

From: Mike Hill, Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services

Barbara Cooper, Director of Growth, Environment and Transport

To: Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee – 25 September 2020

Subject: Front-line Community Services in context of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Recovery

Classification: Unrestricted

Electoral Division: All

Summary: This report presents an overview of the activity of front-line services relevant to Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee and their ongoing service delivery in the context of COVID-19 'Recovery' perhaps better described as COVID-19 'steady state'. This report reflects on the summer period and looks forward to the autumn period.

Recommendation(s):

The Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee is asked to note this report.

1. Introduction

1.1 This Cabinet Committee received a detailed verbal presentation on the impact of COVID-19 and lock down across several front-line community services on 8th June 2020. That verbal presentation also touched on early experiences of service delivery in the context of Recovery from a first spike. The Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services then provided a further detailed update as part of his verbal update to this Cabinet Committee on 3rd July 2020.

1.2 COVID-19 continues to require services to work within both a Respond context and a Recovery context, with the possibility of a resumption of national or local lockdowns in some form for the autumn or winter 2020/2021.

2. Community Wardens/Community Safety

2.1 The Kent Community Safety Partnership (KCSP) resumed meeting in July via MS Teams to ensure continued work on statutory partnership activity such as Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHRs) and PCC (Police and Crime Commissioner) Crime Reduction Grant (CRG) project funding work. Several DHRs had been successfully progressed by Kent Community Safety Team in

the spring and dates to re-instate those that were initially postponed were agreed with partners. The Business as Usual engagement at district level Community Safety Partnership meetings has been maintained throughout.

- 2.2 The PCC recently agreed that the KCSP can use its 2020/21 CRG funding allocation to support a range of community safety projects as set out in a business case submitted earlier this year. However, whether all the projects can still be delivered as planned during 2020/21 may be impacted due to partner agencies having to deal with the pandemic. In addition, several projects which received funding in 2019/20 were also put on hold due to the pandemic. In-year changes to the business cases for both 2019/20 and 2020/21 are likely to be required, increasing the KCST workload in managing the project funding and ensuring it is used effectively.
- 2.3 Our wardens have been working closely with Districts/Boroughs as lockdown restrictions have eased and town centres have opened. The priority for reopening was to ensure clear public messaging around social distancing and navigating through town centres. There has also been demand in relation to increased gatherings, where anti-social behaviour and coastal area popularity has required wardens to provide extra visible presence in partnership with other agencies. As lockdown eased and the shielding programme ended, wardens have been able to move away from providing support for essential food and medical needs for vulnerable individuals. A return to BAU is underway, including responding to requests for welfare checks of potentially vulnerable adults referred in by the ASCH for example.
- 2.4 Looking towards the autumn, key KCST deliverables such as training and seminars provided for community safety partners are being adapted for digital/virtual delivery. This year the Kent Community Safety Partnership (KCSP) Conference is being developed with the Kent Resilience Forum around the topic of Community Resilience, and virtual delivery is planned.
- 2.5 This autumn, wardens will continue to adapt their approaches for supporting residents and communities whilst social distancing and restrictions on gatherings continue. Social isolation and loneliness have grown during the lockdown and will persist where residents remain cautious. Tackling this issue was already an objective for the service (and an associated Interreg funded project; Connected Communities) and will remain a priority. Unlike many others in the public, voluntary and community sector, with the notable exception of the NHS and Age Concern, KCWS has been able to expand its pool of volunteers during lockdown. Their activities have been restricted to sharing Public Protection social media messages, but this will broaden as KCWS capacity and social distancing restrictions allow.

3. Country Parks

- 3.1 As has been previously reported to this committee, Country Parks have been open throughout the pandemic, and have been extremely busy since reopening the car parks in May after a six-week closure during the strictest period of lockdown. The summer period saw the major sites full on many days, and both

Kent Police and local district/borough councils supported the service to encourage and enforce responsible parking outside the parks.

- 3.2 The parks, as with all green spaces, experienced a large increase in litter. This led to additional costs for litter collections and warden hours. Play areas reopened at the very end of July, with hand sanitiser available at each one and new, greatly enhanced cleaning regimes. Cafes were reopened for takeaway coffees/food at major sites.
- 3.3 In addition to littering, the team experienced many operational challenges caused by unexpected customer behaviour across all sites, including visitors swimming and tombstoning where it was not safe to do so. Both the Environment Agency and Kent Police again supported the service to promote safe customer behaviour.
- 3.4 Looking to the autumn, the service will be re-opening the cafés as sit in cafés (rather than takeaway) at Shorne and Lullingstone and is exploring options for the re-opening of the visitor centres. These plans are still in development but will be implemented in late September/October to move the country parks onto their next stage of the recovery in a COVID-secure manner. The service is also promoting an adjusted education offer to schools.
- 3.5 The team will also be attending to damaged pathways across the entirety of the estate, caused by visitors observing social distancing and therefore walking intensively along the edges of our trails and paths. The team is currently liaising with parkrun UK to determine whether the ever-popular parkrun will be able to recommence across several of our sites at the end of October

4. Culture and Creative Economy

- 4.1 The Culture and Creative Economy Team led a series of roundtable Zoom discussions throughout the summer with over 100 sector professionals. Chaired by industry leaders, the roundtables were started quickly at the start of lockdown and were welcomed by the sector in enabling creative businesses to share experiences and give each other critical support.
- 4.2 The South East Creatives programme, a European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) funded SELEP wide business support programme remained active over the summer providing business advice, mentoring and grant aid to the creative sector through local hubs. Specialist business advice was made available through the Kent & Medway COVID-19 Business Support Helpline, delivered via Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce.
- 4.3 Looking ahead to this autumn, the roundtable Zoom discussions are continuing with a focus on what the cultural sector needs to support businesses back into the marketplace. Part of this discussion will be about learning from our experiences and looking at different ways of delivering cultural services. Areas to be progressed include developing strong cultural hubs to make new use of buildings to reenergise town centres and developing a practical model for social

prescribing in response to the positive health effects which people in lockdown experienced through engagement with cultural activity.

- 4.4 With ongoing restrictions on social distancing, the sector continues to struggle albeit a small number of outdoor events are beginning to happen but with significantly reduced numbers. A combination of home-delivered resources supported by online tutorials is proving popular and distanced workshops in COVID-19 safe studios have taken place. Theatres are particularly hard hit with distancing meaning audience numbers are too low to make shows viable. Government has agreed to review this in November.

5. Explore Kent

- 5.1 Over the summer, the Explore Kent (EK) service was able to continue with team members working effectively from home. Some commissions, which EK relies upon for its sustainability, were paused, including Old Chalk New Downs, Country Parks marketing and the Kent Downs AONB's Experience project.
- 5.2 Some commissions however operated as Business as Usual, or they were only minimally impeded, such as Walking and Cycling Town Cycle Maps production (in summer 2020 they were created for Dartford, Gravesham, and Tunbridge Wells Borough Councils). Additional cycling and walking route guides were produced for a range of other clients.
- 5.3 EK also provided extensive summer digital content including staycation ideas for residents and visitors to make the most of Kent.
- 5.4 For the next few months, Explore Kent will continue to be engaged in promotion of active travel route improvements as part of the Emergency Active Travel Fund grant KCC received. Working with KCC PROW and Transport Innovation services, Explore Kent is also promoting safe active travel to workplaces and schools using a package of marketing.

6. Libraries, Registration and Archives

- 6.1 During lockdown, LRA focused on its digital service delivery and contacting by phone those users of the home library service and postal loan service to ensure they had regular contact. The service has produced a fuller report on this period including positive feedback from customers who received services at this time. This is Included as Appendix !- LRA lockdown performance report.
- 6.2 Since the Cabinet Committee briefing, the following LRA service recovery steps have been progressed:
- Home library service and postal loan services have restarted deliveries
 - 12 libraries reopened from Monday 13th July. These had an initial offer of:
 - Bookable Public PCs which in July saw 5,275 bookings with 2,141 hours of usage
 - Select and Collect book offer which provides users with access to the service without having to fully come inside a library as it is accepted

that this remains an uncertain time when many people are still nervous of indoor public spaces. Here, customers can request titles that are in that specific library to come and collect or can ask for the staff to select books for them based on their genre or author preferences. July saw 4,432 Select and Collect requests with 19,679 issues.

- A further 12 libraries reopened over the course of week commencing 24th August offering library browsing with social distancing measures in place.
- September also saw the return of the Mobile Library Service with some additional seven libraries reopening across the month,
- The Archive search room reopened for booked appointments on Tuesday 18th September 2020.
- Registration services have made excellent progress on clearing backlogs caused by the lockdown and as of 17th August 2020:
 - Face to Face birth registrations resumed from 17th June and Kent had a backlog of over 4000 births. . By the end of June 2020, the backlog of 4,000 birth registrations had already been reduced by 1,608 and was cleared by the end of August.
 - Welcomed 202 new citizens by completing their Citizenship ceremony
 - Weddings and civil partnerships resumed from Saturday 4th July and as of 17th August 347 ceremonies had been held

6.3 Staff have produced some very creative and professional films for customers to enjoy, from illustrated versions of picture books to special Archive local history talks.

6.4 In Registration the teams of Customer Service Officers, Ceremony Officers and Technical officers have worked to keep customers up to date with the latest information and government guidance. This has been most relevant for Registration ceremony teams who have worked to keep couples informed to enable them to make difficult choices about whether to progress or postpone their special day. Throughout the pandemic, Registration staff managed the difficult emotional task of speaking to those bereaved to register a death at the most difficult of times.

6.5 The service has worked in partnership with the KCC health and safety and infrastructure teams on making library, registration and archive buildings COVID-19 secure with screens, hand sanitizer, re-designed layouts, one-way flows and use of face coverings in place. Staff have also been deployed to roles introduced since lockdown began to lift, to facilitate social distancing, for example completing careful return of library stock ensuring that 72-hour quarantine for book returns is achieved.

7. Public Protection Communications and Trading Standards

7.1 During the pandemic, GET's Public Protection Group developed and implemented a sophisticated social and digital media plan to help protect Kent residents and businesses. 'Between 17th March and 1st September our alerts and messages had a direct reach of 2,277,000, with a further 1,474,000 achieved through viral reach'.

- 7.2 Throughout the spring, summer and continuing into autumn the team successfully used social media together with direct mailing and a dedicated online page to warn and advise about fraudsters and the vast number of Covid-19 related scams targeting Kent residents; including NHS Test and Trace scams, fake masks and sanitisers, and Coronavirus cure and/or insurance scams. These channels also delivered significant promotion for the Kent Together helpline.
- 7.3 Public Protection has also ensured that Kent businesses have been proactively warned and advised about the growing number of business scams, including HMRC scams, PPE scams, and supply chain scams. Trading Standards supported Kent businesses with unlimited free business advice during the period and ran two well attended virtual workshops for Kent businesses. Membership fees for the KCC Trading Standards Checked fair trader scheme were also temporarily suspended until this autumn to specifically help the building and home maintenance sector.

8. Public Rights of Way

- 8.1 There was a very significant increase in use of the Public Rights of Way (PRoW) network by the public at the start of lockdown. Automated counters measured at least a three- fold increase in use, one route measuring a 10-fold increase. This increase in use was evident throughout the network. This use gradually fell back during summer as alternative recreational opportunities opened, but levels of use across the summer remained high at three times pre-COVID levels.
- 8.2 Associated with this, the service also experienced an increased level of reported nuisance across the summer, particularly reports from landowners, and consequently undertook a project working with Explore Kent and Kent Downs AONB to deliver a video guide for new and inexperienced users of Public Rights of Way.
- 8.3 Early summer (May) saw the resumption of all the PRoW maintenance programmes. Vegetation clearance was the first area recommenced as it aids with social distancing. Remaining maintenance programmes restarted in early June. Programmes have been amended to ensure that schemes can be delivered in year.
- 8.4 Working with KCC Highways Team (KHT), the PRoW Service directly secured over £156, 000 from the Government's Emergency Active Travel Fund. The actual spend on PRoW will be greater as there are several PRoW improved as part of KHT led projects under the same scheme.
- 8.5 The Medway Towpath, an extremely valuable local route, unfortunately had to be closed temporarily this summer at Ringlestone Park, Widespread and advanced Ash Dieback in an adjacent woodland was identified, requiring the felling of 100+ ash trees by the landowner. This section has now re-opened There was additionally a partial collapse of the footpath and a section of the river wall. Investigations are progressing but a geological fault is thought to be

the cause of the issue. Repair is being phased over financial years to be met within current budgets. The Aylesford section of the river path remains closed pending the completion of the repairs .

- 8.6 Turning to this autumn, use of the Public Rights of Way network has remained high as COVID restrictions have eased. While it is anticipated that this use will decline further as winter approaches, it is still 300% up on pre-COVID, as identified above.
- 8.7 The long-term implication of greater use will be of greater wear and tear on PRow, effectively shortening the lifespan of some assets and creating a potential budget pressure.
- 8.8 One unexpected impact of the COVID-19 restrictions has been an increase in the receipt of Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 applications to record public rights of way. These applications are being worked through in accordance with national requirements, but it must be noted that there was an existing backlog pre-COVID.

9. Sport and Physical Activity

- 9.1 Across the summer the Sport and Physical Activity (SPA) service delivered 'My Active Rainbow' and 'My Active Life' as an alternative option to the Kent School Games. My Active Rainbow was targeted at primary aged young people and was accessed through a variety of networks. Young people were encouraged to participate in a series of challenges and gained rewards including Kent School Games Bronze, Silver and Gold Medals. These challenges ran throughout the summer school holidays to encourage young people to remain active during the summer. As at the end of August, 8,259 individual challenges had been completed and 834 medals awarded.
- 9.2 The team reviewed and developed safeguarding materials to provide guidance regarding online delivery by a range of Kent sports clubs, which are almost wholly voluntary and community in nature. This was referenced as an example of good practice by Sport England to all Governing Bodies of Sport and funded partners. More recently additional safeguarding advice has been added to support clubs and organisations in relation to 'return to play'.
- 9.3 Boxing, fitness, hockey, basketball and handball all secured funding via Sport and Physical Activity to deliver virtual Satellite Clubs (these are where sports clubs deliver engagement usually on school grounds to engage young people within an environment, they feel confident)
- 9.4 The Service ran a virtual but proactive celebration of Volunteers' Week albeit stretched throughout June, linked to the fact that community sport is delivered in large part by voluntary and community sports clubs. The service's volunteer Facebook page saw a monthly increase of 5000% in people reached, a 14,000% increase in engagement and a 1,600% increase of page 'likes'.

- 9.5 500 My Active Rainbow packs were placed into culture packs that were distributed to vulnerable families, and similarly, working with Sports Directory UK, 50 boxes of sports equipment/items were distributed to vulnerable young people aged 16-21.
- 9.6 The financial impact on the leisure sector has been profound. To support the sector, by the end of August the Sport and Physical Activity service awarded Everyday Active Small Grants (Kent Trust for Youth Sport/Kent and Medway Active Partnership funding) to 69 successful applications. Additionally, there were 194 successful Kent sports clubs/organisations' applications to the Sport England Community Emergency Fund – receiving £757,503
- 9.7 Looking ahead to this autumn, Kent Sport was successful in securing Tackling Inequalities Funding – £110,000 to support organisations with significant financial need that work with deprived communities, Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups and disabled people/those with long-term health conditions. This is to try to halt the inequalities gap re physical activity and sport from widening further due to COVID-19. Additionally, a further £110,000 has been secured through a second tranche of funding, from Sport England, to further extend delivery across the County and engagement with underrepresented groups.
- 9.9 In addition, four virtual Kent School Games competitions have been created for roll out from September – in Dance, Rowing, Cheerleading, Sportshall Athletics.
- 9.10 The leisure sector faces an enormous challenge to recover from COVID, however, and this is explicitly recognised within the Kent and Medway Recovery Strategy Finance Cell's Action Plan. Many local leisure facilities remain closed amid real concerns for the financial viability for these local community facilities, especially in Kent where many facilities are run by local Leisure Trusts. There is still wariness from the public to return to leisure facilities. Additionally, many governing bodies for sport have furloughed staff and, in some cases, made regional/local development officer posts redundant.

10. Financial Implications

- 10.1 The costs and lost income directly attributable to COVID are captured by Corporate Finance. The costs captured for the services above (forecast to financial year end) are £3.5m, of which LRA accounts for £3.2m

11. Policy Framework

- 11.1 The services above deliver 'Business as Usual' against a wide range of Policies. As can be seen from the narrative, all services have looked to negate any negative impact from COVID on existing established priorities but have simultaneously adapted to challenges and opportunities as the year has unfolded.

12. Equalities Impact Assessment

12.1 Existing Business as Usual for these services is governed by a suite of Equality Impact Assessments. These largely cover the additional or revised activities described above. The need to complete Equality Impact Assessments was paused by KCC during the height of the pandemic but has now resumed. The requirement to observe the Equality Duty 2010 has been maintained by KCC throughout the year.

13. General Data Protection Regulation Considerations

13.1 A Data Protection Impact Assessment is not needed for this overarching narrative report

14. Conclusion

14.1 The importance and value of these community services is demonstrated by the additional demands placed upon these services by members of the public at a time of considerable national disruption. These services are used by most of our residents, and feedback year after year identifies their value to our residents.

14.2 The services have sought to mitigate COVID's negative impacts and meet the surge in customer demand throughout lockdown and across the period covered by this report. Autumn and Winter will bring their own challenges, and all the services are currently preparing for a triple coincidence of COVID, Transition and Winter Preparedness (flu and seasonal weather risks)

14.3 The services have learned and adapted to every stage of the pandemic. It has been a significant step for staff and customers to return to face to face delivery of services and it has been key to build this up step by step building confidence of both staff and customers. This has guided a careful, measured and phased approach to Recovery, which will continue to evolve and reflect national and local conditions.

15. Recommendation(s)

Recommendation(s):

The Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee is asked to note this report.

16. Contact details

Daniel Gooch – Operations Manager, Kent Country Parks, 03000 411638

Mike Overbeke – Head of Public Protection, 03000 413427

Shafick Peerbux – Head of Community Safety, 03000 413431

Elise Rendall – Interim Lead for Sport and Physical Activity, 03000 412290

Graham Rusling – Head of Public Rights of Way and Access Service, 03000 413449

Chris Walker – Head of Explore Kent, 03000 412408

Steve Rock – Head of Trading Services 03000 414137

Ian Baugh – Head of Business Development 03000 413325

Tony Witton – Head of Culture and Creative Economy, 03000 417204

Relevant Directors:

Stephanie Holt-Castle, Interim Director, Environment, Planning and Enforcement,
03000 412064

James Pearson, Head of Libraries, Registration and Archives, 03000 414923

David Smith, Director Economic Development, 03000 417176

