HEALTH AND WELLBEING BOARD

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**USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN HEALTH:
LESSONS LEARNED DURING THE PANDEMIC**

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Summary

This paper is a brief overview of some of the ways the Council and in particular the health and social care system in Medway adapted and transformed its services during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The paper highlights a number of innovative practices and lessons learnt in Medway. It also acts as a precursor to the more detailed Annual Public Health Report which will explore these changes in more detail under 3 themes:

1) Digital self-managed care
2) Digitally enabled remote access to services
3) Using digital means to prevent & monitor

It should also be noted that work is underway to inform the Council digital inclusion strategy. This strategy will set out the ambitions and actions that need to be taken in Medway to ensure digital inclusion.

1.   Budget and policy framework

1.1.   The report has no current financial implications. It highlights ways in which services could be designed or accessed in different ways as a result of learning from the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.   Background

2.1.   The COVID-19 pandemic facilitated the most significant and rapid adoptions of digital technology in the history on innovation in the field of health and social care. The pandemic accelerated digital transformation and use of technology. This led to significant changes in working practices and a fundamental rethink in the manner in which services were provided across the public sector more widely. Within health and social care digital innovation

helped to free up bed spaces and increase capacity in acute hospitals; it enabled remote working and therefore a reduction in the risk of people being infected in both social care and NHS settings.

2.2. Even before the pandemic the NHS and Social Care sectors were actively pursuing ambitious digital strategies. NHSX is a joint unit of NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care. This department is tasked with supporting local NHS and care organisations to develop and implement digital solutions to improve efficiency and outcomes for services users and staff. NHSX were in the process of implementing a range of digital programmes across the health and care system. Normally these programmes would take some time to rollout and embed. The coronavirus pandemic resulted in unprecedented changes to the way the health and social care sector delivered services and resulted in the rapid adoption of digital technology in a very short timeframe.

2.3. Community health services and Primary care i have seen a major shift to online. There has been a significant increase in the use of remote appointments. Whilst some have valued the ability to access care and support remotely, there is still an on-going debate around the need to find the most appropriate balance between online remote appointments and face to face interventions and services.

2.4. There has been a widespread adoption in the general use by people of digital remote health services and apps. This increase in uptake is not simply focussed on COVID or similar NHS related apps. Data suggests more people are using things such as e-prescriptions. They are access mental health support from apps such as Kooth. People are connecting more in the workplace and in social contexts via platforms such as Teams, Zoom and Skype. The use of these technologies appear to have become part of normal life for many people of all ages. These behavioural and technological changes have happened at an incredible pace. Both in technical development and roll out of apps and services, health care professionals have had to respond innovatively to continue to provide services. They have had to learn how to successfully and safely use these digital tools.

2.5. Technology has been successfully implemented to both manage the effects of the pandemic. For example, the 111 online service was launched at the start of March 2020 to provide more capacity for people needing advice and support about COVID-19 and to free up NHS call handlers' time. NHS apps were introduced to communicate information about symptoms and guidance around self-isolation, and to create COVID passports. Online booking systems and text message were used by primary care to manage the vaccination programme.

2.6. Text messaging was also utilised to communicate with people who were advised to shield, as well as to check in with people who registered their coronavirus symptoms with NHS 111 online. In Medway we utilised the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) text messaging services to

communicate messages about access to support services, prescription delivery and food parcels as part of the Councils COVID response.

3. Examples of localized transformation

3.1. This paper is not a full review of all of the technological changes that have happened in Medway since the start of the pandemic but merely a snapshot of some of the ways in which we have adapted and innovated in the past 18 months.

3.2 Digital Inclusion

Medway and Kent Public Health teams developed a digital Inclusion pilot throughout 2019 and 2020 to support local people through the pandemic. The scheme supports people offering access to technology and loan of devices, as well as providing them with the skills and confidence to use these tools.

Funding was secured from the Contain Outbreak Management Fund and Interreg (European Policy learning programme fund for local authorities). The Pilot focused on three key areas:
- Vulnerable Families
- Families who needed support with health needs (Mental Health, Weight management, breastfeeding etc)
- Residents 65 and over, who are socially isolated to be able to access social groups and support online.

The digital schemes made available over 120 tablets to Medway residents to borrow for up to 6 months free of charge with up to 20GB of data. It also provided a safe and secured system with targeted specific apps and support. These measures prevented the devices being used for any negative reasons (gambling etc).

In addition to this was the appointment of a digital co-ordinator who was to oversee the project and work with partners such as libraries, Medway Voluntary Action and Mid-Kent college. We developed a network of trained and vetted 'digital champions' to support services users to learn about the devices and use them effectively. A case study (appendix 1) provides some insight into how local people accessed this support.

3.3 Use of apps

Across the system a number of interventions have been developed or procured to reduce the demand on face-to-face services and provide high quality support and interventions through digital innovation. In Medway a number of different systems and apps have been used to great success. Below are a small set and examples of some of those introduced over the past 2 years.

Kooth – Kooth is an online wellbeing community and app which helps children and young people feel safe and to access professional support and guidance. It is available 24/7 and was introduced in Medway in late 2019.

Stay Alive and Hub of Hope – Two new apps for people at risk of suicide to make their safety plans. Stay Alive is Suicide prevention app full of information, support and techniques for people in crisis and risk of suicide. Hub of Hope is a national mental health app and database launched in 2021 and aims to bring an up-to-date list of community charity, private and NHS services together in one place a one-stop shop for adult support services. Both were launched and promoted in Medway during the pandemic.

3.4 **Supporting our partners**

Our Voluntary and community sectors played a significant part in the local response to COVID. Collaboration during the pandemic has served to further strengthen relationships between the Council, the CCG and local people. Public Health launched a Digital fund (managed by Kent Community Foundation Trust) to support the VCS. As part of the Interreg funded social prescribing project PH have secured £50k to set up a digital funding pot for VCS organisations to apply for bids of up to £3,000 to:
- Upgrade current equipment/devices
- Purchase equipment/devices that can be used to support residents
- Pay for training to upskill staff and/or volunteers to be able to deliver services online

This grant aims to support the sector to continue/implement hybrid services so that residents that struggle to, or cannot leave the house (e.g. housebound, people vulnerable to COVID) can still access community groups and support.

3.5 **Use of new social media technologies**

Many Public Sector organisations have traditionally been risk-averse about using new social media channels to communicate with their services users or communities. As a result of findings from two comprehensive Lockdown surveys undertaken with Medway's Young people, Public Health alongside Medway's Communications team commissioned North East London Commissioning Support Unit (NEL CSU) ran an innovative digital campaign aimed at local young people. The focus was on engaging with this cohort using methods that appealed. We were able to support them to protect themselves and others, by sharing the latest COVID guidance using formats such as Tik Tok, Instagram and Snapshot. These media platforms had previously not been used by local authorities. Innovative animations videos were issued during 2019/2020. Evaluation demonstrated huge reach and engagement with the target audience. This was more beneficial as the methods used had not previously been adopted. The campaign resulted in Medway winning a national UK Public Health award for the Campaign in April 2021.

4.   Advice and analysis

4.1   A DPIA was completed for the digital inclusion collaboratively with KCC. This resulted in the additional consultation work undertaken by MVA

5.   Risk management

5.1   Risk management is an integral part of good governance. The Council has a responsibility to identify and manage threats and risks to achieve its strategic objectives and enhance the value of services it provides to the community.

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Long Term Support for digital	Coming out of the pandemic will mean lack of focus and investment in digital and innovation	Developing a Medway Digital Inclusion strategy in collaboration with partners which considers ways to make things sustainable should negate these issues	D3

6.   Consultation

6.1   Significant consultation went into the digital inclusion work and further work with MVA around our local BAME communities is ongoing. Appendix 2 has the full report. There was also significant consultation with the young people of Medway throughout lockdown that informed the digital investment and approach that was taken.

7.   Climate change implications

7.1   [The Council declared a climate change emergency in April 2019](#) – (ref -item 1038D) refers and has set a target for Medway to become carbon neutral by 2050.

7.2   Any digital developments will have a positive impact on the climate. During the pandemic using apps, video conferencing social media will have all reduced our carbon footprint and further measure were put in place to limit social contact where at all possible including the aforementioned examples of collaboration between services.

7.3   Any future digital strategy and APHR should clearly detail anticipated changes to this agenda.

8. Financial implications

8.1 There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

9. Legal implications

9.1 There are no legal implications arising directly from this report.

10. Conclusions

10.1 Medway responded very well to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and introduced a wide variety of digital innovation and services to ensure our residents were engaged and supported. It is clear that some services across the health and social care sector are still better serviced by face-to-face contacts. Digital transformation has been rapid and provides a basis to further vary choice and personalise provision for our residents and services in the future. These findings will be set out in more detail in the Annual Public Health Report and the Digital Inclusion strategy in early 2022.

11. Recommendations

11.1 That Health and Wellbeing Board note the report

11.2 That an item on Digital Inclusion Strategy be included on a future agenda.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Kent & Medway Digital Inclusion Device Loan Scheme

Appendix 2 – Understanding Digital Inclusion in Kent and Medway

Background papers

None