to the residents of Kent. This has included support for Free School Meal eligible households with food vouchers, countywide energy voucher schemes, support with water bills and more, as well as delivery of support through local schemes with District and Borough Councils.

3.5 The third round of funding began at the beginning of October 2022 and is currently still being delivered. The funding for the current round must be spent by the end of March 2023.

#### **Household Support Fund Delivery to date**

3.6 For Free School Meal eligible households, this has resulted in over 300,000 awards of support over rounds 1 and 2. Whilst each round has varied in the specific support, eligible families could receive between £65 and £110 of support over 6 month periods. In the first two rounds of Household Support Fund, this has totalled over £8m funding.

3.7 Another key part of delivery of the Household Support Fund has been through support with energy bills and water bills. We are currently in the third round of the HSF, and the funding allocated for use by the Helping Hands Team is being developed to target support at those who are unlikely to receive support through other means, whilst also providing an opportunity for those experiencing exceptional financial hardship to seek out help.

3.8 Since the inception of the HSF, support has been delivered to people in need via voucher schemes and direct support to individuals' utility accounts that can alleviate the financial pressures that the household is experiencing.

3.9 The Household Support Fund delivered within KCC has already made 32,429 awards through Rounds 1 and 2 to the residents of Kent who have been experiencing financial hardship and with planned phase 3 funding set to award a further 24,910. The total actual and planned awards at the close of March 2023 from all Household Support Fund rounds will be 57,339. This has been done with the support of the Kent Support and Assistance Service which provides help to people in financial crisis.

3.10 District and Borough Councils have delivered local targeted support with additional Household Support Funds provided to focus on energy efficiency solutions such as boiler replacement and repairs to provide a longer-term sustainable solution for the household.

#### **Household Support Fund Round 4**

3.11 A fourth round of Household Support Funding has been announced by the Department

of Work and Pensions as part of measures to provide help with global inflationary challenges. Whereas previous rounds of Household Support Fund have run for 6 months, this round of funding has been extended to 12 months, running from 1 April 2023 until 31 March 2024. Because of the extended length, the grant amount is larger, the grant determination for Kent is £22m.

3.12 To reflect the approach taken in the previous rounds, the following approach has been proposed under the existing Key Decision (21/00107):

- Provide £10 per week food vouchers for Free School Meal eligible households over the school holidays
- Provide energy vouchers for Free School Meal eligible households
- Allocate 20% of the funds to District and Borough Councils for local initiatives in line with the guidance
- Allocate the remaining funds for countywide initiatives including a publicly available energy voucher scheme.

#### **4. Financial Hardship Programme**

4.1 The Financial Hardship Programme has delivered, and is continuing to deliver through the Helping Hands Funding, innovative projects to support residents in hardship, or at risk of hardship. The different streams of activity have been developed to target support in areas which have been most impacted by initially the Covid-19 pandemic, and subsequently by the cost-of-living crisis. In addition, the work targets areas which are not already being supported by existing schemes.

4.2 Full details of the projects included in the Financial Hardship Programme can be found in Appendix A, however the below summary provides some key headlines from the activity to date.

##### **Residential**

4.3 The Residential Workstream has focused on a number of key areas and has launched a Money Advice Hub pilot which aims to provide Kent residents with a central hub for specialist debt advice and solutions using the latest technology. Working with delivery partner Citizen Advice Bureau (CAB), initial outputs indicate over **200** people have contacted the service for debt support. This compliments the Money and Mental Health project which has supported over **450** people with mental health problems to receive targeted debt advice. Another key area of work is a Parish Council Scheme being set up in partnership with the Kent Association of Local Councils. Parish Councils will be invited to apply for grants of up to a maximum of £2000 to support existing or new projects taking place in their parish.

##### **Data Sharing**

4.4 The Data Sharing Workstream's central aim, is to improve the ability of local authorities to proactively identify and subsequently support Kent residents who are experiencing financial hardship, or at risk of some form of crisis likely associated with financial difficulty (e.g. homelessness). There are two data-sharing systems which are being piloted across Kent which seek to achieve the above aim: the 'Low-Income Family Tracker' (LIFT) provided by Policy in Practice (PIP), and 'OneView' supplied by Xantura. PIP's system has now been actively piloted since 2021, resulting in over **£750,000** worth of benefits being claimed by local residents. Over the next 7 years, this rolling-return is expected to deliver over **£11m** to Kent residents, and a likely reduction on demand of statutory services as a result (e.g. temporary accommodation, mental health services). Xantura's system is in the process of being rolled-out to district and borough councils following Maidstone's small-scale pilot in 2020/21.

## Strengthening Referrals

4.5 The strengthening referrals workstream aims to mitigate the action of signposting by ensuring that organisations across Kent can make simple, safe and secure referrals for people who need help and support rather than signposting. The online platform ReferKent was launched in September 2022, where organisations across Kent can join to make and receive secure referrals. **716** referrals have been made through the system since launch, with over **65** organisations taking part.

## Free School Meals and Healthy Start

4.6 The Free School Meals and Healthy Start workstream's purpose is to increase uptake of both schemes, to benefit Kent families that are in financial hardship by providing assistance with the cost of providing nutritious, balanced diets, to help improve health and education outcomes. Through engagement with stakeholders we have seen an increase in Healthy Start registrations from 56% to 64% or 771 families (the National average was 57.5% in Aug '21 and is now 62%), with every district seeing an increase in registrations. A pilot approach to Vitamin delivery has provided **1000** mothers in 5 postcodes with a full-term supply of Health Start vitamins. This has resulted in an average increase of **23%** in new registrations for the vitamins, which will contribute to positive health outcomes.

## Digital Inclusion & Capabilities

4.7 The Digital Inclusion & Capabilities workstream's central aim is to improve digital inclusion and capabilities across Kent (and more recently Medway). The workstream is also known as Digital Kent. The workstream was originally allocated £2.5m from COVID Emergency Grants (Helping Hands). A further £2.5m was allocated through Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF) and now the workstream has influenced or attracted a further **£2m** to support digital inclusion.

4.8 This workstream has successfully delivered a number of projects. The Hardware Access scheme has gifted a total of **3,837** remanufactured devices to residents, which has not only supported with digital inclusion, but has also contributed to positive environmental impacts. The Digital Champions Network has recruited over **500** volunteers and has become one of the largest community networks of volunteer digital champions in the country.

## 5. Recommendation(s)

5.1 Cabinet is asked to:

- Note and comment on the activities being led by the Financial Hardship Programme funded through the Helping Hands Scheme
- Note the latest allocation of the Household Support Fund and the approach proposed in section 3.12 to be delivered under key decision 21/00107
- Comment and discuss if there are additional areas of financial hardship which are not currently being supported that should be explored
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Residential Workstream	
<b>Kent Money Advice Hub</b>	<p>The project aims to provide Kent residents with a central hub for specialist debt advice and solutions. The project objectives are to reduce triage times, provide high quality, standardised debt advice and ensure an all-inclusive service. This project uses the latest technology, working with delivery partner Citizen Advice Bureau (CAB) to provide advice via several channels, including phone, video calling, and text money and debt advice support delivered via kiosks, pods (kiosk within a soundproof booth) and a supporting website. The 4 kiosks and 1 kiosk with soundproof booth (pod) are strategically placed within the Kent community; located in Gateways, community centres and food banks. Initial outputs from the scheme indicate that demand into the service has been high with more than 200 people contacting the service for debt related support.</p> <p>To compliment this project, the Helping Hands Scheme has part funded the Money and Mental Health Project. This project is designed to reduce the risk of people with mental health problems attempting to take their own lives as a result of their problematic debt, this project has created a new specific referral pathway through which clinicians, services and individuals can refer into a dedicated Citizens Advice team. The number of individuals being supported since the beginning of the scheme continues to grow with over 450 being supported at the time of writing.</p>
<b>Bereavement Support Payments</b>	<p>There is a large national cohort of families (c21,000) eligible to claim bereavement support back to 2001 following a legal action to entitle common law and civil partners to Bereavement support. Nationally, there will be an additional c1,800 families eligible for this support annually. National Children’s Bureau are working with DWP to identify those eligible. From a Kent perspective we are raising awareness for Kent residents through a communication campaign working collaboratively with DWP and National Children’s Bureau share messaging through our own channels. We have already facilitated this information being shared nationally through the LGA Cost-of-Living hub and Local Government Pension Service.</p> <p>If the claimant was getting Child Benefit when their partner died (or did not get it but were entitled to it), they will get the higher rate of £9,800. If the claimant was not entitled to Child Benefit, they will get the lower rate (unless they were pregnant when their partner died) of £4,300. The affected families have 12 months from the 9th February 2023 to claim the backdated payments.</p>
<b>Parish Council Scheme</b>	<p>In response to the cost-of-living crisis we will be working in collaboration with Kent Association of Local Councils to deliver a grant scheme to support Kent residents experiencing financial hardship. Parish Councils will be invited to apply for grants of up to a maximum of £2000 to support existing or new projects taking place in their parish. A total budget of £300,000 has been agreed by KCC for this project to help address specific hardships of residents as a result of the cost-of-living crises.</p>
<b>Underwritten Loans Scheme</b>	<p>The Underwritten Loans Scheme is a partnership project with Citizen’s Advice Bureau (CAB) and Kent’s Credit Union, Kent Savers. The project is intended to provide zero interest loans for a term of up to 5 years and a maximum loan of £4000 to residents in high interest debt. Applicants need to undertake financial resilience training with CAB to improve their financial resilience (maximise their income) and sign up to a membership with Kent Savers to benefit from accessing the zero-interest loan.</p>
<b>Debt Relief Order (DRO)</b>	<p>The project aims to provide Kent Savers Credit Union with funding, which will be available to a set number of pre-identified debt specialist organisations with the objective to process Debt Relief Order (DRO) applications for up to 100 Kent residents. This project is set to speed up the DRO application process reducing the administration time for processing a DRO Fee from weeks to days and lessen the financial burden on the Kent resident.</p> <p>Debt Relief Orders (DRO) are a form of insolvency. A debt relief order is an option for people on low income, no assets, and debts of £30,000 or less. There are strict criteria to qualify for this type of insolvency which Citizens Advice and Crosslight debt professionals will identify.</p>

## Data Sharing Workstream

### Low Income Family Tracker (LIFT)

Policy in Practice's (PIP) system has proven to be a highly useful tool, specifically for Revenues & Benefits teams in District and Borough Councils. The system allows for identification of those eligible for, but not in receipt of, a range of benefits and support such as pension credit, discretionary housing payments etc. Local support teams can then design and implement resident engagement campaigns to increase take-up in a more targeted and tailored way.

So far, over 50 different campaigns have been designed by Council teams across Kent. These campaigns target those individuals and households entitled to a range of benefits such as pension credit, but are not claiming them. 25 campaigns were completed from 2021 – 2022, resulting in over £750,000 worth of benefits being claimed by local residents who are likely to be experiencing financial hardship. Over the next 7 years, this rolling-return is expected to deliver over £11million to Kent residents, and a likely reduction on demand of statutory services as a result (e.g. temporary accommodation, mental health services).

### OneView

Xantura's 'OneView' system goes further still, with the ability to intelligently identify cohorts of people at risk of a particular crisis (e.g. homelessness) based on the associated risk factors which contribute to that crisis. The system also generates a holistic picture of the individual's situation by drawing on data from multiple services including social care.

Maidstone Borough Council originally ran a small-scale pilot of Xantura's system with a limited amount of data and resource assigned to the project. A case study was produced evaluating this initial pilot, which confirmed the following outcomes:



We have worked extensively with partners to ensure a robust approach to data protection and information governance has been taken in the rollout of the countywide pilot. Further work is continuing to ensure all legal considerations are addressed, and we have engaged with independent public bodies such as the Equality & Human Rights Commission to ensure privacy and proportionality are incorporated into the whole implementation of the system.

Over the past year, we have engaged with all district and borough council's in Kent to offer to join the countywide pilot. We expect to have six district council's live with Xantura's system by the end of this financial year, with the remainder coming online in a phased approach in the summer.

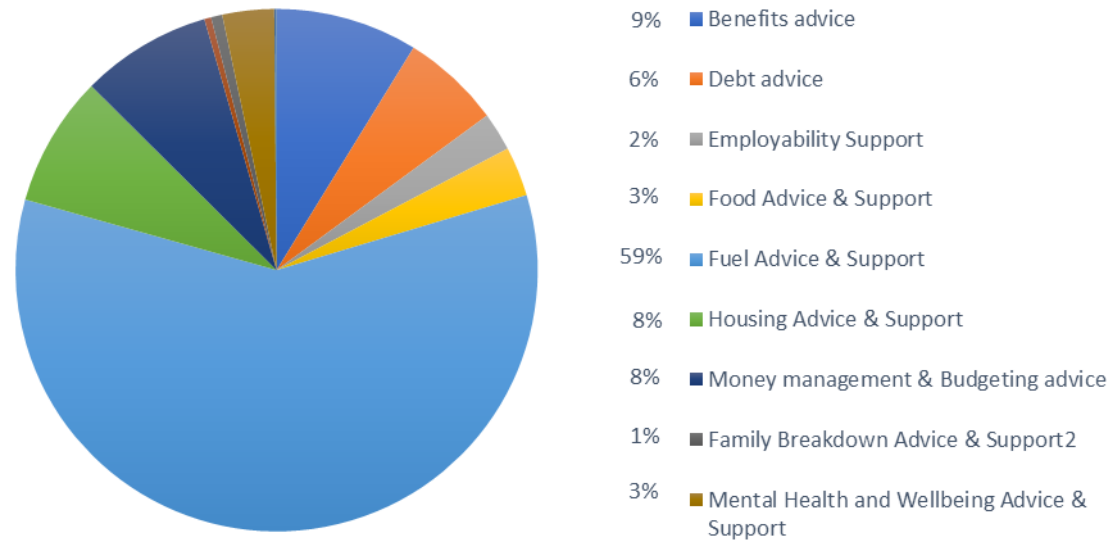
Alongside the core homelessness prevention objective we are looking into additional novel system uses for Xantura's system identified by service areas in the county council, district and borough councils and the NHS, including falls prevention, violence reduction, and food insecurity among others.

## Strengthening Referrals Workstream

### ReferKent

ReferKent launched in September 2022. ReferKent is an online platform that organisations and teams across Kent can join to make and receive referrals rather than signpost. 716 referrals have been made through the system since launch. After a small pilot with 5 organisations, 62 more have joined, with a further 100 in the process. Each week more teams and organisations are coming forward to join the platform.

Referral Category



### Money Advice Network (MAN)

The Money Advice Network is a partnership project with the Money and Pension Service's Money Helper scheme. The project was initiated to ensure that individuals could be referred immediately to a network of debt advisors across the country. 672 referrals have been made by KCC to this service. One person said as a result of the debt advice they received they are now able to prioritise their rent and energy and that this will help them as they re-enter the workforce.

As a result of our work, other organisations across Kent are making referrals to this service and the Money and Pension service have quoted 'we are receiving the highest amount of debt referrals from Kent compared to other counties'.

### Vulnerability Registration Service (VRS)

The Vulnerability Registration Service is an online register that alerts creditors and lenders to a person's financial vulnerability. KCC's Client Financial Services are one of the first services to use the register and are now able to register those they have Power of Attorney over; we will be working to increase the number of teams/services across KCC and the district and borough councils who are able to register individuals across KCC. Client Financial Services have said that they often see individuals who need care home places, often these individuals have high debts because family members have taken out credit in the vulnerable person's name. This means that KCC has to foot the bill of the care home place as the debt is seen as a priority payment. The VRS can help as it will alert creditors and lenders to the persons vulnerability, and so the credit is not issued in first instance, this has the potential to decrease the amount of individuals presenting to Client Financial Services with high debts.

## Free School Meals and Healthy Start Workstream

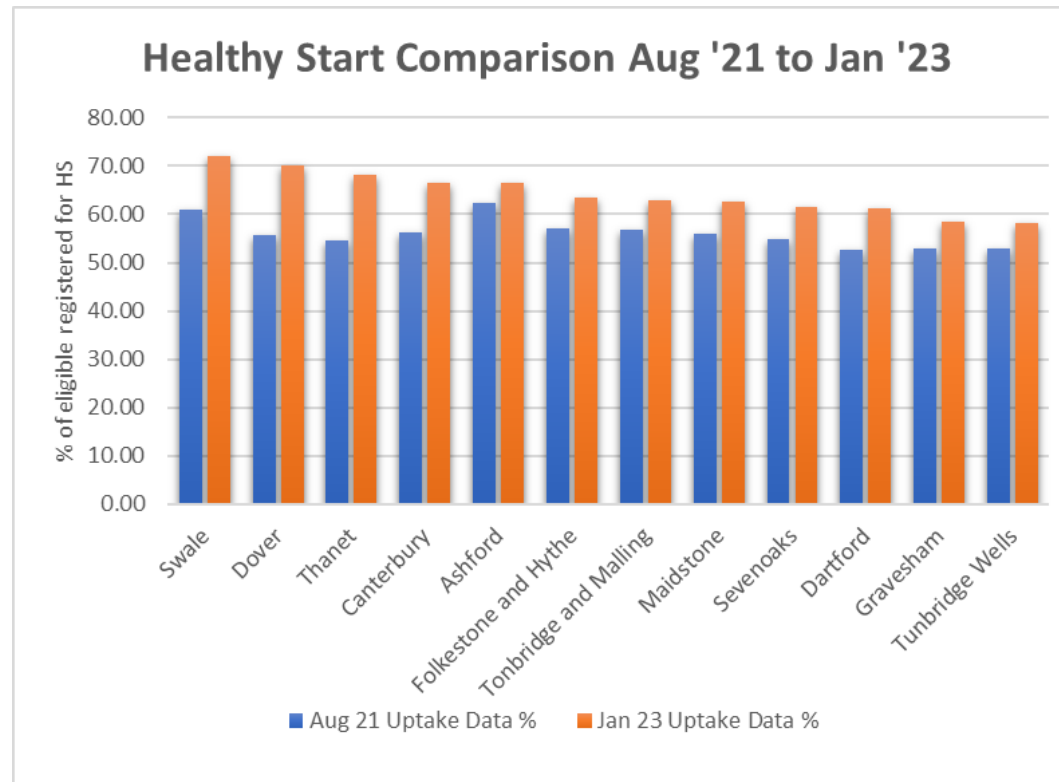
### Free School Meals (FSM)

FSM registered families will now remain eligible until at least July 2015, even if their circumstances improve, due to Universal Credit transitional protection. FSM is used as a metric for several other benefits that support the child and family including Pupil Premium funding. Each FSM child registered provides an additional £985-£1,385 annually in Pupil Premium funding to schools (currently £2.6m of Pupil Premium funding is unclaimed annually in Kent). These payments continue for at least 6 years, and are used to run interventions to close the attainment gap. The FSM metric has also been used by Southern Water to provide an additional £180,000 in vouchers to families in Thanet.

KCC is exploring providing District Council's with access to FSM data, within the school data eco-system so reducing GDPR and so allowing Districts to use their benefit data to identify households likely to be eligible and support them to run a FSM eligibility check. The same data can also be used to identify those on FSM and target those households about existing and new support and has been sought by Districts for a number of years.

### Healthy Start

Healthy Start vouchers are intended to support eligible low income households from early pregnancy through early childhood to the age of 4 for help with the cost of milk, healthy food, worth up to £1230 and free vitamins. Through engagement with stakeholders we have seen an increase in Healthy Start registrations from 56% to 64% or 771 families (the National average was 57.5% in Aug '21 and is now 62%), with every district seeing an increase in registrations. Registrations for Healthy Start vitamins continue to increase steadily, since October 2022 there has been a 129% increase in registrations.





KCC is scoping providing a secure data trust which would be used to identify eligible households that have not registered for Healthy Start. They would then be contacted to notify them of their eligibility and the benefits from registering. We are looking to create a mock-up of this system to demonstrate how it works to the organisations involved and subject to governance, would allow us to pilot an operational system.

The Dartford and Gravesham NHS Trust Vitamin Project, launched in December 2022, provides 1000 mothers in 5 postcodes with high levels of deprivation, with a full-term supply of Healthy Start vitamins. In addition to the health benefits to the mother and child, the project is:

- Promoting the Healthy Start scheme to families likely to be eligible
- Promoting Healthy Start vitamins
- Training midwives on the changes to the Healthy Start scheme and importance of promoting pregnancy/early development vitamins
- Data to inform the Public Health pre-conception strategy and NHS partners future strategies on pregnancy and early development vitamins.

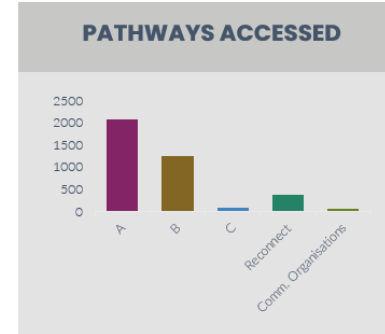
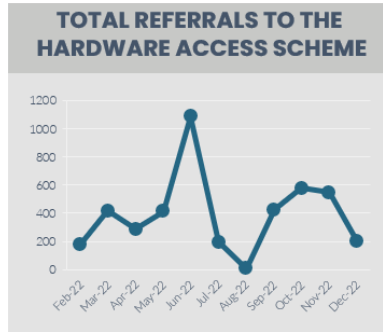
The pilot has resulted in an average increase of 23% in new registrations for Healthy Start vitamins from the targeted towns.

Subject to the success of the pilot, the Integrated Care Board have asked to repeat the pilot with the remaining acute NHS trusts.

## Digital Inclusion and Capabilities Workstream

### Hardware Access

Between February 2022 and December 2023, a total of 3,837 remanufactured devices have been gifted to residents (an average of 80 devices a week).



We had multiple 'access pathways' to enable residents to receive a device. The pathways (as shown above are):

- Pathway A – those Kent residents digitally excluded and in or at-risk of financial hardship.
- Pathway B – those Kent residents aged between 4 and 16 that are digitally excluded and in education, employment, or training meeting other criteria.
- Pathway C – those Kent residents aged between 16 and 18 that are digitally excluded and not in education, employment or training and working with KCC's NEET Support Service.
- Reconnect – this was specifically funded by the Reconnect programme and those funded met the eligibility criteria of Pathway B or C.
- Community Organisations – this is a pathway for the Voluntary and Community Sector to access the scheme.

The scheme is currently paused. The scheme is due to reopen in April 2023, with targeted support to areas of Kent that have not utilised the scheme based on the digital exclusion evidence. However, in the meantime we are offering laptops as part of the Digital Inclusion Support Scheme – Folkestone project.

The devices procured for the scheme have been from a company that is Kitemarked for the remanufacturing process. Therefore, these devices being supplied have contributed to the environmental impacts:

- 1.8m kilograms of sequestered carbon emissions. Helping to compensate for the 'embodied' carbon emissions from each laptop original manufacture and first three years of use.
- 573.8m litres of water saved, as it is not being used for extraction, refining and production of a new computer or its components.
- 954.3k kilograms of carbon reduction – avoided approximately this amount of equivalent emissions by not buying new. The laptops purchased are a carbon-neutral product from a carbon-neutral company with high environmental values.

### Digital Champions Network

Since launching in May 2022, we have recruited 540 volunteer digital champions. One of the largest community networks of volunteer digital champions in the country.

The digital champions have spent 1,387 hours helping people across Kent in various ways from setting up laptops to helping someone using scanning. In addition, our digital champions have supported residents to set up their UC accounts or use the NHS app.

<b>Connectivity Access</b>	<p>Between August 2022 and December 2022, a total of 874 cellular routers have been provided to residents (an average of 43 routers per week).</p> <p>The scheme is currently paused, whilst the business case to continue the scheme for another year is considered. However, in the meantime we are offering routers and hotspot vouchers as part of the Digital Inclusion Support Scheme – Folkestone project.</p>
<b>Social Tariffs for Broadband</b>	<p>In October 2022, we launched a county-wide campaign to raise awareness of Social Tariffs for Broadband. This is after Ofcom found that only 1.5% of eligible households were taking advantage of these deals with their broadband providers.</p> <p>The campaign had a total reach of 4.4m residents via various channels including social media, radio, outdoor (BT telephone boxes, bus rear and internal panelling) and community handbooks.</p> <p>Following this campaign, we also worked with Maidstone Borough Council to pilot a targeted postcard campaign to those eligible residents, for example those claiming certain benefits. The website data and enquiries generated shows that this messaging has worked at enabling people to be aware of the offer and save on some money on their monthly bills.</p> <p>In January 2023, we wrote to all the other District and Borough councils to give them the opportunity to access funding to print, post and administer postcards to be sent to targeted individuals that would be eligible. So far, we have received funding applications from 4 Councils.</p>
<b>Social Connectivity</b>	<p>Working with social housing and telecom stakeholders, a Kent wayleave agreement and toolkit has been created to ensure equality of access to full fibre broadband (FTTP) for those living in social housing and multi-dwelling units. This project has now been adopted as BAU by the GET Broadband team and has been shared with stakeholders through the Kent Housing Group and is being piloted by Dover district. A key benefit of this project has been supporting housing stakeholders to receive the wayleave payments they are entitled to and provide social value for residents.</p>
<b>Device Recycling Scheme</b>	<p>The workstream will soon be launching a Device Recycling Scheme, which will be a simple, free and secure disposal mechanism for hardware across the county (public sector organisations, private businesses, and individual residents). This will generate value, that we will reinvest into digital inclusion projects (such as the Hardware Access Scheme) making this sustainable. In addition, this scheme will support KCC’s environmental objectives, reducing carbon emissions.</p>
<b>Digital Kiosks/Hubs</b>	<p>The workstream is continuing to progress the Digital Kiosk/Hub project. The aim of the project is to pilot and test digital kiosks in strategic locations across the county, to enable inclusion for those excluded. This is being linked with the Strategic Reset Programme’s Community Assets Programme, and we are planning to test a ‘Hubs’ which has Kiosks and Digital Champions within. The Hub model will be piloted at Larkfield Library initially.</p>