

Parish Council Update – March 2021

This report provides an update on some of the work Kent County Council (KCC) has undertaken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic over the past twelve months.

It is almost a year since the country went into a national lockdown in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic and the restrictions and measures put in place to control it have had an impact on virtually all aspects of life. From the start of the pandemic, Kent County Council (KCC) has needed to respond to a huge number of unprecedented challenges, urgently adapting how it works and working with our partners to find new ways to continue to provide our services and meet people's needs across the county.

In the summer of 2020, the challenge for KCC shifted from that of immediate response to starting to address the economic and social consequences of COVID-19 and planning a route to recovery. The period from October 2020 to early January 2021 was characterised by a much larger upswing in COVID-19 cases than in the first wave. The County Council's focus had to switch again, and huge efforts were put into contact tracing activity and asymptomatic testing as well as supporting the county through another lockdown. The detection of the 'Kent variant', resulted in a period of intensive partnership work as authorities took action to minimise its impact.

The County Council's five crucial actions for responding to COVID-19 are:

- Reminding residents of the importance of adhering to rules and guidance;
- Developing widespread testing, both for people who are symptomatic and symptom free;
- Effective contact tracing; and
- Explaining and enforcing rules for businesses.
- As far as possible continuing to deliver public services to our residents.

Delivering with our partners

The Kent Resilience Forum (KRF) is a multi-agency partnership to plan for and respond to emergencies. It includes representatives from key local public services and facilities such as Local Authorities, Police, Fire, NHS, Environment Agency and many others. Kent County Council is a lead agency within the KRF. From March 2020, KRF's strategic command structures were activated to oversee vital workstreams to respond to the pandemic as it took hold.

Whilst the Districts were leading on the co-ordination and provision of Community Hubs, KCC added resilience and capacity to the process by developing the Kent Together webpage and phone line. As of 28 February 2021, 5944 requests have been made to Kent Together.

The Kent Support and Assistance Service (KSAS) has worked with the Districts and other statutory partners to provide discretionary support in the form of supermarket vouchers, school uniforms, white goods, school meal vouchers, and much more.

In the early stages of lockdown, the decision was taken to award £200K to Kent Community Foundation's (KCF) Emergency Fund. This was in recognition of the need to provide support to VCS organisations facing financial difficulty due to lost income.

Impact on Business

The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been severe: the UK economy contracted by around 11.4% in 2020. The Government's emergency response has been substantial. It is likely that total Government financial support to businesses in Kent and Medway amounted to around £2.5 billion in 2020.

In August 2020, Kent and Medway Economic Partnership adopted the Kent & Medway Renewal and Resilience Plan. The Plan sets out principles to support the county's recovery and outlines workstreams through which activity is being driven to support business and jobs.

Public Health

KCC's Public Health team have been working closely with the NHS and Public Health England (PHE) at both local and regional level since the beginning of the pandemic. Consultants were involved in the initial rollout of vaccinations to health and social care workers (particularly in care homes) and are now working with partners to address vaccine uptake.

Testing of symptomatic and asymptomatic individuals is key to managing infections. The Testing Cell provides leadership in all aspects of testing, including the setting up of ten Local Symptomatic Testing Sites (LTS), two Regional Testing Sites (RTS) and the direction of Mobile Testing Units (MTU) where needed. There has been additional testing arranged for care homes where outbreaks are suspected. Asymptomatic testing for COVID-19 was initiated in December and with initial military assistance, 24 sites have now been set up across the County.

KCC and partners have worked together to understand the impact of the pandemic on both public mental health and mental health services. Advice and support has been provided on KCC's website and a 'One Stop Shop' for mental health information has been developed with partners. Suicide prevention work has been enhanced through monitoring and modelling of risk. Support for people who have been suddenly bereaved has also been commissioned.

Adult Social Care and Strategic Commissioning

Adult Social Care, along with other KCC frontline services took immediate steps in responding to the challenges associated with the COVID-19 crisis. The Directorate worked tirelessly to ensure that there was appropriate support in place for all providers, including the distribution of much needed Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

As care providers in the county came under financial pressure KCC stepped in and responded with practical financial support by making two payments totalling £13.5 million, to all residential, nursing, homecare and supported living and supporting independence providers, (including providers located outside Kent) looking after people placed by the council.

Children's Social Care

Throughout the pandemic, keeping vulnerable children safe and supported has continued to be a key priority. Integrated Children's Services have adapted their service provision as required and in the early stages of the pandemic made thousands of calls to vulnerable children and young people to check on their welfare as well as maintaining face to face visits where needed. Since September, routine face to face visits have resumed across all children's social work and early help units, taking care to follow infection prevention and social distancing measures.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the pre-existing pressures on the county to receive Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC). KCC was forced to take the difficult decision in August that it was unable to accept new arrivals until a solution could be found by the Home Office to fairly distribute the children to other councils. As numbers of new arrivals dropped going into the winter, and some young people were transferred, these duties were resumed on 7 December.

Schools and Education

KCC has provided information and support to schools throughout the pandemic to assist them in adapting with the changing circumstances. KCC has helped to allocate IT devices to vulnerable Kent children through the Government's IT devices initiative to support remote learning.

The pandemic and necessary restrictions have had a significant impact on the lives of children and young people and providing emotional and mental health support is an important priority. HeadStart Kent is an existing scheme that offers a wide range of advice, information and toolkits to parents, staff and schools to improve the emotional and mental wellbeing of children and young people.

Community Wardens

During the past 12 months of the pandemic, the KCC Community Warden Service has been reprioritised to support the most vulnerable in our communities, working alongside the Community Hubs. This is in addition to their role of providing information and guidance to their communities on the frequently changing/evolving COVID rules. It is anticipated that the demand for the Community Warden Service will increase as restrictions begin to ease and the warden role begins to broaden out again, as the associated issues with public spaces reopening and a return to group gathering will require close multi-agency working to resolve.

Trading Standards

Since March 2020 Trading Standards has been given additional responsibility for the enforcement of the Regulations covering the restriction and closure of businesses, to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Over 4,000 referrals have been received from the public covering issues such as scams, fake PPE, and prohibited shops trading. The service is providing guidance to the public and businesses on COVID-19 restrictions. The service is tackling the proliferation of COVID-related scams and financial abuse by implementing a social media and digital plan to inform and help protect residents and businesses.

Libraries and Registration Services

During the closure of libraries, work was quickly undertaken to develop and promote digital library services and enable easy online joining so customers could gain immediate access to e-books, e-audiobooks, e-magazines and e-newspapers. Use of these resources has increased by 94%. A varied programme of virtual activities has been delivered throughout the year.

In March 2020, all Registration services were suspended with the exception of death registrations. As key workers, the Registration teams across the county have delivered 16,247 death registrations since 1st April 2020, a 26% increase on last year's figures. Face to face birth registration appointments were re-established in June, working to clear the backlog of 4,000 outstanding births. Socially distanced wedding ceremonies were

introduced in July, although from November's lockdown only emergency ceremonies were allowed to continue and birth registrations were again suspended. March 2021 sees the return of face-to-face birth appointments and ceremonies (from 29th March)

Country Parks and Public Rights of Access (PROW)

KCC's Country Parks were able to stay open throughout the pandemic, with only a brief 6-week closure of the carparks during the first lockdown. Individual Parks have been between 50% and 220% busier than normal. PROW have experienced up to a tenfold increase in users on certain routes. Both Parks and PROW attracted a considerable number of new users across the year, which reflects the value of these local assets particularly in contributing to the wellbeing of our residents during this challenging time.

Coroner Service

There has been a significant increase in numbers of new death referrals to the Coroner Service. Straight-forward inquest hearings have been conducted virtually, but a substantial backlog of more complex inquests (with or without a jury) has developed. Existing court facilities were not COVID-19 compliant for jury cases and so an additional venue was established. The increased workload is expected to continue through summer 2021 and may run into the next winter period. Courts have resumed a full timetable to address the backlog.

The new variant of COVID-19 put significant pressure on the NHS and in turn, its mortuary capacity, creating some delays from point of death to releasing the deceased into the care of a Funeral Director. In response to the escalating death rates in December, Aylesford Temporary Place of Rest (TPoR) was set up to provide additional capacity to support the hospital mortuaries across the County. It was mobilised within 48 hours and for the first six weeks of 2021 and the facility held between 130 and 200 deceased at any one time.

Transport

The Department for Transport (DfT) allocated the County Council £1.6m for Emergency Temporary Active Travel schemes in June 2020 to encourage walking and cycling. The aim was to create safe spaces for these activities to continue the significant growth they experienced during the first lockdown. Due to the deadline imposed by DfT and the prospect of losing significant inward investment in the County, twenty-four schemes were implemented in the first tranche without it being possible to undertake the usual public consultation. Subsequently a number of these schemes were dropped in response to the feedback received about them. However, the majority remain in place and KCC was successful in gaining a further £6.4m for larger, permanent schemes for the second tranche of the programme, which are now the subject of full public consultation and engagement in order to implement them successfully.

Buses

The Public Transport team have supported bus operators to adapt to reduced demand and new restrictions. This has included supporting them to develop new cleaning and operating processes to keep users safe and adapting network provision to changing demand over the last year. KCC has supported bus operators with continuity payments to keep the network stable.

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