

## **HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**10 MARCH 2022**

### **“BRIDGING THE DIGITAL GAP – IMPROVING HEALTH OUTCOMES THROUGH DIGITAL INNOVATION” ANNUAL REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH 2020 - 2021**

Report from/Author: James Williams, Director of Public Health

#### Summary

Directors of Public Health (DsPH) have a statutory requirement to produce public health reports. These reports are the DsPH's professional statement about the health of the local community.

The 2020-21 report focuses on digital exclusion and the challenge of ensuring that all residents, in particular those who would gain most benefit are able to access digital services.

#### 1. Budget and policy framework

- 1.1. Improving everyone's health and reducing inequalities and improving support for vulnerable adults are identified priorities for Medway Council reflected in the Council Plan 2020/21.
- 1.2. Additionally, the Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2018-2023 and its vision that “the lives of all people in Medway “will be as full, meaningful and healthy as possible” is underpinned by themes including: theme 2 – enabling our older population to live independently and well, theme 4 – improving mental and physical health and wellbeing and theme 5 – reducing health inequalities.

#### 2. Background

- 2.1. Directors of Public Health have a duty to write an Annual Public Health Report. The aim of Annual Public Health Report is to identify issues that are currently, or have the potential to, impact on the health or wellbeing of the local authorities population. Directors of Public Health are tasked with making recommendations to address identified issues.

- 2.2. This Annual Public Health Report is a departure from previous reports. The nature of the significant challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic to the health of the Medway population, renders any comparisons, analysis or progress on actions and previous recommendations set out in previous years extremely difficult. Action is however in hand. A major investigation looking at factors impacting the health of the population of Medway will be completed in 2022. The findings from this work, will be used to undertake a detailed review of the issues and highlight any new challenges affecting the population.
- 2.3. The primary focus of this report (attached at Appendix 1) is digital exclusion. The COVID-19 pandemic has seen a rapid increase in the use of technology. The impact that access to online services and support have on the population is significant. The challenge of ensuring that all residents, in particular those who would gain most benefit are able to access digital services is important.
- 2.4. Digital exclusion clearly has a significant impact on public health. For example the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) suggests there are a number of areas that benefit people who acquire basic digital skills. These include:
- **Earnings:** People who acquire basic digital skills, can increase their earnings by between 3% and 10%
  - **Retail transactions:** Shopping online has been found to be 13% cheaper on average than shopping in-store.
  - **Communication:** Basic digital skills enable people to connect and communicate with family, friends and the community 14% more frequently.
- 2.5. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of digital exclusion. It has also identified the range of benefits that can be achieved through digital innovation. It has given greater impetus regarding actions required to bridge the digital divide. The annual public health report explores a number of concepts associated with digital exclusion and the role that digital innovation can play to empower communities and help address health inequalities within Medway.

### 3. Options

- 3.1. Publishing an Annual Public Health Report is a requirement of the Health and Social Care Act 2012. The report provides a focus on earlier intervention and prevention at scale, which will enable more local people to improve their mental wellbeing.

### 4. Advice and analysis

- 4.1. The Annual Public Health Report sets out a number of recommendations to be considered by all stakeholders and partners in order for the population of Medway to fully benefit from digital transformation:

- 4.1.1 **NHS Services-** The benefits of online access and virtual consultations are well-evidenced. It is however recommended that action is taken to enable those people who for whatever reason, be it choice, lack of knowledge or skill who are unable to use digital technology are not prevented from accessing appropriate NHS services that meet their needs.
- 4.1.2 **Data Sharing-** The pandemic has highlighted the benefits of data sharing and collaboration between agencies. It is important that momentum is maintained. It is recommended that additional engagement work is undertaken to maximise the benefits to local systems from joint working in order to ensure these are not lost when normal 'post pandemic' service delivery models are resumed.
- 4.1.3 **Training and Learning-** Increasing the skills and abilities of our most disadvantaged communities is essential to bridge the gap and tackle the digital inequalities that exist in society. The role that libraries and Medway Adult Education and other stakeholders play to support our most challenged communities has been pivotal throughout the pandemic. It is recommended that additional work be undertaken to determine how to maximise the capabilities of MAE and the library service to address digital disparity within our more challenged communities.

## 5. Health and Wellbeing Board

- 5.1 The report was presented to the Health and Wellbeing Board on 19 February 2022. The minutes of the discussion are as set out in paragraphs 5.2 to 5.3.
- 5.2 Discussion
- 5.2.1 The Director of Public Health (DPH) briefed the Board on his Annual Report 2020 – 2021. He said that pursuant to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a cultural change in people's interaction from conventional face-to-face engagement to online. It was therefore crucial that Medway responded quickly to these challenges. Digital innovation will ensure residents, particularly those who lived independently, had the capability to stay digitally connected and supported if necessary.
- 5.2.2 **Digital poverty** - the Director of People – Children and Adults' Services expressed support for the report's focus on digital exclusion. She informed the Board that at a poll conducted among social care and early help colleagues during the first lockdown, 35% of the families in Medway were experiencing digital poverty. She considered that whilst a laptop was a standard provision in most schools, Medway should seek to eradicate digital poverty ahead of other local authorities.
- 5.2.3 The DPH pointed out that the use of laptops was essential to enable children to access remote education delivered through Zoom or MS Teams. He highlighted the benefits for people who acquired basic digital skills, including increasing earnings, being able to buy cheaper products online and communicating with family and friends more frequently.

5.2.4 **Access to advancing technology:** A Board member commended the idea of improving health outcomes through digital innovation yet cautioned the need to keep up with the rapid technological advancement. This would enable residents to retain access to emerging technologies. This was supported by another member who agreed that whilst the Council was currently making best use of current technology, it should look to review the infrastructure and replace any obsolete devices or technology within any community hubs.

5.2.5 The DPH explained the Council was aware of the need to facilitate access to digital services for the population of Medway. This would support some of the most vulnerable communities to improve their life chances. Local libraries continue to provide essential services for people who need to get online and deal with issues related to employment, benefits, or gain access to health or other services online.

5.2.6 A Board Member advocated eradicating digital exclusion in Medway in five years' time. The member suggested that older people may also benefit from digital innovation. The Council should seek to support elderly people who did not have the equipment or capability to go online. Consideration should be given to providing older adults in need with equipment, to the same extent as that provided to children. This would enable all local people to access free WIFI via future capability being implemented across Medway, for example through the use of the lighting columns as WIFI base stations.

5.2.7 The Joint Senior Responsible Officer (JSRO), Medway and Swale Integrated Care Partnership, highlighted the provision of an iPad library to loan equipment to care homes without this technology, This equipment was made possible through subsidized arrangements with IT suppliers. The JSRO stated that action was being taken to improve internet access for the primary care networks (PCNs) in Strood and the Peninsula. Further work was being undertaken to explore the feasibility of linking the PCN systems with other clinical systems.

5.2.8 The DPH informed the Board there was a commitment within the NHS to increase the capacity and capability of service users to get the most benefit from improvements in technology. This would help residents get the most value from their interaction and engagement with the NHS and other services digitally.

5.2.9 Members expressed their appreciation for the report.

5.3 Decision:

5.3.1 The Health and Wellbeing Board noted the Annual Report of the Director of Public Health 2020-2021.

## 6. Risk management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Not addressing the digital skills gap	People experiencing digital exclusion are subjected to increased risk of inequality. They are unable to access services or gain insight on issues that affect their health and wellbeing.	Adopt the recommendations set out in the report	D2

## 7. Consultation

7.1 In common with previous Annual Public Health Reports, evidence is gained from a number of different sources. Once finalised, the report and its recommendations will be shared with a range of organisations and committees. The report will also be presented to a range of council committees. These include the Health and Wellbeing Board, Health and Adult Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Cabinet and other forums.

## 8. Financial implications

8.1 Any resources required to deliver ambitions set out in this report will be found through existing service or organisational budgets.

## 9. Legal implications

9.1 The Annual Public Health Report is an independent report of the Director of Public Health as set out in Section 73B(5) & (6) of the NHS Act 2006, inserted by section 31 of the Health and Social Care Act 2012 a. Local Authorities are required to publish the Director of Public Health's Annual Public Health Report.

## 10. Recommendations

10.1 The Committee is asked to:

- a) note the comments of the Health and Wellbeing Board.
- b) note the Annual Public Health Report 2020/21.

## Lead officer contact

James Williams, Director of Public Health

Email: [James.williams@medway.gov.uk](mailto:James.williams@medway.gov.uk) Tel: 01634 332480

## Appendices

Appendix 1 – Annual Public Health Report 2020/21

## Background papers

None