

The Covid-19 helpline within the Kent and Medway Growth hub was set up early in lockdown in March, sponsored by KCC. Up to 24th July it had received 8,470 phone calls; dealt with 1,890 queries via the web chat line; providing 3,301 individual phone based advice sessions.

The Maidstone and Ashford areas have seen the greatest level of use. Hospitality and Leisure services have made the most contacts, just ahead of retail businesses. The Agriculture sector has made fewest contacts. 53% of the enquiries related to the Business Rates Relief Grant, the highest topic for queries.

This week saw the rebranding of the Covid-19 Helpline and the launch of the Business Recovery Workshop programme with 190 businesses registering in the first few days. The workshops and one to one sessions begin over the next few weeks to help businesses assess what action they can take to increase the chances of their business continuing to trade.

A few businesses continue to seek clarity around the re-opening of certain sectors, but in general most seem comfortable with their understanding of their obligations. Perhaps surprisingly, the introduction of the face mask guidance didn't cause as much concern as anticipated as this appears to have been seen as a consumer requirement rather than a business issue.

There has been a worrying number of calls relating to redundancy and it may be that, as forecast a few weeks ago, this is the lagged effect of the economic shock associated with lockdown starting to play out. Access to cash flow is still a focus of attention. Conversations suggest that some businesses are reluctant to take on further debt; as they don't have confidence in their future trading strength.

The shift from high street to online continues at pace, as retailers seek to replace the losses in footfall. While some areas have seen the benefits of pent up demand, most see the need for an online presence as being critical.

KCC will continue to provide all the support it can to businesses struggling to recover and thrive.

A video for schoolchildren using the bus to and from school from September is planned, which will feature in special 'back to school' newsletters for parents of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), Disability and residents, as well as being promoted on social media. Kent Communications is also working with Strategic Commissioning, Headstart

and the NHS on an article for these newsletters and elsewhere to help parents and schools support children coming back to school who might be particularly anxious or worried. All communications will be fully covered on kent.gov, including information on parental expectations of specific transport options for eligible learners.

While on the subject of school transport, detailed transport guidance from the DfE has been expected for over four weeks, since school return announced, and is still awaited. However, initial planning for transport services is underway, based on the current guidance. Guidance has been provided to schools to explain current limitations on the transport available, but focussing on what planning can still be completed. Clear communication lines for all schools enabling them to raise individual concerns have been established.

SEN students will be provided their normal hired transport and mainstream students entitled to transport will continue to be provided with either dedicated hired vehicles or a season ticket on a local bus.

Initial guidance for these pupils does not require social distancing on dedicated school transport vehicles, due to the consistent cohort and lack of interaction with the general public. Social distancing and face covering requirements are clear for different pupils on different types of transport and will be implemented. The schools transport team has worked with local bus operators to identify services which can be designated as for schools only, which increases on-vehicle capacity to 70% from the normal 50%.

The application window for the Kent Travel Saver remains open. Applications made by the 9th August are guaranteed a pass in time for start of term. The application process for free school transport has been available throughout the lockdown period and applications are being submitted.

The cost of KCC subsidising school travel passes for parents amounts to £8 million annually, from its budget. Not all county councils around Britain provide such a scheme and this should be viewed as a privilege and not a right, for it could be withdrawn if KCC has to make savings as a result of COVID-19 creating a financial drain on its funds.

There are currently 508, under 18-year-old, unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) in the County. There have been 331 new arrivals since the start of the year, including 50 young people so far in July.

Quarantining of young people arriving was stopped on 10th July in line with government guidance (unless they have been in a Country not on the exempt list within the previous 14 days). This enabled Oakwood House, which had previously been used for those quarantined, to be taken out of use. All young people are now housed at Millbank, Swattenden, Appledore, and the Mansion House, with Oakwood House being kept as contingency accommodation in case there is a sudden rise in numbers or the requirement to quarantine all those arriving from France is reintroduced.

As of today, 75 young people have moved to other Local Authorities as part of the partially revitalised National Transfer Scheme, with a further 10 moving this week. We are grateful to our colleagues working in other local authorities for this and the other 137 offers of placement that have come through. The service is working hard to match young people to the pledges made.

It is worth noting that there have been no known Covid-19 cases among the new arrivals.

The Integrated Children's Services team have been working with colleagues in Strategic Commissioning to model the potential latent demand that may be seen in September, when all children are back in school. The service has been carefully looking at the trends in referrals across the County during recent months as there have been some clear differences across the districts and is making preparations at the Front Door to ensure there are sufficient staff to process referrals from our partners. It is, of course, to be hoped that the latent demand will not materialise, but this seems unlikely and the consequent pressure on resources will be significant.

Finally, I am very concerned at the loss of employment some members of our community may suffer due to the impact of COVID-19 on local businesses, including some of the major ferry companies at Dover Port, even though some of these companies took advantage of the Central Government financial schemes.

I would like to assist those who have been made redundant to become reemployed quickly to stave off financial problems along with the worries that brings.

To this end, if anyone on my ward has been made redundant, please email me, I require NO NARRATIVE, just first and family name, email address,

contact telephone landline and mobile number, type of occupation before redundancy, any particular additional skills e.g. class1 HGV driver, qualified mechanic, seamstress, etc. By sending me your email, you accept and agree to giving me open permission to pass your details on to a potential recruiter. I will not reply to your emails, other than acknowledge its receipt.

If you operate your own business or control a major business and you require one or more staff, full or part time, once more I require no narrative just your first and family name the name of the company, farm or small holding contact email address and phone number. Just email to me the type and number of job vacancies you have. Once more I will only acknowledge receipt of your email.

My intention is to get those who have suddenly lost an income back to receiving an income quickly, to ease any major financial worries and to support local industry grow. To do this, all my role will be is to pass the details of those unemployed to business operators and farmers who require staff.

Whilst I encourage those who are out of work to sign on at the Department for Work and Pensions, hopefully, if we all work to support each other, should you be unemployed you may be recruited sooner and then this will ease the case load for the DWP too.

Finally, those unemployed who may consider this is the time to start their own business. My advice, really research that business, is there a market? be honest with yourself, do you have the discipline, the energy, the tenacity and strength of character and knowledge to actually run such a business, are you prepared to put in the time ? Are you prepared to listen and learn? If you feel you have what it takes, drop me a brief line stating what type of business you would like to consider starting, explain why you believe there is a market by evidencing your beliefs, explain how you intend to fund it and I may be able to assist you further with advice. One of my many roles at KCC is "start up business enterprise and support." I am contactable on email address Geoff.Lymer@kent.gov.uk.

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