

From: Jamie Henderson, Cabinet Member for Coastal
Regeneration and Public Health

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To: **Kent Health and Wellbeing Board - 30 September 2026**

Subject: Strategic Partnership for Health and Economy: Providing
System Leadership on Health, Work and Inclusive Growth

Classification: Unrestricted

Past Pathway of Paper: None

Future Pathway of Paper: None

Electoral Division: All

Summary:

Good quality, stable employment is a fundamental determinant of health and wellbeing. It supports financial security, social connection, confidence and good physical and mental health. Conversely, poor health can prevent people from entering, remaining in or progressing in work, contributing to inequalities and reducing economic participation.

The Kent and Medway Strategic Partnership for Health and Economy (SPHE) brings together partners from across health, public health, employment, skills, economic development, business and the voluntary and community sector. It provides a shared leadership space through which partners can align activity, identify opportunities for collaboration and strengthen the collective impact of work across the system.

The number of programmes and short-term funding opportunities relating to work, health and economic inactivity continues to grow. This creates significant opportunities for Kent, but also presents a risk of fragmentation, duplication and additional pressure on limited partner capacity. SPHE has an important role in helping the system respond strategically, ensuring that activity is aligned with local priorities and contributes to a coherent approach for residents, communities and employers.

Recommendation(s):

The Health and Wellbeing Board is asked to:

1. **NOTE** the progress made by SPHE in bringing together partners across health, employment, skills and economic development and commencing work streams to provide support and information to residents and employers;
 2. **ENDORSE** SPHE's role in providing strategic coordination and system leadership across the health, work and inclusive growth agenda; recognising its contribution to addressing the wider determinants of health and reducing health inequalities
 3. **AGREE** that the SPHE should continue to provide a forum for strategic alignment across relevant health, employment, skills and economic development initiatives, and support the Health and Wellbeing Board in shaping the strategic direction of work across health and economy
 4. **NOTE** that SPHE will develop a shared outcome and evidence framework and that future updates will be provided to the Health and Wellbeing Board on SPHE's activity, priorities and collective impact.
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1 Introduction

- 1.1 There is a strong relationship between health and economic outcomes. Employment, income and education are significant socio-economic determinants of health. Good employment can contribute to positive physical and mental health, financial security, social inclusion and a sense of purpose.
- 1.2 The relationship also operates in the other direction. Poor health can make it more difficult for people to access work, remain in employment or progress. This can reduce household income, increase isolation and contribute to widening inequalities.
- 1.3 Supporting people to access and sustain appropriate employment is therefore both a health priority and an economic priority. It requires coordinated action across health services, public health, employment support, skills provision, economic development, employers and the voluntary and community sector.

2 The Strategic Partnership for Health and Economy

- 2.1 SPHE was established in October 2024 to provide a strategic forum connecting health and economic development across Kent and Medway. Its membership includes representatives from local government, public health, NHS organisations, employment and skills services, business, education and the voluntary and community sector.
- 2.2 SPHE is an advisory partnership. It does not hold a budget or replace the formal decision-making responsibilities of individual partner organisations. Its purpose is to provide collaboration, strategic alignment and shared leadership across an area in which responsibilities and resources sit across several organisations.

- 2.3** On the health side, SPHE now reports into the Kent Health and Wellbeing Board as one of the partnerships supporting the Board's work on prevention, inequalities and the wider determinants of health. The SPHE also reports into the Kent and Medway Economic Partnership on the economic development side.
- 2.4** This governance relationship provides an opportunity for the Health and Wellbeing Board to help shape the strategic direction of work across health and the economy, while enabling SPHE to provide a coordinated view of emerging opportunities, delivery challenges and system-wide outcomes.

3 The Need for System Leadership and Alignment

- 3.1** Kent partners are involved in a growing range of programmes, strategies and funding opportunities relating to health, employment, skills and economic participation. These include:
- The Kent and Medway Integrated Work and Health Strategy
 - The Get Kent and Medway Working Plan
 - Connect to Work
 - WorkWell
 - The Kent Marmot Coastal Region
 - Health and Economy Lived Experience Project (HELX)
 - HOPES research collaboration
- 3.2** Each programme has its own objectives, eligibility requirements, governance arrangements, monitoring expectations and delivery timescales. Although the investment and national focus are welcome, the increasing number of initiatives creates a risk that activity becomes fragmented or difficult for residents, employers and professionals to navigate.
- 3.3** Partners have highlighted the importance of considering both capacity and alignment when responding to new initiatives. This includes assessing whether new opportunities complement existing priorities and whether the system has sufficient capacity to engage with and deliver them effectively. Key messaging about support available is targeted at three audiences; residents, employers and system partners and stakeholders.
- 3.4** SPHE can provide the strategic space in which partners collectively consider:
- How an opportunity contributes to agreed health and economic priorities
 - Whether it complements or duplicates existing activity
 - How it aligns with the needs of particular places and communities
 - What capacity and resources would be required
 - Whether the proposed activity can be sustained
 - How outcomes and impact will be demonstrated
 - How learning can be shared across the system
- 3.5** This does not mean that SPHE would control individual programmes or funding decisions. Its role is to help partners see the whole system, make informed connections and use collective resources as effectively as possible.

4 Current Areas of Activity

4.1 Partnership leadership and governance

SPHE's co-chairing arrangements bring together leadership across public health, local government, social enterprise, employment and business. This is supported through a core group, which helps coordinate activity, shape agendas and maintain momentum between wider partnership meetings, supporting SPHE's role as the place where partners build a coherent narrative across health, work and inclusive growth.

4.2 Integrated Work and Health Strategy

The Kent and Medway Integrated Work and Health Strategy provides a shared framework for improving and integrating support for employers and residents, particularly people with long-term health conditions or disabilities who need support to start, stay and succeed in work. It is structured around four aspirations: building employer confidence; developing skills and training; taking a person-centred approach; and supporting a healthy, thriving workforce.

Progress includes:

- Mapping more than 800 work and health resources across nine areas of support, with information being organised through Joy for residents, ReferKent for referrers and the Kent and Medway Growth Hub for employers.
- Developing an employer engagement plan and employer support pack to provide clearer and more coordinated information.
- Expanding employer-focused content, case studies and resources through the Kent and Medway Growth Hub (central source of business support information and advice funded by government).
- Supporting the implementation of WorkWell and developing an approach to evaluate the strategy's impact.

4.3 Get Kent and Medway Working Plan

The Get Kent and Medway Working Plan provides a shared framework for reducing economic inactivity and improving employment outcomes across Kent and Medway. It brings together employment, health and skills activity around five themes: personalised support for individuals; coordinated employer engagement; training and work supply; wider determinants such as housing, transport and digital inclusion; and stronger system working.

Progress includes:

- Progressing NEET provision mapping to improve understanding of available support, gaps and referral pathways for young people.
- Supporting the rollout of employment provision through community and public service settings, including GP practices, Youth Hubs, family hubs and gateways.
- Strengthening links between housing, health, skills and employment following the Housing, Skills and Employment Partnership event.
- Planning a further Health, Work and Skills Summit for February 2027, with a stronger focus on employer engagement.

4.4 Connect to Work

Connect to Work is a voluntary supported employment programme that helps people facing barriers to employment to find and sustain suitable work. It

supports both people who are out of work and those who need help to remain in employment, including people with disabilities, long-term health conditions, neurodivergence, caring responsibilities, housing instability or experience of the justice system. Participants receive personalised support from employment specialists, including intensive in-work support and engagement with employers. The programme will support more than 9,000 residents over five years.

4.5 Marmot Coastal Region

The Kent Marmot Coastal Region continues to provide the place-based framework for aligning work and health activity with the communities experiencing the greatest inequalities. The Marmot Accelerator Programme will test approaches to support people into education and employment and build evidence about what works, while avoiding duplication with existing programmes.

SPHE can help connect this evidence to employer engagement, workforce wellbeing, lived experience and employment support activity.

4.6 WorkWell

WorkWell is planned to go live in November 2026. The service will use a community and primary care model, with WorkWell coaches providing early, lower-intensity support for people whose health is affecting their employment. The first year will focus on musculoskeletal conditions, with a mental health pathway to follow.

4.7 Health and Economy Lived Experience roles

The Health and Economy Lived Experience roles, known as HELX, are being recruited, trained and embedded within SPHE. Eight representatives are fully engaged, with training and further recruitment under way. HELX representatives have already contributed to the design of WorkWell.

SPHE agreed that lived experience should become a regular part of its agenda. The approach will provide both targeted feedback on specific programmes and broader insight into barriers, gaps and people's experience of the system. SPHE will also capture how this input changes decisions and delivery, helping to build evidence for effective lived experience leadership.

4.8 HOPES research collaboration

HOPES, Health of our young people for employment success, is a collaborative NIHR initiative involving Canterbury Christ Church University and partners across Kent and Medway. It is focused on preventing young people from becoming not in education, employment or training and improving pathways into employment.

HOPES demonstrates the value of SPHE as a bridge between research, lived experience, business insight and delivery. Its evidence can inform the Integrated Work and Health Strategy, the Get Kent and Medway Working Plan, Marmot activity and future interventions for young people.

5 Added Value Through System Leadership

- 5.1** SPHE occupies a unique position between the health and economic systems. Its added value is not principally in delivering individual services, but in providing the shared leadership, connections and direction needed for the whole system to work more effectively. The breadth and pace of activity across health, employment and skills makes this coordinating role increasingly important.
- 5.2** SPHE adds value through system leadership by:
- Maintaining a shared overview of major programmes, initiatives, funding opportunities and referral routes
 - Clarifying the purpose of different programmes and how residents, employers and professionals move between them
 - Aligning delivery with the Integrated Work and Health Strategy, the Get Kent and Medway Working Plan, Marmot and place-based priorities
 - Using HELX and wider lived experience to sense-check strategy, communications and programme design
 - Connecting employer insight, research and delivery, including learning from HOPES
 - Identifying duplication, gaps, capacity pressures and opportunities for joint action
 - Developing shared outcomes and evidence so that partners can demonstrate collective impact
- 5.3** This leadership role will not replace the governance or accountability of individual programmes. It will enable the Health and Wellbeing Board and partners to understand the combined picture, focus on issues requiring collective action and make better use of the investment and expertise already present across Kent and Medway.
- 5.4** The immediate priority is to translate a large and changing portfolio of activity into a cohesive system narrative that is clear for residents, employers, referrers and decision-makers, while retaining a strong focus on good work as a determinant of health and on reducing inequalities.
- 5.5** Through this role, SPHE can also help the system assess its collective capacity to respond effectively to new funding opportunities, avoid disconnected short-term projects and promote collective accountability for sustainable outcomes.
- 5.6** SPHE can therefore help the Health and Wellbeing Board move from oversight of individual initiatives towards a clearer understanding of their combined contribution to health, wellbeing and inclusive economic participation.

6 Outcomes and Impact

- 6.1** A stronger emphasis on outcomes will be central to the next phase of SPHE's work. The partnership will seek to demonstrate not only the activity taking place, but the difference that joined-up working makes for residents, employers and the wider system.

- 6.2** A shared outcomes approach could include:
- Improved access to appropriate employment and health support
 - Increased numbers of people entering or remaining in good quality work
 - Improved coordination between services and referral pathways
 - Increased employer confidence in recruiting and retaining people with health conditions or disabilities
 - Improved reach into communities experiencing poorer health and employment outcomes
 - Evidence that interventions are reducing inequalities
 - Evidence of duplication being avoided and resources being better aligned
 - Learning that can inform future commissioning, funding and policy decisions
- 6.3** The framework will need to recognise that SPHE's contribution is often one of influence, alignment and enabling action across organisations. Measures should therefore capture both direct programme outcomes and the value created by stronger system coordination.

7 Next Steps

- 7.1** Subject to the views of the Health and Wellbeing Board, SPHE will:
- Develop a clearer system leadership narrative for health, work and inclusive growth
 - Maintain a shared overview of the principal strategies, programmes, funding streams and referral routes across the system
 - Strengthen alignment with Marmot and place-based health inequalities work
 - Develop a proportionate shared outcomes and evidence framework
 - Identify opportunities to simplify pathways for residents, employers and professionals
 - Embed HELX lived experience insight as a regular input to priorities, delivery and evaluation
 - Connect evidence from HOPES, Marmot, programme evaluation and lived experience, and provide the Board with future updates on collective impact
- 7.2** The Board's support will help SPHE establish a clearer mandate to convene partners, highlight where alignment is required and make the case for collective action.

8 Financial Implications

- 8.1** There are no direct financial implications arising from the recommendations in this report.
- 8.2** Individual programmes and funding proposals will remain subject to their own financial approval, commissioning and governance arrangements.

- 8.3** SPHE's coordinating role may help partners identify opportunities to align resources, reduce duplication and make more effective use of available funding.

9 Legal Implications

- 9.1** There are no direct legal implications arising from this report. Any future commissioning, data-sharing or funding arrangements will be considered through the relevant governance processes.

10 Equalities Implications

- 10.1** SPHE's work has a strong focus on reducing inequalities associated with poor health, disability, unemployment, insecure work and socio-economic disadvantage.
- 10.2** Individual programmes will undertake equality impact assessment where required. The partnership will also seek to understand whether collective activity is reaching the communities experiencing the greatest barriers and poorest outcomes.

11 Data Protection Implications

- 11.1** There are no direct data protection implications arising from this report. Any future proposals involving personal information, data sharing or digital technology will be subject to the appropriate data protection assessment and governance processes.

12 Conclusion

- 12.1** Kent has a significant opportunity to improve residents' health and wellbeing by strengthening the connection between health, employment, skills and economic development.
- 12.2** However, individual programmes will not achieve the required system change in isolation. Stronger alignment, shared evidence and collective leadership are needed to ensure that investment translates into accessible pathways, sustainable outcomes and reduced inequalities.
- 12.3** SPHE provides the partnership infrastructure through which this can happen. With the support of the Health and Wellbeing Board, it can step more confidently into this leadership space, bringing partners together around a shared ambition for a healthier, more inclusive and economically active Kent.

13. Recommendation(s):

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14. Contact details

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