

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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MEDWAY COVID-19 RECOVERY

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Summary

This report sets out how services for children and young people have been working to ‘Build Back Better’ as part of the recovery strategy from COVID-19.

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. As part of our recovery strategy from COVID-19 we have committed to ensuring that we make the most of this opportunity to ‘Build Back Better’ by implementing new ways of working and in some instances new operational models, as we return to business as usual or the ‘new normal’.

2.2. Our priority, as well as ensuring the safe resumptions of all our services is to identify opportunities for Medway to emerge stronger and more resilient from the pandemic with an exciting agenda ahead. This paper outlines our approach which will be refined over time, but this is an early opportunity to map out the road ahead.

2.3. During 2020 and 2021, COVID-19 and the associated Government restrictions have led to the closure of a wide range of Medway Council’s services, with a

particular impact on discretionary services that are required to generate income through paid for activities.

- 2.4. Our planned approach to recovery is therefore being rolled out in three phases: *Rebound, Rebuild and Reimagine*, over 5+ years. Alongside each of these delivery and implementation phases, we are developing a series of marketing and communications campaigns, to encourage residents and visitors back to our venues, reassuring them that our services will be delivered in a COVID compliant and safe way.

3. Approach Outline

REBOUND – PHASE ONE OF RECOVERY 2021-22

Child-Friendly Medway

- 3.1. We have begun our journey towards becoming a 'Child Friendly Medway' having concluded our first consultation (a survey) with children and young people to find out what it feels like to be a young person living in Medway, their needs and wants, opportunities and aspirations, as well as to understand how children and young people would like to be involved in shaping the future of Medway and the Child-Friendly Medway plan.
- 3.2. We are now starting our second phase of the Child Friendly Medway consultation. Following up on the insights from the survey responses from children and young people on growing up in Medway and their aspirations for the future to determine the key areas of interest and better understand the worries and concerns. We will be facilitating these discussions through focus groups led by the research agency Tonic and the Youth Service.
- 3.3. In July we will be starting our first piece of 'seeing is believing' programming for Child-Friendly Medway, providing opportunities for children and young people. We are delivering eight weeks of drop-in football sessions in six parks across Medway for young people aged 5-16 years old to provide free positive, healthy activities in their local community, and start building momentum for this new initiative and buy-in from the young people, families/carers, and wider community.
- 3.4. Throughout Autumn 2021 we will use this insight to work with young people to develop our vision, plans and marketing. We will be working with young people and professionals through a City Halls (public meetings) approach and focus groups to determine the values, mission, key priorities, and action plan for Child-Friendly Medway. This will provide a meaningful way for young people to be involved in shaping the future of Medway and having a meaningful say in decisions and services and spaces that shape their lives.

Children's Social Care (incl. Improvement Programme)

- 3.5. In 2020, the Children's Social Care Recovery Cell was convened which included key leads across Children's Social Care, Education and Children's Commissioning. Weekly meetings provided oversight and coordination to planning the recovery, ensuring intelligence and information was shared. A phased approach to recovery has been taken, in line with the dates set out in the government roadmap for easing lockdown.
- 3.6. Work has continued with families and vulnerable children including face to face contacts with the most vulnerable, specifically resuming for children subject to child protection plans. Detailed and comprehensive operating procedures have been revised to take account of the Recovery phase and provide staff with clarity on dealing with children and families, how to maintain contact with families, working from home and managing all aspects of child protection planning and processes. These have been communicated to other safeguarding partners. All children and families have been risk assessed and safety plans are in place which determine the level and type of contact required.
- 3.7. The service will return to usual practice beyond the 19 July when social distancing and restrictions are lifted. Operational procedures will be revised to reflect this with priority risk assessments (PRA) and safety plans reactivated if Covid19 situation prevents visiting.
- 3.8. Those parts of the service who have a reliance on buildings for the delivery of services have been adapted to be compliant with social distancing and other health and safety measures, allowing them to resume in a phased way, and have now resumed on a face-to-face basis. e.g., the resumption of group work in Early Help hubs, Youth Services venues and Family Contact at Sunlight Centre.
- 3.9. Wellbeing and resilience of the workforce has been a key focus throughout the pandemic. Vaccinations continue to be actively promoted with good uptake of around 80% of workers. Staff are regularly reminded to continue with asymptomatic testing at least twice a week, even if they have had the vaccine. Testing will help to keep our infection rate low.
- 3.10. The recovery plan has been based on 'blended' working arrangements for each element of the service that will ensure the right balance of face-to-face direct work with children and families, home working, office, and using virtual/remote delivery or creative ways of working where benefits are clear. E.g., virtual meetings have positively impacted attendance of key professionals.
- 3.11. This will include a capability for 'Hybrid' meetings with a mixture of face to face and virtual attendees. E.g., Child Protection Conferences, which involve

families and key professionals. For some buildings this will have a financial cost related to minor alterations and some investment in technology (large screens and communications equipment). The hybrid model is currently being piloted by IT Services and expected to be in place across the service through Autumn 2021.

- 3.12. Despite the challenge of the pandemic, the Improvement Programme has continued unabated. The team has continued to work at pace to make significant improvements within the service and made substantial targeted investment to drive the developments. In May 2021 Medway welcomed a team from Ofsted on a virtual assurance visit to review how well children have been safeguarded during the Covid 19 restrictions. The resulting Ofsted report is encouraging highlighting many areas of progress in embedding change across the service. It also sets out some areas of focus which will be pursued as part of our improvement plan. The Service expects further monitoring visits as part of the ILACS framework throughout 2021-22.

Education and Schools (incl. SEND)

- 3.13. In 2020, the Education Recovery group was convened. Membership of the group comprised of LA officers together with a range of professionals from across all education phases. Weekly meetings brought together education leaders to consider and begin to plan for the recovery phase. Members were solution focused and represented education colleagues across all phases, contexts and the council in order to:
- Share intelligence, gather information and discuss the response to key challenges in response to Secretary of State's directive
 - Work in partnership with a representative from the DfE / Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC)
 - Recognise and share best practice in the current context
 - Align and co-ordinate provision across education settings and the council
 - Ensure effective communication from this group into the *Covid 19: HT Reference group* and colleagues across all education settings
- 3.14. From the outset of this group, members agreed that they would plan beyond the immediate and move towards the recovery phase, addressing identified issues to facilitate effective provision. Immediate issues for consideration were identified as follows:
- Transition back into education settings
 - Transition between phases within and outside of immediate education settings
 - Pupil assessment / grading systems, reporting and moderation arrangements
 - Pupils with an EHCP / SEND / vulnerable / disadvantaged pupils
 - The Medway Test

- University and college applications Sept 2021
 - Provision for children and young people during a school holiday
- 3.15. This group has continued to meet through to the present day to ensure that the full return to school since March 2021 has been coordinated, informed and appropriate to the relevant government legislative directives.
- 3.16. The group is firmly sighted on planning ahead, anticipating emerging issues and providing guidance to stakeholders.
- 3.17. Education provision throughout Medway had been fully reopened since March 2021. Some schools have had to close bubbles, or in two cases the whole school, for a period of time when positive cases occurred, but all services, including home learning, are available for schools and pupils.
- 3.18. SEND pupils have been transported via the councils SEND transport contracts and wherever possible pupils have been transported in their bubbles to minimise cross infection. For Mainstream pupils, public bus services have continued, and duplicate and additional services have been provided to enable social distancing on school buses, which has been funded via a government grant. This will continue to the end of term in mid-July 2021
- 3.19. School catering has been fully available since March 2021 and with the governments covid support grant funding, vouchers for Free School Meal will be provided for eligible pupils during the school holidays.
- 3.20. Schools are expected to fully reopen again after the school summer holidays in September 2021 when the academic year begins. All services will be available, and continued support from the LA will be in place in line with central government directives.
- 3.21. Regular communications with head teachers through meetings and written briefings will continue to ensure all schools are aware of, and can react to, any changes and initiatives that arise.

Children's Commissioned Services

- 3.22. A children and young people's health system wide call was established across Kent and Medway at the start of the pandemic to share best practice, seek solutions to challenges and plan for Covid recovery. This significantly improved communication and provided opportunities to find solutions early on. For example, health services were finding it challenging to enter some schools who were closed to all external visits. The system call enabled us to work with the Education sector in Kent and Medway and develop an agreed standard operating procedure across all health providers when working with schools.
- 3.23. Many frontline health staff were redeployed during the height of the pandemic, this had an impact on the services ability to meet children's needs and also an impact on staff wellbeing. Through the system call we were able to agree

across all community health providers a prioritisation of services so that deployment decisions were made in an informed way that led to minimal disruption in subsequent waves of the pandemic.

- 3.24. In Medway, vulnerable families were prioritised and continued to receive face to face contacts from health visitors. All new birth and 6-8 week maternal mood assessments were carried out face to face (unless a family specifically requested otherwise). 1 year and 2.5 year checks moved to virtual platform (via video link where possible), except for those families risk assessed as vulnerable, where face to face contacts continued. Health visiting worked more closely with social care, with improved information sharing so as to minimise the need for both agencies to visit the home where appropriate.
- 3.25. A data modelling group was established to pull child health related data from across providers to map activity during waves so that future patterns could be predicted. This was especially pertinent for CAMHS who saw a surge in referrals when schools reopened post the first lockdown. The data enabled us to understand capacity in other low to moderate support services and work with schools and GPs around referring appropriately. There continues to be a significant increase in referrals into CAMHS services, to date this has not had increased the waiting times to access Mental Health treatment but as a system we continue to monitor the situation closely and there has been increased investment in crisis services.
- 3.26. Attendance at Emergency Department (ED) and admissions to ward fell dramatically during the pandemic and there is work currently underway through the population health management group to understand what drove this decline and how any behaviour change can be embedded to stop unnecessary attendances at ED.

REBUILD – PHASE TWO OF RECOVERY 2022-23

Child-Friendly Medway

- 3.27. We will develop a clear message and identity to make it easier for businesses and organisations to articulate their support for Child Friendly Medway as a place to live, work and play and stay. In partnership with our education, business community and third sector employees, we will ‘invest’ in children and young people ensuring they have access to the best social and educational opportunities and choices. We hope to develop a skilled workforce capable of ensuring that Medway continues to develop a strong economy.

Children’s Social Care (incl. Improvement Programme)

- 3.28. Our ‘Blended’ working arrangements are expected to be fully operational and embedded through 2022 and beyond, in line with the Council’s wider HR and organisational developments.

- 3.29. Our journey out of intervention to providing good high-quality services will continue at pace in line with clear improvement plans. The timing of any future ILACS inspection is unknown. We will embed the improvements already made and, in lieu of the inspection, respond to any areas of focus highlighted in Ofsted monitoring visits.

Education and Schools (incl. SEND)

- 3.30. Schools will continue to operate through 2022 and beyond as usual, with full support from the LA in line with government directives.
- 3.31. Officers will maintain the excellent relationships and partnerships with schools and academies, to support schools in emerging from the restrictions of coronavirus in a positive way.

Children's Commissioned Services

- 3.32. We will build capacity in our low and moderate mental wellbeing services to address the findings from COVID CYP surveys that told us anxiety was a significant contributor to poor emotional wellbeing.
- 3.33. We will implement the THRIVE approach across Medway so there is a clear and consistent language and understanding in support for children's emotional wellbeing and mental health.
- 3.34. We will develop more community based therapeutic interventions to prevent escalation of need in our children with complex needs.
- 3.35. We will continue to work with parents and carers to shape services to meet our families' needs – coproducing improvements and ensuring a blended approach to digital health services i.e. some families engaged better through virtual services but this solution does not suit all families or all types of health service.
- 3.36. We will continue to work in partnership with Education, social care and health to ensure we take a system wide approach to improving outcomes for children.

REIMAGINE – PHASE THREE OF RECOVERY 2024-Onwards

Child-Friendly Medway

- 3.37. In 2025, Medway will be recognised as a Child Friendly City. We will ensure that children and young people are central to our plans outlined above. We will engage with Medway's children and young people throughout the development process for all the capital projects and community programmes we are delivering. We will also engage with younger adults with a learning or physical disability to identify some of the challenges they may have faced

growing up in Medway. This will support the development process, when we can consider how we overcome the challenges to further support children and young people in Medway’

Children’s Social Care (incl. Improvement Programme)

- 3.38. We will have had a successful Ofsted inspection of our Children’s Social Care, and continue on our journey to providing good, high-quality sustainable services. Services which will champion resilience and independence; working with families to focus on the family’s and the child’s strengths and supporting them to live happy and healthy lives free from harm.

Education and Schools (incl. SEND)

- 3.39. Officers will continue to support schools into the future in line with relevant central government directives to create a first-class education system within Medway, working collaboratively with schools and academy trusts together with FE colleges and universities.
- 3.40. As Medway’s population increases through significant house building, new and expanded schools will form part of an increasingly diverse school system, providing increased choice for residents and an improved local community offer.

4. Risk management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Recovery programme is not adequate	The programme is under resourced and inefficiently planned to support Medway to recover from the pandemic	A robust programme in consultation with all stakeholders.	D1
Another period of lock down	With rising levels of Covid it is possible to see some retrograde in Government policy (i.e. national Covid restrictions being lifted)	Strong communications with Government departments and appropriate monitoring.	B1
A swell of demand post recovery	As residents emerge from restrictions ‘hidden issues’ emerge that might need to augment our service sufficiency planning.	Appropriate modelling and monitoring – regular communication with the most vulnerable along with those on the edge of needing services	D1

5. Financial implications

- 5.1. There are no direct financial implications as a result of the recommendations of this report. However, as services begin to open up changes in key activity data with financial implications will be monitored.
- 5.2. The Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) process is underway and will capture updated projections of the growth and changes in demand for placements including any contractual price increases. The MTFS is due to go to Cabinet on 21 September.
- 5.3. There have been no announcements about the continuation of any COVID grant funding that is currently in place beyond the 2021/22 financial year.

6. Legal implications

- 6.1. There are no direct implications as a result of the recommendations of this report.

7. Recommendation

- 7.1. The Committee is recommended to note the overall approach for the Children and Young People-focused COVID-19 Recovery Plan

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Appendices

None

Background papers

None