

COUNTY COUNCIL

Wednesday 17 June 2020

**Question by Paul Bartlett to Mike Hill,
Cabinet Member for Community & Regulatory Services**

Kent Community Warden Service (KCWS) is a recognised and highly valued service to Kent's communities, helping to create stronger and safer communities. The service forms a key part of KCC's response to its statutory responsibilities delivering a frontline response to local issues in partnership with the others. KCWS responds to local issues including preventing crime and scams, supporting vulnerable residents, tackling social isolation and leading community development activities. The current COVID-19 pandemic, the demands and need for the service have never been greater.

Does the portfolio holder join with me in welcoming the plans to strengthen the service and can he share with colleagues some of the steps that will be taken?

Answer

As the Cabinet Member, I have sought and therefore enthusiastically welcomed the plans to strengthen the Kent Community Warden Service. This is a service which I have championed over many years as a hugely flexible resource providing invaluable support to communities across Kent.

I would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge the splendid work of our Community Wardens during this pandemic. The Wardens have been hard at work every day helping residents cope with the impact of COVID-19. Colleagues may have already heard about some of the really good examples of the work that Wardens have undertaken in their communities and alongside the local community hubs to ensure that the vulnerable have the essential food supplies and medical prescriptions that they need at this time.

It is timely therefore that a proposed decision will seek to provide funding to expand their number. Once this has been implemented, we will start to recruit and train more Community Wardens as soon as possible. It is our intention that some will be on the streets and operational by the end of the year. Alongside this, we will also be updating the Community Wardens' job descriptions to accurately reflect the role they carry out and improving the service structure and the career progression within the service so that we can attract and retain the very best staff. We will also be ensuring that the Wardens have the appropriate tools, training and support to undertake their roles effectively including developing and utilising new technology and software to support delivery of the service. Additionally, we will be improving our communications to allow better engagement with the public and make the service even more accessible.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Wednesday 17 June 2020

**Question by Mike Angell to Susan Carey,
Cabinet Member for Environment**

Can the Cabinet Member please update the Council on the progress being made in educating magistrates on the harm fly-tipping causes and the cost to the taxpayer for its removal?

Answer

In Kent it is the District and Borough councils that have the statutory responsibility to deal with fly-tipping. However, KCC suffers from fly-tipping on both its highways and other land and is committed to working with the Districts and Boroughs to combat this environmental crime.

KCC took part in a Waste Enforcement Advisor meeting with DEFRA on the 13th March where it was agreed that a national strategy would be developed on fly-tipping with practitioner input. It is intended to engage with the Sentencing Council to amend sentencing guidance for magistrates to ensure that they are aware of local fixed penalty levels for these offences. DEFRA's Waste Regulation and Crime unit are currently preparing a Fly-tipping Toolkit which they committed to developing in the Government's Resource and Waste Strategy. The toolkit will cover 'How to present robust cases to the courts to ensure tougher penalties'. DEFRA has engaged directly with KCC's Waste Enforcement Advisor to gain insight from Kent, specifically where successful outcomes have been achieved at magistrate's court but also where there may be barriers.

Whilst it is positive that DEFRA is taking a national approach to this issue, KCC is also directly supporting the Kent Resource Partnership (KRP) in raising awareness of environmental crime within Kent to the Magistrates Association, the aim is to encourage larger fines or sentences consistent with new national guidance.

In order to ensure we have the baseline data to approach the Magistrates Association with clear facts, the Kent Resource Partnership requested of each of the 12 District and Borough councils' details of all fly-tipping prosecutions for 2019/20. This data request included details of each incident (size, type, location, type of vehicle) as well as the enforcement actions taken (i.e. level of fine, additional costs, victim surcharge etc). This data is currently being collated by the KRP and will be discussed at the Kent Environmental Crime Practitioners Working Group (KECPWG) on 23rd June, where the approach to the Magistrates Association will be agreed by all partners that attend the group. This is likely to take the form of a formal letter sent from the KRP, with the request of a meeting to discuss.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Wednesday 17 June 2020

Question by Trudy Dean to Richard Long
Cabinet Member for Education and Skills

Could the Cabinet Member please say what proportion of Kent children from poorer backgrounds have received adequate food, including free school meals and food bank provision, since the March school closures, and include in the answer details of what support will be available to them over the next three months?

Answer

The Local Authority does not hold this detailed information as the arrangements for the provision of food for eligible pupils has been put in place by national government for implementation by schools locally. Schools hold this information about the provision they have made in the context of their local communities and parental preference. This will not include any formally recorded information on the use of food banks.

To monitor attendance, KCC has sent out a daily request for information to all schools in Kent. On two separate occasions this has specifically included a question on whether schools were accessing the national government led scheme for the purchasing of Free School Meals (FSM) vouchers for those children who are eligible. There have been well publicised difficulties with the roll out of this scheme through the government's appointed contractor (Edenred).

Out of a total of 586 schools in Kent, 505 returns were received, and of the 496 which responded on this point, 403 of them had accessed vouchers through Edenred at least once. Many reported problems with logging onto the site, invalid codes and the delay with families receiving the vouchers.

As an alternative or additional means of providing support, many schools, including those which has sought to put provision in place prior to the introduction of the national scheme from government, have used a variety of options including:

- 1) School purchased vouchers or gift cards or provided cards with preloaded credit for particular local or small scale convenience stores as used by parents
- 2) School or MAT used an alternative company of their choosing to secure and distribute vouchers or make weekly food parcel deliveries
- 3) School contracted catering services with their usual supplier
- 4) In house provision, through staff directly employed by the school.

From the returns we received, almost all schools indicated that their families had continued to receive access to free schools meals since the start of lockdown. I say almost all, because 24 suggested this was not the case although their more detailed answers indicated support had been provided but interrupted by the national voucher scheme.

KCC has worked with the three catering suppliers on its framework to ensure that daily meals have been provided to all Looked After Children, Vulnerable children and the children of key workers who have been attending school. All those attending have had access to a meal. These arrangements only cover the 179 schools which purchase catering via this route. During recent times as few as 39 out of those 179 schools have had operational kitchens. Many schools wanted to minimise the number of people on site.

KCC has paid 100% of the cost of FSM based on the numbers of meals served over the preceding 3 months. For those children who have not attended, schools have made a packed lunch available for collection, the use of food parcels or 'hampers', or vouchers either through Edenred or another provider. Many parents have preferred to receive a voucher.

Government has already encouraged schools to move away from using Edenred vouchers and to instead arrange for food parcels to be provided through their own catering arrangements. Schools have been able to reclaim the additional per pupil weekly cost of £3.50 where they have directly purchased vouchers or food parcels (which cost £15 against the £11.50 of FSM funding they receive in their budget). It is not known if government will continue to fund this difference beyond the end of the school term. However, on 16th June the Government announced that it has now extended the FSM programme; and that there will be a Covid Summer Food Fund but the exact details are awaited.

We are also aware that families in need have received help through other routes. Children's Centres were involved with supporting food boxes. Food boxes were distributed on the week our Children's Centre buildings closed where we had some in centres. However, when Children's Centres closed, we stopped being part of the distribution so there are not any recent figures. District Council and community resources are providing these currently.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Wednesday 17 June 2020

**Question by Rob Bird to Roger Gough,
Leader of the Council**

Could the Leader of the Council please comment on KCC's response to the recommendations arising from the Government's 2016 Exercise 'Cygnus' pandemic drill?

Answer

Exercise Cygnus was a national command and control exercise facilitated by Public Health England (PHE) on behalf of the Department of Health and held between 18th – 20th October 2016. The exercise was designed to assess the UK's preparedness and response to a pandemic influenza outbreak and was aimed at responders in Local Resilience Forums (LRFs), NHS England, Public Health England, the Department of Health and other government departments.

Eight LRFs participated in Exercise Cygnus, including the Kent Resilience Forum (KRF). The County Council's Adult Social Care and Emergency Planning teams were actively involved in the KRF element of the exercise and contributed to the subsequent debrief process.

The following three actions for KCC (and Medway Council and PHE) were agreed at the local Exercise Cygnus Structured Debrief:

- 1. Review all plans used in the exercise using the feedback from the workshops and debrief;*
- 2. Validate plans via a table-top exercise; and*
- 3. Have a public communication plan to ensure they are aware of what would be happening during an incident of this nature.*

Actions 1. and 2 are both emergency planning standard practice for the County Council, while action 3 is addressed through KCC's Crisis Communication Plan.

The national PHE Exercise Cygnus Report contained one 'lesson identified' aimed at Department of Health but with some specific relevance to social care and hence KCC services:

"A Strategic approach to mapping social care priorities. Department of Health should work with social care partners to develop a strategic approach for prioritising local authority social care services during a pandemic. The following issues should be considered as part of this planning:

- How the National Quality Board can assist this process*
- How the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) and the voluntary sector can assist with the delivery of services during a pandemic*
- How to carry out a risk assessment of service users to ensure they receive proper support once discharged*

- *A clear articulation of the support that will be required by social care to deliver a response – for example military command and control*
- *Consider relaxation of CQC registration of premises during pandemic”*

The County Council has continued to develop its own local pandemic and business continuity planning informed by learning from Exercise Cygnus and a range of other operational and exercise activity - as evidenced by its level of preparedness for, and proactive response since late January to, the profound challenges presented by COVID-19.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Wednesday 17 June 2020

**Question by George Koowaree to Clair Bell,
Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Public Health**

Would the Cabinet Member please advise how many people are providing home-care services in Kent and include within the answer what proportion of these care workers have been tested for Covid-19, as well as what proportion have access to appropriate PPE?

Answer

Thank you for your question.

There are 219 homecare providers across Kent, with 25 holding a Care and Support in the Home Contract with KCC.

The market has a fluctuating workforce with over 8,000 people delivering the service. Recruitment is an ongoing issue for providers.

Changing government guidance regarding Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) initially created concern regarding available stocks. KCC used its purchasing power to obtain PPE stocks to relieve the pressure on providers experiencing an urgent shortfall in supply.

On 10 April 2020, KCC introduced a process where providers could access emergency supplies via an online portal operated by Kent County Supplies (KCS). The general PPE market provision is recovering, and providers are now able to source adequate supplies from their normal or an alternative supplier.

The Care Quality Commission (CQC) has made COVID-19 testing available to the staff of homecare providers since mid-April. This arrangement is between the provider, staff and their GP. KCC is not notified of the tests taking place or of their respective outcomes; however, KCC and CQC are notified of any positive cases via an online COVID-19 Update Form submitted by providers.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Wednesday 17 June 2020

**Question by Antony Hook to Michael Payne,
Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport**

As long ago as 2015 this Council promised to repair or replace the swing bridge in Faversham so the bridge could once again open and close, providing important access for boats. This promise was repeated by the then Council Leader as recently as last year. Will the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport now set a firm date for repair of the bridge?

Answer

Since last November I have personally visited Faversham on four occasions. Firstly, to inspect the old bridge and the upgrade work to the pedestrian footpath along Flood Lane. Secondly, to see works to the bridge abutments. Thirdly, to view the temporary road bridge being installed, together with a separate and segregated pedestrian bridge. Then on 21 January to attend the reopening ceremony of both these bridges with your Member of Parliament, Helen Whately.

Since then progress has been continued with Kent Highway plans for a permanent replacement. Indeed, consulting engineers have recently been appointed to develop outline designs and to provide further cost analysis.

These commissions cover repairs to the abutments, a replacement bridge deck and footway as well as addressing all the mechanical and electrical requirements.

Whilst these designs are concluded, Kent Highways plan to assess the appropriate operational needs and develop the potential future management and maintenance options.

Kent Highways also remain in discussion with Peel Ports regarding their prevailing responsibilities surrounding the bridge and sluice gates as well as their obligations for dredging.

Hence, whilst Kent Highways continuing to make progress, at this stage, it is not possible to provide a definitive date for the conclusion of the project.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Wednesday 17 June 2020

**Question by Dan Daley to Roger Gough,
Leader of the Council**

Could the Leader please say how local lockdown arrangements are intended to be triggered and carried out in the event of local Covid-19 spikes, and include within his answer what the responsibilities of Kent County, District and Borough Councils are expected to be under such arrangements?

Answer

Thank you for the question Mr Daly.

As we move into the next phase of managing the COVID-19 pandemic, the Test and Trace system, keeping cases as low as possible across the Kent population and the R value below 1 is vitally important if we are to rebuild our Kent economy and protect our people, families and communities from the adverse consequences of COVID-19 infection.

We currently don't have clarity from central government on lockdown powers conveyed to local authorities nor on how local arrangements might be triggered in the event of general rising cases and higher infectivity rates. I understand there are ongoing national discussions in advance of guidance being issued.

Traditionally, outbreak management is based on consensus management with stakeholders and effected parties and there will be an going emphasis on consensus as we manage clusters of COVID-19. In particular, we need the support of the public and members of the public; we need them to adhere, as much as possible to social distancing guidance, to self-isolate and to be tested when symptomatic of COVID-19 and cooperate with the tracing system, or to self-isolate for fourteen days if they are notified as being a close contact with a positive case.

This is the only way we are going to avoid more widespread future cases and the need to impose local, or more national sanctions. Returning to the question of lockdown, we expect guidance to be published nationally and we will ensure this is shared when available.

There is a clearer picture with respect to Outbreak Control Plans. It will be for local authorities, and in particular the Director of Public Health, to develop these plans, which must be in place by the end of this month. These plans will address seven themes, including the management of outbreaks in schools and care homes, ensuring accessibility of local testing and support for vulnerable people who have to self-isolate. County Councils with their public health responsibilities are expected to lead in this area, but to work closely with District Councils, especially given the latter's role in Environmental Health. There must also be a Member-led board to lead effective public communication. Plans will be based on the philosophy of public consent described earlier.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Wednesday 17 June 2020

**Question by Ian Chittenden to Mike Whiting,
Cabinet Member for Economic Development**

Could the Cabinet Member please say when the government provision of an apprenticeship for all young people over 18 without employment is due to start, and include within the answer details of what barriers to success will need to be overcome, based upon KCC's knowledge of Kent businesses?

Answer

The Government has announced it is considering changes to apprenticeship training, the apprenticeship levy and funding for training more generally in order:

- to help young people find the right job opportunities in an economic environment suffering from the impact of COVID-19, and
- to make reforms to the apprenticeship scheme to respond to the employers who say they can offer jobs to young people with the right skills.

We look forward to the Government's announcement and we shall respond positively and constructively to the consultation which may follow.

Kent County Council, as a significant employer of young people in Kent, has made the most of the current apprenticeship scheme but we are very aware that many small and medium sized companies have found the arrangements difficult.

The prospect of a very large increase in unemployment caused by the pandemic is one of the key areas that our Kent and Medway Economic Recovery Strategy aims to tackle. Mr Chittenden will have seen from the consultation draft of the Strategy that accelerating employment and supporting the labour market in Kent is one of its five priority areas for action.

We are working closely with employers and Higher Education and Further Education training providers to develop this action plan and we shall fully take into account any new apprenticeship arrangements that the Government will announce.

Mr Chittenden also asks about our engagement with Kent's businesses.

He will know that business representatives are in a majority on the board of the Kent and Medway Economic Partnership and its meetings regularly discuss skills and the need to improve the prospects of young people in the jobs market.

Many businesses engage in the work of the Skills Guilds where specific issues of concern about the current apprenticeship scheme have been discussed. For example, many SME employers have expressed a general lack of understanding how they should access training and funding for that training. Non-levy paying employers have had to set up a digital account which they say is time consuming and difficult to navigate.

During the lock-down forced on us by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Kent and Medway COVID-19 Business Support Helpline was set up, funded by KCC and District Councils. Callers to the Help Line indicate that the immediate concern of most Kent's businesses has been cash-flow. The measures introduced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, including the scheme which pays 80 percent of the costs of furloughed employees, have gone a very long way to meeting the crisis in the short term, and this has been acknowledged by the callers.

KCC will play its full part in the Government's measures which are being put in place for the national economic recovery and I hope Mr Chittenden will wholeheartedly support the Recovery Strategy we are implementing in Kent.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Wednesday 17 June 2020

**Question by Karen Constantine to Roger Gough,
Leader of the Council**

Thanet as you know is the poorest part of Kent, with child poverty running at 35% across Thanet as a whole and 50% in one ward in my Division. Unemployment has risen from 5% - 9% and youth unemployment is the highest in the South east at 13.6%. We need action to ensure economic survival for our people and businesses.

Can KCC recommit the Parkway allocation of £17.8M or equivalent into ensuring the survival of Ramsgate's economy?

Answer

KCC absolutely recognises the significant social and economic pressures in Thanet, and indeed those pressures are prominent in many of Kent's coastal communities. This has been intensified by the COVID-19 crisis, not least its impact on sectors such as the visitor economy and creative industries, on which Thanet and Ramsgate, is dependent.

In response to the crisis, the Kent and Medway COVID-19 Business Support Helpline was quickly established by the end of March, funded by KCC and District Councils and delivered by the Kent & Medway Growth Hub. To the end of May, the Business Support Helpline had responded to 6,553 calls from businesses needing advice and support with an additional 1,486 online webchats. Satisfaction with the Helpline is currently at 96% with a 100% recommendation rate.

Recovery planning across the organisation is underway and economic recovery is a key priority for KCC and our District partners, including Thanet. A draft Economic Recovery Plan has been developed and was shared with KCC Members on 28 May, with the central themes of bringing forward key infrastructure, support for skills and active labour market measures and a focus on key sectors that matter for the Kent, and Thanet economies.

In Thanet, KCC's investment in the Turner Contemporary in Margate is well-known, and independent research shows that the Turner Contemporary has benefited the local economy by £70 million through attracting visitors to the area, job creation and the impact on the local supply chain. The development of the creative industries have not been restricted to Margate, and Ramsgate has seen important development in this sector. That is, of course, a sector that has been especially hard hit by the COVID-19 crisis, but it is also, as I have indicated, central to the Economic Recovery Plan. KCC also works closely with Thanet District Council to support their Economic Growth Strategy.

In relation to the social issues that Mrs Constantine has highlighted, Kent Support and Assistance Service (KSAS) has in recent months made 391 awards of support to individuals and families in Thanet, almost twice the level seen in any other Kent District.

Thanet Parkway is a large-scale, long-term project and the proposed KCC funding is from our capital programme, meaning we would have to borrow this money. The Cabinet decision taken earlier this year was clear that £17.81m would be the maximum amount available for this scheme. It is simply not the case that this is monies readily available and could be reallocated elsewhere, and in particular to revenue expenditure. The Executive and the officers working on this project are committed to seeking alternative sources for funding Thanet Parkway and I am as cognisant as anyone of the severe financial pressures that the County Council will face in the coming years, along with our existing levels of borrowing and indeed, the impact of any future borrowing. We are carrying out a review of our capital programme in light of the pressures put upon us by the current crisis.

KCC is committed to helping the survival and renewal of Kent's local economy, including Ramsgate and this is a priority for us.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Wednesday 17 June 2020

**Question by Ida Linfield to Sue Chandler,
Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services**

On April 24th emergency government legislation was introduced to “relax local authorities’ statutory duties” towards vulnerable children. This legislation lasts at least until September this year despite no time being given for Parliament to debate the issue. Amendments were made to 10 regulations regarding children’s social care, which is now considered by national children’s charities as having removed or ‘weakened’ 65 vital legal protections for children in care and so stripped most safeguards for vulnerable children during the coronavirus pandemic. These charities and other local authorities are reporting that there has been that this has resulted in an “alarming series of cases” where children have been trafficked into human slavery and targeted by gangs of criminals with “high” and “significant” numbers of children being reported as missing.

Will the Cabinet Member for Integrated Children’s Services not only join me in condemning this legislation – especially as we all share the responsibility of being corporate parents – but also say how this legislation has affected children in Kent and precisely how many children in care have gone missing since April?

Answer

The protection of vulnerable children and young people is at the heart of the work of Integrated Children’s Services and any change to legislation, whenever it occurs which negatively impacts on the lives of these children is neither welcomed or desirable on a long term basis; however, this was put in place in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our children’s services in Kent have taken the approach during the COVID-19 pandemic that our substantive statutory duties will be adhered to when the circumstances are safe and appropriate. However, the relaxation of the 10 substantive regulations have been welcomed by the Service in that they allowed for a high degree of flexibility to work with children, young people and their families when without them it would not have been possible to fulfil the duties as previously set out.

Kent staff have used the amendments in legislation for a variety of reasons. The ability to undertake virtual rather than face to face visits was necessary, both due to a lack of staff availability to undertake face to face visits and as a result of families who were unwilling or unable to have visits. There continues to be a small cohort of both staff and families who are shielding and not able to work outside the home or receive visits. Flexibilities in the regulations have enabled Child Protection and Children in Care reviews to continue and for adoption and fostering preparation groups to take place, all on a virtual platform and with the appropriate decision-making processes in place.

Feedback from young people in particular has told us that they have welcomed the greater use of virtual meetings, prospective foster carers and adopters have continued to be recruited using virtual panels and training courses, and more partner agencies than ever

before have been able to take part in child protection and looked after reviews by being able to connect in the virtual space.

I am pleased to say that the picture in Kent is very different to that outlined by Mrs Linfield in her question and that we have in fact seen a reduction in the number of missing episodes for all Kent children, including those in care. In the six-week period since the amended regulations were introduced on 24th April there have been 179 missing episodes involving 69 of Kent's children in care. This is a reduction of 33% in missing episodes compared to the six-week period prior to the commencement of lockdown. Of the 69 young people missing, all but three have returned to their placements.

We have reviewed the reasons for this reduction to see if there is any learning that can be carried forward. Children and foster carers have reported that in many cases the fact that there are more activities going on in the home, along with home schooling, has resulted in children feeling safer, more involved and ultimately led to greater placement stability. It was also more difficult for young people to go missing to meet up with friends in open spaces such as parks, as for some time these were closed. As a result of the need to reduce face to face visits, social care staff have been creative in the ways that they have found to engage with young people via social media and we are committed to maintain different ways of working with and staying in contact with children and young people in the future.

We continue to work closely with the Police and there have been no reported increases in respect of exploitation and trafficking since the regulations were relaxed on 24th April. However, for some vulnerable children, the increased amount of unstructured free time due to the lack of formal schooling, has raised opportunities for sexual and criminal exploitation such as county lines and opportunities for grooming. We continue to remain vigilant and are aware that, whilst referrals to the Front Door have reduced, Voluntary Sector organisations have seen a marked increase in calls during the lockdown period.

I would therefore like to reassure Mrs Linfield that the Local Authority has continued to meet its statutory duties and that any use of the amended regulations has been to find ways to meet them in a more effective way given the restrictions within which staff have had to work.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Wednesday 17 June 2020

**Question by Martin Whybrow to Susan Carey,
Cabinet Member for Environment**

What Member involvement and communication has there been around the decision to make the government funded electric vehicle charging point scheme available only to a selected subset of town and parish councils, rather than available for all to apply for, as originally intended?

Answer

As Cabinet Member for Environment, I asked officers to advise on an approach that would target the funding to parishes which best met the criteria for the grant.

The initial Government funding for this scheme is £60,000; a relatively small amount to allocate across over 300 Kent parishes. It would have been misleading to encourage them all to go to the trouble and expense of applying and raise expectations when so few would be able to benefit.

The grant was discussed at the most recent Kent Environment Strategy Cross Party Member Group including the approach to ask officers for technical advice on how funding could be allocated.

Whilst the first tranche of Parishes has been identified and recommendations made, no parishes have yet been contacted.

Members will continue to be informed of progress on EV charging points either through the Cross-Party Member Group or the Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Wednesday 17 June 2020

**Question by Paul Cooper to Clair Bell,
Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Public Health**

What has the situation been in Kent's care homes during the Covid-19 outbreak, and how are we managing the situation going forwards?

Answer

Thank you for your question.

In Kent, we have worked closely with the Care home sector, and indeed with all of our providers of social care, listening closely to what they have been saying to us, offering various kinds of support, including advice and guidance finance and material.

Early on in the emergency we instigated weekly meetings with representatives of the provider market, including roundtables chaired by the Leader of the Council, and through this we could understand and quickly respond to their needs. Through an early survey it became apparent that a key area where we could support was in the provision of PPE.

We recognised that to ensure supplies reached our providers quickly it would be necessary for us to create our own distribution system, utilising the expertise of Kent Commercial Services and our Strategic Commissioning department. We have delivered over 4.4 million pieces of PPE and underwritten over £3 million of PPE purchases.

We have worked to ensure that additional funds were quickly available to our providers of social care and have to date paid an additional £13.5 million to our providers to aid with the increased costs of delivery that have come about due to COVID-19.

Whilst Kent has the highest number of registered care homes in the South East, with over 550 providers, it has had, according to the Office for National Statistics the lowest rate of outbreaks in the South East, at around 29% of homes having had an outbreak.

And whilst every outbreak, and every death in a care home is tragic, without the excellent work of our providers, their staff and the staff at KCC we could have had a much more challenging picture in Kent.

The words of the Kent Integrated Care Alliance (KICA) included in our Kent Local Care Plan show the value of our approach:

"KICA has welcomed the collaborative approach KCC has taken in supporting the social care providers across all parts of the sector in Kent. We have been able to work closely together to ensure that financial support was accessed swiftly at the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus to all contracted providers through the additional 2-week invoice payment which was received without undue process or unnecessary delay. Providers have also been supported with PPE supplies via the KCS portal, which has ensured almost immediate access to vital equipment when normal provider supply chains were struggling to source and deliver adequate supplies".

Through the government's Infection Control Fund, we also have the opportunity to develop a new relationship with care homes in Kent. Kent has received £18.8m through this fund and is required to passport 75% of it to all care homes in Kent based on the number of bed spaces. This includes many providers (over 100) with whom we have had no previous relationship.

Going forward we will maintain our close work with our providers, continuing to engage with the Trade Associations on a regular basis, and listening to how their needs are changing. We will carry on with our provision of guidance to our homes and ensure that their challenges and needs are represented to government, for example through ensuring that the testing system is working effectively for them.

We will continue to supply emergency PPE if it is needed, but this should be limited as normal supply routes are restored, and the government Clipper service for emergency PPE is now established.

One area of concern that has been raised through our regular conversations with providers is the sustainability of the market, with a challenge around below average occupancy of homes brought about by a number of factors, including a reluctance of people to enter a care home during the current period, or relatives preferring to provide care during the lockdown period.

We will continue to monitor the situation as the lockdown eases, maintaining our close contact with providers, providing ready support, and quick access to any additional finances that are made available from the government, including the second tranche of the Infection Control Fund in July.