

From: Sarah Hammond, Interim Corporate Director – Children, Young People and Education

To: Cabinet

Subject: **Reconnect: Kent Children and Young People Programme - Delivery Beyond August 2022**

Classification: **Unrestricted**

Past Pathway of report: Previous reports to Cabinet 15th March and 24th June 2021, leading to decision 21/00035 and decision: 21/00044.

Future Pathway of report: Cabinet key decision

Electoral Division: All

Summary:

The Cabinet decisions regarding Reconnect (21/00035 and 21/00042) envisaged that the programme would run until 31st August 2022. This paper proposes that delivery of some activity be extend within the current financial year, to be completed by 31 March 2023.

Recommendation(s):

Cabinet is asked to agree to:

- i. commissioning and delivery of activity within the Reconnect: Kent Children and Young People Programme can continue until 31 March 2023; and
- ii. further work be undertaken considering the potential for a successor brand to Reconnect to support capacity building in the VCS linked to the vision of Reconnect.

1. Background

- 1.1 The County Council recognises that the Covid-19 pandemic has affected substantially the lives of all Kent residents. All Members have been united in expressing their concern about the particular impact on young people, who saw every aspect of their life and development affected. In March 2021 Cabinet approved the creation of the Reconnect: Kent Children and Young People Programme, with its aims and objectives being approved in June 2021, together with approval of its £10m budget.
- 1.2 The urgency to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic on the County's children and young people was captured by its agreed end date of 31st August 2022. Accordingly, the programme has focused on working with hundreds of organisations, clubs, partners and individuals to secure delivery of a wide range of support, activities, and new opportunities for children and young people.

- 1.3 As we move towards the anticipated end date, it is important to review whether the original decision, which was made in good faith in an uncertain international context, should be implemented or adjusted.

2. Current Context

- 2.1 The local, national and international position is much different from that of March and June last year. Covid restrictions have eased, but the supply and cost of food, energy and goods, the availability of labour to fill vacancies, and the war in Ukraine continue to impact on children and families, and the capacity of the organisations working with Reconnect to support them. The path out of the pandemic during 2021/22 was not quick or certain, with new variants like Omicron affecting both children and young people and those seeking to support them.
- 2.2 Reconnect was established to be a County Council led, community-based programme. It has delivered, and continues to deliver, a wide variety of support and opportunities for children and young people, thanks to the overwhelming response from clubs and organisations, large and small, across the County. The feedback from individual children and families received by the providing organisations is truly heart-warming and demonstrates the difference these organisations are making. It is a symbiotic relationship, with organisations being supported by Reconnect, while supporting Reconnect as a brand, a call to arms.
- 2.3 In accordance with the Cabinet decisions, Reconnect has focused on securing delivery of support and activity by 31 August 2022. As we near this end point it is worth reviewing this decision. The context surrounding this is:
- I. Budget – the programme (at the time of writing) has £1.4m of uncommitted funding.
 - II. Capacity – providers (commissioned services, the VCS, schools) are all reporting they are at capacity, struggling to recruit further staff, and continuing to experience staff absences. We are receiving requests to allow providers to delay delivery until the autumn.
 - III. Timescales – it is increasingly implausible to commission further activity for summer 2022, and thus use the uncommitted funds in a prudent and effective way to support C&YP.
 - IV. Reconnect’s Partnership Board has proposed uncommitted funding be used to continue to deliver activity until 31 March 2023.

3. Needs

- 3.1 The five Reconnect themes provide a sensible framework to consider support needed post 31 August to ensure the impacts of the pandemic on C&YP are mitigated as quickly as possible.

I. Learning Missed:

All indications are that pupils who are regularly attending school are, in the main, confident that their schools are addressing the learning they have

missed, and that if they have issues, they can speak with school staff. Schools have additional resources via catch up premium and access to tuition to continue to meet the needs of the majority. The ongoing external aspects of learning missed that would benefit from financial support and extending beyond 31 August are:

- Increased capacity focused on non-attendance and re-engagement.
- School readiness and language development.

II. Health and happiness:

Since January 2022 we have seen an increase in the demand for counselling and mentoring support, with KCHFT reporting a 12% increase in demand every 3-4 months for counselling services, and the mentoring capacity commissioned by Reconnect being utilised before the end of contract periods. DfE (January 2022) found half of secondary school staff felt pupil mental health was their biggest challenge, with wellbeing needing to be prioritised before academic interventions could be effective. We have commissioned further capacity, as much as we can currently find, to address current needs and tackle waiting lists. However, the support need will continue post 31st August.

III. Economic wellbeing:

This summer pupils will take exams. While there have been adjustments to curriculum coverage and greater guidance about the likely areas covered by exam questions, there remain some uncertainties regarding how well pupils will perform and how those most affected by the pandemic will not be disadvantaged. The delivery of, and accessibility of, independent advice and guidance to pupils has been impacted, which may mean a greater number of YP have not selected appropriate post-16 pathways, with the resultant dropout in the autumn term. We are beginning to receive reports that year 11 refugee children are not able to find suitable post-16 provision, because of the entry requirements of the sector. The availability of alternative curriculum provision at this point will be critical to prevent NEETs.

IV. Sport, activities and the outdoors:

Physical health remains an area of focus, but from a Reconnect perspective the needs post 31st August are less funding related. There has been good work, for example the current leisure centre offers and a lot of the activity funded through Reconnect Locality Grants supported this theme.

V. Friends, family and community:

The activities in this theme have promoted opportunities for C&YP to spend time with friends and family and engage in a range of activities. An area of ongoing focus is opportunities for C&YP with disabilities, including short breaks. This group was disproportionately affected during the lockdown periods, and the vulnerability of many restricted their opportunities for much longer, placing significant pressures on families. There continues to be a role

for Reconnect to provide additional support to refugee communities in the County.

4. Options

1. Do nothing - Reconnect ends as planned. Surplus funding is returned to the Covid reserve. Existing services to flex to meet the additional demands having had the advantages of time and the mitigation of Reconnect to ensure they are well placed to do so.
2. Commissioning and delivery continue post 31st August – this option continues to keep Reconnect’s resources focused on delivery of the summer programme, before being diverted to further commissioning. Delivery would need to be extended to “by” 31 March 2023 at the latest. Focus areas for commissioning may include:

Area of Commission	Pass to (existing service area)
School attendance support	PIAS
School readiness and language development	Education
Mentoring/counselling	Strategic Commissioning (Children’s), and Open Access
Provision for NEETs/refugees post-16	Strategic Commissioning (Children’s) and Education
Disabled children – including short breaks	Strategic Commissioning (Children’s) and Children with Disabilities Service

5. Capacity building – VCS, including Reconnect Brand and Invicta Youth Forum

5.1 It is welcomed that some providers have expressed the view that having the Reconnect brand to work within has been helpful. It has provided a clear statement of what people are collectively trying to achieve, made it easier to explain what they are doing and the context, and has helped drive greater collaboration between providers. The vision of Reconnect was “an enhanced and networked approach to creating opportunities for children and young people in their communities. Organisations and communities will thrive, joined around the shared value of generating meaningful impact and sustainable change for children and young people”. The comments indicate Reconnect has achieved some, if not all of this vision. Some providers have suggested a brand, such as Reconnect, should continue, so as to provide the clarity of purpose and explanation to support ongoing collaboration.

5.2 The County Council’s Civil Society Strategy indicates our commitment to supporting the VCS to grow and develop. Reconnect has been seeking to do this, for example commissioning Kent Community Foundation to run bid writing training, and TEP to deliver safeguarding training. These are small,

but effective contributions. We are currently looking to provide resource packs to small independent youth clubs, typically run by local volunteers with contributions covering hall hire but little more. It is highly cost effective to make these small but important gestures of support to sustain local organisations and ensure they continue delivering effectively and safely.

- 5.3 The suggestion that Reconnect has provided a banner that has galvanised providers behind a single cause should not be overlooked. The Civil Society Strategy found 40% of organisations had worked more with third-party organisations during the pandemic and wanted to continue to do so. The question is whether a successor brand to Reconnect, such as “Connect: Kent Children and Young People” could continue to encourage providers to work together, and what might this look like? Its aims and mission would be different, but it would be a logical progression. A new brand, while requiring building, would signify a change in mission and avoid public expectation that free offers provided by Reconnect will continue to be available.
- 5.4 Similarly, the concept of the County leading or supporting a County-wide Youth Forum has been raised. Virtual working has made it easier to convene such forums, potentially making them more effective and impactful than when such forums were held face to face. There are significant resources in the VCS which are locked within individual organisations. The better sharing of resources would unlock a significant expansion in opportunities for C&YP across Kent.
- 5.5 If Reconnect continues until 31 March, these issues could be further explored. Some Reconnect funding could be used to provide a capacity building fund.

6. Financial Implications

- 6.1 Currently the majority of staff dedicated to Reconnect have contracts which finish on 31 August 2022. Some, but not all, contracts would need to be extended in order to provide the capacity required to deliver the final commissions. The costs can be covered within the existing budget.

7. Monitoring and Evaluation

- 7.1 The recommendation is to continue to evaluate the impact of Reconnect following 31 August 2022. Final monitoring and evaluation returns are due in September 2022 and should be provided by the majority of funding recipients. The proposal to extend the delivery date has two impacts. The first is a small number of funding recipients have requested to be able to deliver aspects of their work in the autumn term. These aspects may fall outside of formal evaluation. The second is new commissions. It is anticipated that these will be few in number and are likely to be more of something previously commissioned, meaning evaluation of impact already exists. It is proposed to report the impact of Reconnect as planned to both Cabinet and Scrutiny Committees in December 2022.

8. Legal Implications

8.1 There are no fresh legal implications arising from the proposed extension of the delivery date of Reconnect.

9. Equalities Implications

9.1 An equalities impact assessment was completed for the programme. There is nothing obvious from the proposal to extend the delivery date which suggests this needs to be revisited.

10. Recommendations:

Cabinet is asked to agree to:

- i. commissioning and delivery of activity within the Reconnect: Kent Children and Young People Programme can continue until 31 March 2023; and
- ii. further work be undertaken considering the potential for a successor brand to Reconnect to support capacity building in the VCS linked to the vision of Reconnect.

11. Background Documents

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