

Minutes of the meeting of the **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held as a Teams Live Events remote meeting on Monday, 11 January 2021 at 6.00 pm

Present:

Chairman: Councillor C D Zosseder

Councillors: M Bates
S H Beer
T A Bond
S C Manion
J Rose
M Rose
R S Walkden
P Walker
H M Williams

Officers: Democratic Services Manager
Democratic Services Officer

64 APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence received.

65 APPOINTMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

The Democratic Services Manager advised that no notice had been received for the appointment of substitute members.

66 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made by Members.

67 REVIEW OF FOOD POVERTY IN THE DOVER DISTRICT

The Chairman welcomed the invited attendees to the meeting and thanked them for attending to answer the Committee's questions in respect of the levels of Food Poverty in the Dover District.

Kent County Council (Cllr S S Chandler, Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services)

Councillor S S Chandler advised that in addition to her own Cabinet Portfolio she was representing Councillor R Long, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills.

Kent County Council (KCC) provided a range of support for families, including assistance for families with managing everyday life and ensuring that children attended schools and had access to free school meals where eligible. There were also a number of projects such as proper nutrition and helping families budget for food that KCC supported.

Since the start of lockdown as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, KCC had continued to provide school places for vulnerable children and the children of key workers, including the provision of free school meals. It was recognised that not all

families that would be eligible for free school meals were registered and schools were encouraging eligible families to do so.

During the October 2020 half term, KCC had distributed 20,000 supermarket vouchers worth £15 per child to those families who were eligible for free school meals. For the Christmas holidays, 31,984 supermarket vouchers worth £30 per child had been distributed to those eligible for free school meals. The vouchers were predominantly through ASDA or Tesco, although schools had local flexibility to vary this where these stores were not available such as in Sandwich where Co-Op vouchers had been provided. In contrast with the October 2020 vouchers, the vouchers at Christmas were automatically sent directly to eligible families and did not need to be applied for. Arrangements were also being put in place for the February 2021 half-term. The Government had made funding available for free school meals to be provided for the Easter 2021 holiday and KCC was waiting on further details. The success of the voucher schemes had seen an increase in take up for free school meals.

It was recognised that early assistance was very important for long term outcomes and KCC supported groups such as Home-Start to assist with this. The early help support provided by KCC was not based solely on income but on a range of factors.

Members enquired as to the level of take up for free school meals and were advised that schools had an important role in identifying potentially eligible children. At schools, steps were taken to ensure that children in receipt of free school meals could not be identified as such.

Dover, Deal and District Citizens Advice Bureau (Jan Stewart, Chief Officer)

Although Dover, Deal and District Citizens Advice Bureau had not been able to see people face-to-face during the pandemic, they had worked to ensure that everyone could be seen by alternative methods such as by telephone or online. The Dover, Deal and District Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) had dealt with 4,804 people (87% of which were on less than £480 per month) since August 2020 about a range of issues, not just food poverty. This including assisting with housing issues, benefits and mental health issues. They were also still helping people with issues that had occurred during the first phase of lockdown.

For the period August – December 2020, the Dover, Deal and District Citizens Advice Bureau had issued 330 food vouchers.

The Dover, Deal and District Citizens Advice Bureau had created a hardship fund of £7,000 to help those who had been unable to receive help elsewhere. The hardship fund was used to provide basic essentials but was now struggling to find grants to help feed people.

The Dover, Deal and District Citizens Advice Bureau had seen demand for its services increase by 12% per year on average over the last 10 years. Since April 2020 there had been a 393% increase in demand for services. However, the grant received by the Dover, Deal and District Citizens Advice Bureau had not increased in the last 8 years. In response to a question over what any increase in funding could be used for, Members were advised that an increase in the hardship fund or to recruit additional expertise in employment.

Riverside Centre, Dover (Maggie Paterson, Centre Manager)

The Riverside Centre supported people over 55 years and older with information, advice (including about benefits), support (including befriending services) and help with shopping for essentials. It had 93 clients. The biggest issue faced by people was access to facilities or the ability – mainly physical but some also lacked the knowledge - to cook.

A hardship fund had been created to provide hot meals for one week while a referral was made to a food bank and 17 referrals had been made in the last 12 months. It could also provide a loan if required while people were waiting for benefits. Those under 55 in need of support that contacted the Riverside Centre would be referred to Dover, Deal and District Citizens Advice Bureau.

Due to restrictions during lockdown Riverside was unable to provide meals at the centre and had started a meal delivery service which provided affordable and nutritional two course meals.

The service received some referrals from an NHS social provider. However, the lockdown had impacted on the usual methods it used to promote its services.

The Riverside Centre had following the first lockdown run a confidence building session for those whose mental health had been affected. The Centre had provided a vital resource to tackle social isolation before it had been forced to close due to lockdown measures.

Home-Start Dover (Tracy Perrow, Scheme Manager)

Home-Start provide support to families where at least one child was under 11 years of age. The work was undertaken by a small team supported by volunteers and Home-Start had seen a reduction in the number of volunteers available as part of the pandemic.

The principle of early intervention was important to achieving positive outcomes and Home-Start had funding to for intensive support (at least 3 contacts per week) which was shown to result in dramatic improvements.

The majority (80%) of the families being supported were due to poverty with the remainder due to disability. There were a number with large families (5 – 7 children) and often there was a lack of knowledge around cooking. This had been addressed through cookery demonstrations with donated fresh food before the coronavirus pandemic.

Prior to the pandemic, Home-Start had worked with Tesco and Fareshare to distribute food to those in need. During the Pandemic, Home-Start had £1500 of ALDI vouchers (limited to food only) which had been distributed in £50 blocks to families. This helped free up income to be used to cover basic utility costs.

Home-Start received referrals from social services, schools and pre-schools and had 20 families on its waiting list. It had also seen a small number of families enter the area fleeing abuse that often had nothing with them and needed emergency support. They had seen an increase in families suffering from domestic abuse during the coronavirus pandemic.

They had also issued 25 food bank vouchers.

The Chairman thanked the attendees for their time and responses to the Committee's questions.

The meeting ended at 7.41 pm.