

# **CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**23 JULY 2020**

## **COVID-19 IMPACT AND RESPONSE**

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### Summary

This report provides further information as to the Council's response to the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) global pandemic, within the remit of this committee.

It also further outlines the approach in the coming weeks as priorities around the Council's response alter to reflect the partial lifting of the lockdown and reopen schools.

### 1. Budget and Policy Framework

1.1 Under Chapter 4, Part 5 of the Constitution – Overview and Scrutiny Rules, paragraph 21.1 (ii) General terms of reference, each overview and scrutiny committee has responsibility to review and scrutinise decisions made, or other action taken, in connection with the discharge of any functions which are either executive functions or Council-side functions, in relation to their specific areas of responsibility (for this committee, services for children and young people, as detailed at 21.2 (b) of Chapter 4, Part 5 of the Constitution).

### 2. Background

2.1 On the 12 March 2020, the World Health Organisation advised that COVID-19 had become a Global Pandemic. In response the Local Resilience Forum (Kent Resilience Forum) put in place a Strategic Coordination Group (SCG) . On the 19 March 2020 the SCG decided that the virus was indeed a public health emergency and the response required would need a joint multi-agency approach. In accordance with the Civil Contingencies Act (CCA) 2004, this resulted in Medway activating its emergency procedures to put in place a Command and Control structure. On the 24 March 2020, the SCG had declared COVID-19 a Major Incident.

2.2 The national and local response to the COVID-19 crisis has been unprecedented in peacetime. For the Council this has involved action across

many spheres of activity both with regard to community leadership and the delivery of critical services across Medway. In delivering this response, much of the activity has been in partnership with other organisations including the Kent Resilience Forum (KRF) NHS, Police, care providers, local businesses, the voluntary & community sector and Medway Norse.

- 2.3 Following Government guidance, the Council's response has been focused on ensuring the core objectives of reducing the spread of the virus whilst protecting the most vulnerable members of our community. In doing this the efforts of Council staff across all directorates in both front line and support staff has ensured the continuation of key services. The Council response has been in line with emergency planning best practice and guidance.

### 3. Response management

- 3.1 In accordance with the CCA, Strategic (GOLD) and Tactical (SILVER) command structures were implemented to establish a local response to the pandemic. A COVID-19 strategy was agreed as was a process for considering and recording all decisions made.
- 3.2 The Medway Gold Group continues as part of the current structure. The Tactical Command (SILVER) has a cell structure that ensures the Council's critical services are being maintained.
- 3.3 Other cells in the structure are concentrating on non-critical services, e.g. Registration & Bereavement, Environmental services, Leisure & Heritage etc.
- 3.4 All of the service-based cells are supported by Finance, HR, ICT, Governance, Procurement etc., also categorised as cells in the tactical response structure.
- 3.5 In line with Medway's Emergency Plan, the Tactical Commander has established an Emergency Control Centre within Gun Wharf. Due to the nature of the incident, much of the daily communications is done via Microsoft TEAMS to maintain distance between key staff. A daily Situation Report process is in place to report a Common Operating Picture for all of the designated cell areas.
- 3.6 Whilst not directly involved in either Strategic or Tactical command Structure the Leader has been heavily involved at all stages of the emergency, with daily briefings from the Chief Executive and weekly detailed briefings from the wider command teams. Early in the process the Leader established a weekly cross-party briefing in order to share information, obtain feedback and offer reassurance. The Leader has also given regular community reassurances messages to the Medway community.

### 4. Outbreak Control Plan

- 4.1 The Department of Health & Social Care has asked upper tier local authorities in England, to develop a COVID-19 Local Outbreak Control Plan. The primary purpose of these plans is to prevent, identify, and contain

COVID-19 outbreaks collaboratively with partners. With provision of £300M in Government funding to support the plan's delivery, , Directors of Public Health in each upper tier local authority were required to develop these outbreak control plans, and submitted these to Central Government before the end of June 2020.

- 4.2 The Kent and Medway COVID-19 Local Outbreak Control Plan has been developed and informed through collaboration with partners. These include Public Health England, the Local Resilience Forum and various council committees including Cabinet, the Medway Health and Wellbeing Board, the Kent and Medway Joint and Health Wellbeing Board, and the Kent and Medway CCG. The plan is a live document and is amended regularly in line with emerging evidence and guidance.
- 4.3 It is likely that there will be need for officers, specifically the Director of Public Health and Chief Executive, to respond to local outbreaks at short notice. The Leader may also be required to use powers of urgency to protect the population of Medway.
- 4.4 Cabinet will have an opportunity to further consider the final version of the Kent and Medway COVID-19 Local Outbreak Control Plan and receive updates on the Council's and partners response to the Covid-19 Pandemic in due course.

## 5 Services

### **Children and Young People**

- 5.1 Children's Services moved swiftly and robustly to respond to the Covid-19 crisis, continuing to safeguard the most vulnerable children when face to face contacts are restricted, and availability of staff to undertake work with children is potentially limited. Priority Risk Assessments have been completed for every child and young person who is in receipt of a service identifying the historic risk, present danger, and any strengths and support mechanisms available to the family to help them to reduce the level of risk. These are reviewed regularly. This system has ensured that there is consistent decision making and effective oversight of all cases and particularly where children are most at risk.
- 5.2 Detailed and comprehensive operating procedures have provided staff with clarity on dealing with the crisis, including issues such as how to maintain contact with families, working from home and managing all aspects of child protection planning and processes. Challenges posed by PPE and the provision of IT equipment were minimised by a supportive corporate/tactical response.
- 5.3 Staff health and welfare has also been paramount. Risk assessments have been undertaken prior to every visit to ascertain whether families are symptomatic. PPE has been made available (masks, sanitiser and gloves) for staff undertaking essential home visits. Regular communications have been going out to staff. Staff have adapted to new and innovative ways of keeping in contact with children virtually.

- 5.4 Some of the young people in our care have welcomed the virtual form of contact with their social worker, appropriate to their circumstances. Youth workers have developed online activities which can be accessed by young people but also used by foster carers. Contact for children in care with their families has been maintained either virtually or using our contact centre, with appropriate social distancing measures and hygiene in place.
- 5.5 Early Help hubs in the community have remained open to offer practical support to families and a base for partners to work from.
- 5.6 Parklands and Aut Even continued to remain open during the pandemic. Short Breaks provision at Aut Even moved to Parklands 11 May 2020. Short Breaks and After School Club are both currently in operation from Parklands. The numbers of children have been reduced with 2 for overnight stays and 2 for After School Club. To ensure social distancing. A Covid-19 assessment of the building took place 25 May 2020 which confirmed the building was Covid compliant and could continue to provide our services to children. The plan over the coming months will be to gradually increase the number of children accessing the service up to full occupancy which is 5 children having overnight stays and 5 attending the After School Club. This will be dependent on the Covid-19 status in Medway and latest government guidance.
- 5.7 Statutory meetings requiring multi-agency involvement across the child protection processes have taken place in virtual form throughout the response phase and attendance has been very strong, as a result essential meetings such as Child Protection Conferences and the Children's Improvement Board have not been cancelled. Regular meetings are held with senior police and with health, ensuring Covid-19 does not impact the partnerships ability to respond to the most vulnerable children and/or emerging issues around domestic violence, drugs related county lines and other contextual safeguarding. There has been good cooperation between schools and Children's Social Care, both proactive in contacting vulnerable children not attending and liaison to maximise the drawn down of the digital support offered by the government to close the gap for these children. Daily consultation sessions have been made available to schools as children are returning, in order to identify and respond quickly to any emerging concerns.
- 5.8 Recruitment to key posts has continued. For example, Dr Lee-Anne Farach, the new Assistant Director, Children's Social Care, started work at Medway on 11 May 2020. There have however been delays in recruiting permanent international social workers, directly related to the global pandemic. They are now scheduled to join the Council by the end of October 2020.

## **Education**

- 5.9 We started joint planning work with schools very early in the crisis, working effectively through our Head Teacher's reference group (initially daily, then stepping down to bi-weekly and then weekly from late June). This joint approach has been in place from early March, before the Government ordered schools to close for all but vulnerable and disadvantaged children, and those of key workers. All meetings are followed by a briefing note,

which is sent to all head teachers, trust chief executives and college principals. The group has given invaluable advice to enable prompt and clear decisions. We have been able to proactively engage regarding issues and problems within school environments and multi-academy trusts. Schools, including special schools, have remained open for key workers' children.

- 5.10 As of May 2020, we began to plan with our education partners, in line with the position that the council supported the phased re-opening of schools to as many pupils as possible in the nursery, year R, year one and year six as soon as practicable, on or after 1 June 2020.
- 5.11 In order to support schools, while ensuring we have the capacity to respond to head teachers who most need help, we have provided support with risk assessment evaluation and convened weekly meetings with trade unions, giving head teachers comprehensive advice about key issues such as the use of PPE.
- 5.12 The feedback from head teachers is that they feel they have been appropriately supported through both phases – the initial closure with only small numbers of pupils able to attend, and the phased re-opening.
- 5.13 In Medway, 76 primary schools (97 per cent) and 17 secondary schools (94 percent) have confirmed they have reopened in line with the government expectations and we continue to offer our support to head teachers during these challenging times. Pupil attendance in primary schools is increasing week by week, and is now about 40 per cent in the prioritised year groups, although attendance of year 10s in secondary schools is only about 15 per cent.
- 5.14 As we move out of lock down we will be creating teams of integrated staff (incl. early help workers, assessment social workers, mental health workers, education psychologists, YOT etc.) regularly accessible to schools via Microsoft Teams to help identify priority needs of young people and parents in Medway and respond effectively to any surge that may occur.

#### Medway Test

- 5.15 New arrangements for the Medway Test have been agreed in consultation with Head teachers, other authorities, Members and education leaders. The arrangements delay the test by 4 weeks to allow more time for pupils to settle back into school after such a long time out. The test, challenging to organise under normal circumstances, has been arranged with social distancing in mind and as such has resulted in a longer time period for the test over two weeks. Numbers registering for the test are in line with recent years –around 4000 pupils. The new arrangements were expected to create a budget pressure of £70,000 against the approved 2020-21 budget, but Gold have now approved that this budget pressure should be offset by the Covid-19 grant.

### Admissions

- 5.16 All admissions process and timeframes have been met with no outstanding actions. Whilst COVID has slowed down the process, the team has worked hard to ensure all deadlines have been met. When schools closed, the government froze the collection and issuing of new non attendance fixed penalty charge notices, potentially creating a budget pressure of £156,000.

### SEND Transport

- 5.17 SEND transport has worked incredibly well, given the extremely challenging conditions. All providers have been flexible and worked with the LA and schools to ensure that children have been transported safely. The Schools Transport team has worked diligently within the governments guidelines to maintain the service. Further challenges lie ahead for September but the team and providers are working collaboratively to address this.

### Capital Programme

- 5.18 Projects have continued as best as possible despite the difficulties with supply and resource caused by the COVID crisis. The bulge class projects to ensure sufficient places are available in September for year 7 are ongoing, and whilst the timeframe is challenging all stops are being pulled out to complete to time. Schools have been flexible and receptive to the challenges the crisis has thrown up within this programme.

### School Maintenance

- 5.19 The schools maintenance programme has continued wherever possible, however some work will inevitably be delayed. Officers are working with schools through this period to prioritise work and plan ahead as more services are available.

### Early Years

- 5.20 During the pandemic, childcare providers were directed by the Government, to only open to children of Key Workers and those identified as vulnerable. The Government stated that, childcare funding was not to be removed from providers for the children who were not allowed to attend. Furthermore, the Government announced a directive that, restrictions were to be placed upon settings whereupon children were to remain within set bubbles and to only attend one provider of childcare. Provider funding was to remain to those settings who could not have their usual children in attendance.
- 5.21 Due to the restrictions placed upon childcare providers, double funding has occurred with costs that should be met through the top slice of the Designated Schools Grant. If funding were removed from childcare settings, many would close as they could not financially sustain the loss and therefore, the Local Authority would be at high risk of not meeting its statutory duty to secure sufficient childcare for working parents. In order to

support sustainable childcare provision and support key worker parents, Gold Command approved the additional childcare funding for Spring and Summer.

### Public Health

- 5.22 The initial response to COVID and the lockdown was measured for health visiting and school nursing, The service had a high proportion of staff that were in the shielded or vulnerable category (around 30%) as well as a significant proportion of staff who were redeployed (35%) and this meant very quickly we had to identify which services could be delivered remotely to ensure these staff were utilised. Biweekly calls were set up between the service midwifery and Early Help to look at the response as a system. As a result Medway Community Healthcare (MCH) maintained face to face New Birth contacts throughout COVID as it was identified that these were key and would allow midwifery to focus their resource on the Antenatal period. 6-8 week checks and checks for vulnerable families were also prioritised and where possible delivered face to face. The other mandated checks and screening (NCMP/Audio/Vision) were de-prioritised initially by NHSE. It should be noted that there were high did not attend rates and refusal to engage by families due to fear of COVID and self-isolation.
- 5.23 Joint working protocols were established between MCH, children's social care and Early Help so that where there was a scheduled contact with a family that were involved with these services, MCH would take on some additional safeguarding duties and would feed back to Medway Council to minimise the amount of contacts needed and reduce social contact where safe and appropriate to do so.
- 5.24 The full impact of COVID on children's specialist community health service remains to be seen. There is the strong feeling amongst commissioners and service providers that there is a significant way to go for children's services and that the full ramifications of COVID may not be seen for some time. This is because it is unknown what the period of reduced health input, and reduced education input and support will have on children and families; both those known to services and those not currently known.
- 5.25 There has been a significant period during which early intervention work will not have been possible. Early feedback from engagement with young people demonstrates a mixed picture of how they have coped during lockdown, and the longer-term impact on development and behaviours is difficult to predict.
- 5.26 A backlog has been created on the neurodevelopment pathway and for looked after children health assessments where assessments cannot be completed without face to face interaction. Clearing this backlog will be challenging from a capacity and resource perspective.
- 5.27 The effectiveness of services delivered virtually is untested and requires further scrutiny.
- 5.28 North East London Foundation Trust (NELFT) moved to a virtual offer soon after lockdown and continued to engage with all existing clients. The

referrals into the service dropped dramatically once schools closed and there was a significant reduction in number of children attending Medway NHS Foundation Trust in mental health crisis. Commissioners are working with NELFT to ensure there is sufficient capacity to manage any latent demand built up during this time and ensure they can support any surge in referrals that may occur when schools return more fully in September.

- 5.29 An online Tier 2 counselling service called Kooth was commissioned and went live on 1 June. This provides support for children with lower level mental health issues such as anxiety and depression who may not need more specialist support.
- 5.30 The Emerge project was launched remotely in April to support young people who present with Self Harm or suicidal ideations and a number of young people are being supported through the advocacy programme. This will return to face to face in Medway Hospital when appropriate.

## 6 Financial Implications

- 6.1 At the beginning of the national response to the emerging Covid-19 pandemic in the UK, on 16 March the Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick assured Local Government Leaders that: *“This government stands with local councils at this difficult time. Everyone needs to play their part to help the most vulnerable in society and support their local economy. The government will do whatever is necessary to support these efforts.”*
- 6.2 The Government has since announced a wide range of financial support packages for individuals, businesses and public sector bodies leading the Response, including emergency funding for councils. The Government has also commenced monthly data collection returns, requiring authorities to estimate the financial impact of the Covid-19. The data collection instructions set out that the exercise is for planning purposes, to help the Government identify where the greatest pressures are likely to be going forward and inform their assessment of likely future costs.
- 6.3 In terms of direct financial support for local authorities, Medway received an initial £6.628million of emergency un-ringfenced grant funding in March 2020. Following submission of the first data return to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, a second tranche of £7.648million emergency funding was received in April.
- 6.4 The most significant elements of the wider packages of support announced are the Expanded Business Rates Relief scheme (£33.166million), the Small Business Grant and Discretionary Business Grant schemes (£39.712million) and the Council Tax Hardship scheme (£2.056million), which are all fully funded directly by the Government. All other funding announced directed at local authorities has been ring-fenced to specific activities and associated new burdens.
- 6.5 Though the Response is ongoing, as the nation moves into the recovery phase the government has announced some specific packages of support for local authorities:



- Adult Social Care Infection control fund: £2,091,910 to support adult social care providers to reduce the rate of COVID-19 transmission in and between care homes and support wider workforce resilience to deliver infection control.
- Test, track and trace fund: £1,592,918 to mitigate against and manage local outbreaks of COVID-19.
- Emergency Active Travel fund: £1,545,000 (indicative) to support local transport authorities with producing cycling and walking facilities.
- Reopening High Streets Safely fund: £246,396 to put in place additional measures to establish a safe trading environment for businesses and customers, particularly in high streets.

While gladly received, these funding streams are ring-fenced to specific, new activities and cannot therefore be used to offset any of the pressures resulting from the Covid-19 response and recovery.

- 6.6 The third of these returns was submitted to the MHCLG Friday 19 June. While the estimated impact was largely consistent between the three returns, the third return was the first to be informed by the emerging forecasts from budget managers as the first round of the Council's budget monitoring was underway. The returns indicate:
- Additional expenditure beyond that budgeted resulting from Covid-19 of circa £17million,
  - Income shortfalls resulting from Covid-19 of circa £37million,
  - Financial support of c£14m.
- 6.7 These estimates indicate a net pressure for Medway Council in 2020/21 of around £40million, and working with colleagues and partners across the sector, we continue to lobby the government to ensure local authorities are appropriately supported to manage the financial burdens of the Covid-19 response and recovery.
- 6.8 In terms of estimates incurred to support children and young people through Covid 19 to date are as follows:
- £70,000 in relation to the new Medway test arrangements.
  - £156,000 in relation to the loss of non-attendance fixed penalty charge notice income April to December 2020.
  - £146,000 relating to delayed recruitment of permanent international social workers and other children's services support costs.
  - £157,000 in relation to keeping early years nursery provisions open.
  - Minor costs including additional cleaning and other PPE expenditure.

## 7 Legal Implications

- 7.1 The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 places certain legal responsibilities on public sector organisations to assist in the response and other phases of a civil emergency. Once the Covid-19 pandemic was treated as an emergency event, the Council had to comply with legal requirements as a category one responder. This has involved involvement in the Kent Resilience Forum at strategic and tactical levels with multi-agency partners to guide and deliver the Kent and Medway response.

## 8 Risk Management

### **Governance process**

- 8.1 Since the Council implemented the Emergency Planning procedures in response to the Covid-19 Pandemic, a risk assessment in line with the Council's Risk Management Strategy has formed the basis of all decision making and governance arrangements throughout the Response. Each Cell Lead has been responsible for maintaining a risk register detailing the impacts of COVID19 on their area of responsibility, following the Council's Risk Management Strategy. Cell leads have been responsible for managing risks scored below CII – significant likelihood, crucial impact (as such risks would routinely be managed on service/operational risk registers) while issues arising from risks scored at CII or above have been escalated to the SILVER and Gold commands (as such risks would routinely be managed through the Council's Strategic Risk Register). In addition, financial thresholds have been agreed to ensure that where a decision being made would commit the Council to new expenditure or result in the loss of income, appropriate financial authorisation is in place.
- 8.2 A Governance group within the Cell structure has been responsible for providing assurance on the effectiveness of risk management and the implications of actions taken through the Covid-19 response. While the Council's Corporate Risk Register Remains reflective of the key risks facing the organisation in the wider context, formal arrangements to monitor the Corporate Risk Register were paused during the initial response to enable staff to focus on managing risks in the Covid-19 Response. The Governance group will work alongside the Strategic Risk Management Group to resume routine monitoring of strategic risks as soon as possible during 2020/21, beginning with a fundamental review of the Corporate Risk Register in light of the Covid-19 Response and Recovery.
- 8.3 The Governance cell is also working to ensure the impacts of decisions made have been considered appropriately to ensure all decisions taken are sound and are in line with the Council's governance mechanisms. The Cell aims to ensure decisions:
- are made in accordance with appropriate Member and Officer decision making powers, according to the law and in line with the Council's constitution,
  - comply with relevant legislation and regulations,
  - are made within the Council's financial rules and are within the approved budget,
  - do not significantly weaken the Council's control environment or pose a significant fraud risk, and
  - do not create adverse impacts for people with protected characteristics under the Equality Act.
- 8.4 The Governance cell is continuing its role into the Recovery phase, working alongside the rest of the command and control structure to ensure that risks are effectively managed and that the impacts of decisions made through recovery are appropriately considered.

8.5 Beyond the risks faced by Medway Council in the delivery of services through the Covid-19 pandemic, the impact on the economy of the Medway area is of paramount importance to the Council's recovery plans. The Council's Recovery Planning is focussed on five key Cells; Economy, Infrastructure, Health and Social Care, Children's Services and the Voluntary and Community Sector and impact assessments are currently underway for each. These impact assessments will underpin the development of the Medium Term Financial Strategy and Capital Strategy, which in turn underpin the Council's budget for 2021/21 and beyond.

## 9 Recommendations

9.1 The Committee is asked to note the Council's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to services for Children and Young People.

### Lead officer contact

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### Appendices

None

### Background papers

None