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## **Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**4 April 2024**

### **Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Business Management**

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Zoe Van Dyke, Portfolio Holder for Business Management

#### Summary

This annual report provides an account of the role of the Portfolio Holder for Business Management. It details their ambitions for their areas of responsibility, how they have and will undertake political challenge and leadership and what their priorities and ambitions are for the year ahead.

#### 1. Recommendations

1.1. The Committee is asked to note the report.

#### 2. Budget and policy framework

2.1. The areas within the terms of reference of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and covered by the Portfolio Holder for Business Management as set out in the Council's constitution are:

- Benefits and Financial Welfare Services,
- Category Management and Procurement,
- Complaints policy and management,
- Council Tax and business rates administration and recovery,
- Customer and Business Support (CABS),
- Human resources (HR),
- Internal Audit and Counter Fraud, and
- Legal.

#### 3. Background

3.1. My portfolio is both broad and technical, and comprises most of the strategic support services that are so vital to enabling the rest of the Council's services to deliver for our residents. Managing our business well is fundamental to securing financial sustainability for Medway Council and I am very proud and grateful to the staff in my portfolio and across the

Council that the CIPFA resilience review and the reports from our External Auditors concluded that we are doing so, as they found no financial or governance failings.

#### 4. Providing political leadership and challenge

- 4.1. I meet regularly with the officers responsible for managing the services in my portfolio. I am briefed on the day to day activity and performance of each service, am engaged in the development of the services and any transformational change, and discuss risks, issues and opportunities. I led the 'one minute Medway' segment in December 2023 and highlighted the Make A Difference awards which are a vital tool the HR service leads to recognise the excellent work of the Council's staff. I supported the expanded Benefits and Financial Welfare Team and worked across portfolios with the Leader to introduce the Cost of Living Plan. The Council Tax, Business Rates and Recovery teams played a significant role in helping the Council to balance the budget for 2024/25 with a range of initiatives to invest in more staff to deliver increased income to the Council.
- 4.2. Beyond the work of the services in my portfolio, I am a member of the Kent and Medway Fire and Rescue Authority and also contribute to the following groups:
- Climate Change Working Party
  - Member Development Advisory Group.

#### 5. Championing the Interests of service users and Medway residents

- 5.1. I have worked with the Benefits and Financial Welfare Team and the Leader to ensure that the Council maximises the use of the Household Support Fund to benefit Medway's most vulnerable residents and am proud that we are on track to distribute the fund in full for 2023/24. I am also proud that our Council Tax Reduction Scheme continues to support those least able to pay their Council Tax, with the support for our Care Leavers continuing for 2024/25 and the income bands being uprated to make sure all those on the scheme benefit in full from the government's benefit increases next year.
- 5.2. I'm proud that the HR service supported the Council and the Unions to agree a 5% cost of living increase for Medway Council staff, more than 80% of whom live in Medway. The work of the team to support the the MedPay review which will continue into next year, will be instrumental to improving the Council's staff recruitment and retention rates, in turn enabling us to improve the delivery of our services for residents.
- 5.3. I receive and monitor monthly performance reports in respect of the customer contact channel, complaints and Blue Badges, in particular. Performance across the year has been very good, with customers dealt with promptly and effectively. I am satisfied that the service closely

manages performance and addresses any adverse deviation, quickly and thoroughly.

## 6. Support for key service areas

### 6.1. Benefits and Financial Welfare Services

- 6.1.1. In January 2023, a new service was approved to cover Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction Assessment, Discretionary Financial Assistance, Macmillan Welfare Benefits Service, and a team of Housing Related Support Officers. From January 2024, the service has been extended further to include a Welfare and Debt advice team and an extension of the Macmillan Welfare Benefits Service by expanding into North and West Kent at Macmillan's request.
- 6.1.2. Macmillan – The Macmillan Welfare Benefits Team has operated within the Council for over a decade. The team increased the income for the patients they supported in 2022/23 by more than £3million in total. Macmillan have confirmed that they would fully fund both the service for residents of Medway, West and North Kent.
- 6.1.3. Council Tax Reduction – The current caseload is 16,189 as at 29 February 2024, up from 15,141 in February 2022. The spend for Council Tax Reduction has increased to £14.5m due to the increased caseload.
- 6.1.4. Discretionary Housing Payments – Medway has been awarded £484,162 for 2023 to provide additional assistance. Between 1 April 2023 and 6 March 2024, awards to the value of £396,385.92 have been paid from the fund.
- 6.1.5. Energy Bills Support Scheme – The scheme provided a £400 discount on energy bills for winter 2022/2023. Under the Energy Bills Support Scheme Alternative Funding, £221,600 was paid to 554 Medway households. The Alternative Fuel Payment scheme paid £34,200 to 171 Medway Households.
- 6.1.6. Household Support Fund – In September 2021, the government announced the introduction of a new fund known as the Household Support Fund. The fund is worth £2,262,463 every six months. From April 2023, the fund was awarded on an annual basis, however from April 2024 it has reverted to a six-monthly award. Over £11,000m has been distributed to Medway Households

### 6.2. Category Management and Procurement

- 6.2.1. The Category Management team continues to work with and support all services in achieving value for money and exploring more efficient ways of working. With a small team and high case load per officer, the ability to step back and horizon scan, coupled with apprehension from services to change, does prove challenging. Although mandatory, the introduction of

the 'Core Responsibility' training has facilitated a greater coverage of the team's purpose and engages services much earlier in the procurement cycle to make engagement more proactive.

- 6.2.2. The team continues to update the Forward Procurement Plan to support and implement more comprehensive Strategic Sourcing Plans. This will require cultural change as repetitive procurements will become a thing of the past. Again though, this is resource dependent, so with a reluctance to change and resource pressures in many services, progress in this area has been less than desired.
- 6.2.3. The team continues to constructively challenge colleagues in a way that generates demonstrable benefits. We've introduced a standard application of Social Value on all tenders, supporting and promoting local employment, opportunities and wider benefits that are managed as part of contract management.
- 6.2.4. Whilst not a direct deliverable of the Category Management team, inconsistencies with contract management have become a concern. The team annually presents the Procurement Strategy with a focus in the forthcoming year on Contract and Relationship Management; and although guidance and documentation to support this is provided with all contract managers, training will be created and delivered in due course as well as the exploration and enforcement of a new system to support such endeavours.

### **6.3. Customer and Business Support (CABS)**

- 6.3.1. CABS provides the authority's primary customer contact channel and a centralised administration support function, so is an essential part of the delivery supply chain, touching most council services and many customers. CABS operates on a blended role basis, moving resources to where most needed. CABS incorporates the Customer Relations Team (CRT), the Community Interpreting Service (CIS) and delivers the Blue Badge service for Medway residents.
- 6.3.2. Customer Contact Management:
- 6.3.3. CABS manages the first point of contact for advice and information, and for service requests, for (including, but not exhaustively) Revenues and Benefits, Social Care, Planning, Housing, Home Choice, Environment, Waste, Highways, Leisure, School Admissions, Free School Meals and School Transport, and Libraries. Service extends to face to face initial support at Kingsley House in Gillingham. Helping residents to access services and information, includes promoting and supporting self-serve.
- 6.3.4. In the period 1 April 2023 to 31 January 2024 CABS dealt with an average of 25,000 phone enquiries per month, achieving around a 91% achievement for calls answered for year to date.

- 6.3.5. Administration:
- 6.3.6. CABS staff are cross trained to also cover administration roles, with resource being flexed to match demand, also providing greater resilience. Administration roles include minute taking, transcription of PACE interview notes, document scanning and indexing, document uploads, land searches, and a raft of financial administration including placing orders and processing payments.
- 6.3.7. By year end, around 140 safeguarding meetings will have been supported, and the team will have made around 8000 social care referrals. Around 4300 integrated discharge cases will also have been handled by CABS, supporting the NHS with hospital discharges into care arrangements.
- 6.3.8. CABS assesses and processes Older Person's and Disabled Bus Pass applications and between April 2023 and January 2024 processed 9,579 applications, with 95% (9,057) processed within in the six weeks target time. Administration tasks and responsibilities are currently under review, to streamline processes and most effectively use resources.
- 6.3.9. Compliments, Complaints and Feedback
- 6.3.10. The Customer Relations Team (CRT) provides a professional complaints management and reporting service, and supports complaint handlers across the authority, placing an important focus on learning from complaints to improve service delivery. The CRT acts as the interface with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) and as guardian of complaint response thoroughness and timeliness. The Customer Relations Manager has continued to deliver regular Customer Complaint training and operates a pan-council Complaint Handlers Group, to better understand complaints performance and promote shared learning.
- 6.3.11. The CRT is currently implementing a new LGSCO [Complaint Handling Code](#), following its consultation in November 2023, to which Medway Council responded. The new code will mean some changes to the way Medway Council processes and handles complaints.
- 6.3.12. The council continues to receive many encouraging compliments about its corporate service, with more than one compliment received for every three complaints. A total of 1101 stage one complaints was received from 1 April 2023 to 31 January 2024, and 143 stage two complaints for the same period. Year to date performance for stage one corporate complaints reached 87.6% at the end of Q3, exceeding the council's 10-day response target of 80%. Performance for responding to the more complex stage two corporate complaints reached 73.5% at the end of Q3, falling just short of the council's 15-day response target of 75%. Performance was strong in both Children's and Adult's social care complaints, with Children's Social Care achieving 91.7% and Adult Social Care achieving 95.5% by the end of Q3, both far exceeding the council's target of 75%.

- 6.3.13. Community Interpreting Service (CIS)
- 6.3.14. The Community Interpreting Service (CIS) offers translation and interpretation in over 60 languages to help provide equal access to services to those for whom English is not their first language. This extends beyond the authority, with the NHS, schools and other public services being prominent clients. During the period 1 April 2023 to 31 January 2024, CIS received:
- 6.3.15. 7098 requests for interpreting and translation services, of which: Face to Face interpreting appointments numbered: 3111 (44% of total demand) Remote (telephone or video) appointments totalled: 3547 (50% of total demand) Translation assignments amounted to: 440 (6% of total demand). CIS interpreters supported 194 services, including Medway Council, the NHS, and other clients.
- 6.3.16. Blue Badges
- 6.3.17. CABS manages the council's Blue Badge service in line with the Department for Transport's legislation, offering an online application process with digital assistance when needed. Against a 12-week processing target, the cumulative year to date performance is 97% (4,143) processed within target and 59% (2,536) better than target (processed within six weeks).
- 6.3.18. Customer and Business Support (CABS) plays a significant part in facilitating Medway residents and visitors to easily access council services and information. Reporting to the Head of Customer Experience, and working as part of the Information Section, the onus is on continuous improvement and modernisation, promoting customer self-serve, but whilst retaining customer choice of contact methods. The administration element of CABS offers services a resilient, flexible, centralised administration resource, allowing them to focus on core activities.
- 6.3.19. I am fully supportive of the service and the work which is being undertaken, and I am committed to supporting continued progress towards ease of access to council services, to customer choice and to the efficiencies and reliability that a centralised administration service offers. The team has a significant part to play in the delivery of the authority's Financial Improvement and Transformation Plan, improving service and saving costs.

#### **6.4. Council Tax and business rates administration and recovery**

- 6.4.1. Council Tax – The collection rate at the end of February 2024 was 92.04% compared to 92.68% at the same time last year. The main reasons for the slight drop are the fact that last year's collection rate was boosted by the energy rebates that were credited to council tax accounts, and this year the amount of council tax to be collected has recently increased due to the review of single person discounts. The review commenced in October 2023 and all 38,000 discount cases were checked against credit data to see if

there was any indication of another resident at the property. This resulted in 8,000 review letters being issued, and following completion of the review in December, over 1,600 discounts were cancelled generating an additional £570,000 due to be collected this year. It was anticipated that collection rates would be affected by the ongoing cost of living crisis but the impact appears to be fairly low at this stage. A number of changes are being introduced from April 2024 in respect of empty homes which will increase council tax income and will also serve to discourage properties being left empty longer than necessary:

- The 100% premium on empty properties has been brought forward so that it will be charged after a property has been empty for one year rather than two.
- There will no longer be a 3-month period when no council tax is payable after a property is vacated.
- There will no longer be a 12-month period when no council tax is payable where a property is uninhabitable.

The above changes are expected to generate an additional £1.7m income in council tax for the council. Additionally, from April 2025, a 100% premium will become payable on furnished properties that are not occupied (e.g. second homes).

- 6.4.2. Business Rates – The collection rate at the end of February 2024 was 94.06% compared to 95.88% this time last year. The deficit compared to last year has dropped significantly over the past few months and this trend is anticipated to continue in the final month.
- 6.4.3. My Council Tax Online – The customer portal for council tax is continuing to be developed, with modules enabling residents to report moves in a more simplified way and claim or cancel single person discounts, to be rolled out before the end of March. We now have over 13,000 residents signed up with more than 8,000 opting for paperless billing which is helping to reduce postage and printing costs and deliver a more modern and environmentally friendly service to our residents. These numbers are continuing to increase and will hopefully be boosted as the annual council tax bills being delivered this month now include a QR code to make it even easier to sign up.
- 6.4.4. Recovery – In 2023/24 the Magistrates Court granted 13,600 Liability Orders for non-payment of Council Tax and to support customers in enabling them to self-serve and set up their own payment plans we have rolled out a payment plan module within My Council Tax Online. It offers Council Tax residents the flexibility to set up their own payment plans which will auto accept or are reviewed by the Corporate Debt Team if outside of system parameters In recognition that financial circumstances can change from one month to the next this functionality provides residents with the flexibility to increase / decrease payment plans to clear arrears in line with their ability and to have an immediate response. From April 2024 we will be promoting this service on letters and electronic communications sent to encourage engagement and take up. Furthermore in 2024 two additional members of staff will be recruited to invest to save posts to deal with high value arrears cases. They will be responsible for engaging and supporting

vulnerable customers together with the Benefits and Financial Welfare team, as well as progressing high level arrears cases where ability to pay has been identified to improve Council Tax collection. The Council Tax (Administration and Enforcement) Regulations 1992 permit the Council to apply for reasonable associated costs in taking a case to the Magistrates Court and obtaining a Liability Order. The cost to the Council in issuing a Summons has not been reviewed for approximately 10 years, we also incur costs between Summons and Liability order application stage which are not recovered. Council Tax residents not in arrears are therefore picking up the costs not covered by the existing £80 summons costs. A review of the associated costs that can be passed on to residents who will receive a summons will increase to a contribution of £95 from the 01 April 2024 and Liability Order costs will be introduced at £25.

## **6.5. Human Resources Organisational Culture Team (HROC)**

- 6.5.1. The HROC Team provides support to the organisation, as well as schools on a number of matters across external relations, organisational change, payroll, pension, recruitment, and learning
- 6.5.2. Employee Engagement is a large part of what we do, The HR team co-ordinates and supports the Medway Maker engagement champions. They are a selection of motivated individuals who care about people matter across Medway Council. They are a proactive 'sounding board' for prospective change and new initiatives. The group have been active in areas such as the development of our Press Pause Campaign, supporting the children in care Christmas appeal as well as other key initiatives.
- 6.5.3. With the closure of our Head Quarters a short survey was sent to all staff to gain insight into current working arrangements and the aspirations for future working arrangements. In addition, our annual staff survey will be going out to staff in May, this will provide valuable insight of staff opinion across a wide range of employment areas, which will aid our tracking against our Employee Engagement Survey.
- 6.5.4. As part of our ongoing work, we have now launched a set of new Values for the organisation. To support the launch an Managers 'lets talk' framework has been produced and provides a script and useful tips, tools and suggestions to support our managers engage with their staff.
- 6.5.5. The Medpay Review is a critical project for us. The aim of the Review is to ensure that the Council retains, attracts and recruits a talented workforce, whilst supporting career progression. We want to retain the skills and talents in our workforce, be an employer of choice and have transparent and fair pay structures.
- 6.5.6. The Pilot phase resulted in twelve teams implementing between May 2023 and Jan 2024. We are currently in phase 2 and have onboarded cohorts 1 and 2 to date. To support the implementation of this project we have procured a new salary benchmarking system and an automated job evaluation system, developed a new policy to replace Market Premia,

namely Skills Shortage and Retention Allowance policy, developed a new MedPay PPP policy and made proposals to Council to make changes to the pay scale, firstly to create a £500 gap between ranges and secondly, to lift the bottom of Range 3 to create a pay range within Range 2.

- 6.5.7. We have also revised the PDR process and are rolling out a new performance appraisal scheme across the organisation which includes a career conversation and reflections on how individuals are role modelling and demonstrating the new Our Council Values and Behaviours. We have also adopted the 9 box grid, known as our 9 box development diamond to manage succession and talent across the team, a key tool to support our workforce strategy.
- 6.5.8. The project has robust monitoring and review mechanisms in place. An evaluation report of phase 1 was taken to Employment Matters Committee in January 2024. Although early, there have been positive results in relation to significantly improved turnover rates. Communication and engagement are key so we have established communications champions across the directorates, delivered training, staff and manager briefings, onboarding sessions, a regular MedPay Review newsletter, information on MedSpace, intranet and regularly attend Medway Makers. There has also been regular opportunity for feedback to the project through surveys and face to face and from CMT.
- 6.5.9. HRBP's and Organisational Change Consultants support managers to compile business cases and design fit for purpose staff structures and manage TUPE transfers. There have been several significant reorganisations this year, for example, Education & SEND, Legal, Public Health and Planning, that have been implemented this year. This also involves the writing and evaluating of new job profiles and supporting staff subject to redeployment. We provide regular reports to Employment Matters Committee to keep them informed of these changes and the impact to the workforce.
- 6.5.10. We have developed and had approval from Employment Matters Committee for our first Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan. This is an ambitious plan from where we are starting from as an organisation and we will continue to iterate and develop this year on year. The action plan focuses on four key areas - Leadership, Data led, Empowering and enabling colleagues to thrive and prosper, and ensuring all colleagues are valued and can contribute to our success. We are working with colleagues in Public Health on scoping the Turning the Tide project, initially developed in the NHS focusing on race inequality. Next steps are to develop a communications plan for the strategy, engaging all relevant stakeholders in the delivery of the action plan, and reviewing the role of the Equality Board.
- 6.5.11. We monitor and report on our Gender Pay Gap which is at a 5 year low with a mean of 6.91% compared to a national average last year of 14.3%.

We will undertake further analysis to understand the reasons for the pay gap.

- 6.5.12. Our Talent Acquisition Team undertake the recruitment and onboarding of all permanent, casual and fixed term contract employees, for not just our own organisation but Gravesham Borough Council and schools, which purchase our services annually. They also coordinate all work experience placements and administer the DBS checking service for all eligible staff working within Medway Council plus the many umbrella body organisations which purchase this service.
- 6.5.13. This year we effectively undertook the advertising, shortlisting and recruitment for our Director of Place and Assistant Director Community & Culture roles fully in-house, without the use of an external agency, saving the organisation c.£45 - £50k. Some example stats for this busy team. 1 April and 31 December 2023 - 780 adverts placed, 673 new starter contracts issued and 862 DBS applications processed.
- 6.5.14. Our Apprenticeship Academy undertakes the recruitment and onboarding of all apprentices into our organisation plus the registering of existing staff who are upskilling via an apprenticeship programme. They undertake the procurement and commissioning of all training providers and the quality assurance of their programme delivery. All apprentice activities and development opportunities are also undertaken by the Academy.
- 6.5.15. Career progression apprenticeships for developing existing staff a priority. 6 Social Workers Apprentices started their programmes in March 2024. Our Apprenticeship Levy spend on programmes, since its inception in 2017, has just reached £4 million. We have never lost any levy funding back to the Government. We currently have 154 apprenticeship programmes being undertaken with 63 of those being apprentices in apprenticeship posts.
- 6.5.16. Our Temporary Recruitment Team undertake the recruitment and onboarding of all locum, consultant and project teams ensuring our services are resourced to meet their statutory responsibilities. This team is heavily focused on working with our Children & Adults social care teams to support their workforce needs and has recently absorbed Children's permanent recruitment, bringing together shared knowledge around workforce structural requirements; and aligning processes to improve delivery to support this service.
- 6.5.17. This team is currently undergoing an IR35 audit with the Audit & Counter Fraud team to ensure our processes are compliant with the HMRC regulations and avoid the risk of potential fines from HMRC if our status determinations for tax are deemed incorrect.
- 6.5.18. A priority for the team is to try to convert temp staff to permanent and In 2023 there were 10 conversions. As of 31 December 23, there were 106 temps in Children's, 53 in Adults and 74 across the wider organisation.

- 6.5.19. The Learning & Development team source, create and/or develop effective learning and development resources to support the organisation, our employees and our future leaders, via our Leadership Academy. They effectively administer the corporate training budget ensuring our council staff receive all required statutory, mandatory and legislative training. L&D also run the Medway College of Social Care which provides training to local care homes, schools and personal assistants, generating income for the Council c.£35k this year.
- 6.5.20. The Complete Medway Manager training programme is being delivered by the Leadership Academy in two phases, 'Operational' (Range 5 to Range 8 line managers) and 'Strategic' (Service Manager to Director). Over 150 managers have undertaken the Operational training to date, with further dates booked. All managers will have completed by Q2 23/24.

## **6.6. Internal Audit and Counter Fraud**

- 6.6.1. The Internal Audit (IA) team provides independent assurance over the council's framework of governance, risk management and internal control, through the delivery of assurance reviews across various council services. These reviews are selected via an independent audit needs analysis to ensure that IA resource is aimed at the areas of highest risk to the council meeting its objectives.
- 6.6.2. IA assurance activity is driven by workplans that are approved by the Audit Committee on a six-monthly basis and the volume of assurance reviews to be completed is based on resources projected to be available. The plan is amended in year as necessary to reflect any changes in predicted resource, with all revisions to the plan agreed by the Audit Committee.
- 6.6.3. The Audit committee received the annual report and Chief Audit Executives opinion for 2022-23 in September 2023 with final performance against key targets for 2022-23 (as of 31 March 2023) as follows;
- 84% of the agreed assurance work delivered (target 95%);
  - 100% of actions to address risks agreed by client management (target 90%); and
  - 88% of management actions implemented by the agreed date.
- 6.6.4. A survey is issued each year to gauge the satisfaction with internal audit services, the most recent of which identified positive satisfaction from 82.4% of people that responded.
- 6.6.5. The Counter Fraud (CF) team provides counter fraud and investigation services, which are outlined in an annual plan with four core areas of activity, which includes fraud awareness and prevention, pro-active and reactive activity. Much of the work is dictated by the volume of fraud referrals received and the levels of investigative activity necessary, and this has meant that other counter fraud activity, such as fraud awareness and pro-active exercises, has been limited in previous years.

- 6.6.6. A survey at the end of 2022-23 identified that fraud awareness and awareness of the team and its services was well below expected levels. Accordingly, there has been a conscious effort to change this dedicating significant resource to fraud awareness during 2023-24. There have been a number of generic awareness sessions open to all staff via the councils training platform iShare, which have all been well attended and specific sessions have also taken place with a number of teams/services across the council as well as Members.
- 6.6.7. A process of conducting fraud risk assessments in all key areas of the council has also begun with the aim of creating a fraud risk register, which will be used to determine where counter fraud resource should be deployed, ensuring that the resource is used in the most efficient way possible.
- 6.6.8. The Audit Committee received the 2022-23 annual report in September 2023, which outlined the following savings identified through the course of investigations;
- £355,296 of historic Council tax identified (resulting in additional £185,487pa in future years),
  - £121,215 in Housing Benefit overpayments,
  - £1,000 administrative penalty for a council tax reduction offence, and
  - Notional savings of £190,000 linked to the recovery of two council properties and one applicant being removed from the housing register.

This represents total savings of £848,998 against costs of £136,321 for Medway's share counter fraud team and £366,323 for the share of the whole Internal Audit & Counter Fraud service. This represents good value for money.

## **6.7. Legal**

- 6.7.1. The Local Land Charges team were nominated by their customers for a National Award for Customer Satisfaction, although they didn't win on the night they did receive a Highly Commended award. This recognition was well deserved, they are a really small team (2.5 FTE) and work incredibly hard but are often overlooked so it was especially pleasing to see them receiving accolades at a national level.
- 6.7.2. The team are reaching the latter stages of a project which will see HM Land Registry take over one of the services they offer. This has been a long drawn out project which was first envisaged as part of the Infrastructure Act 2015. This has required them to undertake a huge exercise of data evaluation to ensure that the records are transferred in the best condition possible. The transfer is scheduled to take place in early summer 2024.
- 6.7.3. Legal Services has been subject to a root and branch review and has been completely restructured. The new structure provides a clear career pathway through the service and aimed to address the long standing recruitment

and retention difficulties that had been experienced. It has been a real success story, prior to the restructure the team was approximately 70% locum staff, a recruitment campaign saw 11 new team members join filling just over half the 20 vacancies in the team, including several who had been locums and decided to take permanent roles with Medway. This has seen the percentage of locum staff reduce to 24% and a further round of recruitment is underway with interviews taking place in mind March.

- 6.7.4. Although the picture is much improved the team continue to manage a high case load with approximately 1300 open matters being dealt with by the team at any given time, ranging from complex Childcare proceedings, Judicial Reviews and high value property transactions to sales of garden land, littering prosecutions and charges for deferred care act fees. The workload pressure means that it is vital that we keep in touch with our team to ensure their wellbeing, the team operates a hybrid model so that we see colleagues face to face on a regular basis but the current compromised condition of Gun Wharf does make this more challenging.
- 6.7.5. Despite the pressure the team continue to perform at an extremely high level, retaining the vast majority of cases in house and providing a full spectrum service to our client departments.
- 6.7.6. The Place half of the legal team operate a shared service and provide services to Gravesham Borough Council. The Annual review of the service was presented to Gravesham's Cabinet recently and was warmly received.
- 6.7.7. The Council underwent an Inspection of its use of surveillance in late 2023. The inspector recognised the significant progress that had been made since the previous inspection where a number of failings had been identified. Having resolved these issues the Council is now not due to be inspected for four years.
- 6.7.8. A full review of the governance of the Council's LATCOs (Kyndi and MDC ) has been completed. This has seen the establishment of new sub committees and the inaugural meetings have been held. The revised articles of association and memoranda of understanding were approved at those meetings and are currently awaiting respective board approval. Future sub-committee meetings have been programmed in for the coming year, and meeting with the respective Chief Executive Officers are diarised to discuss and agree reporting schedules for information to be reported back to the council.
- 6.7.9. A further significant piece of work has been the review of the Council's arrangements with Medway Norse. Good progress has been made in this with new overarching agreements in place which define the relationship and the formal contractual arrangements of the SEND transport contract almost complete. The next phased of the review will focus on the household waste and recycling services.

## 7. Conclusion

- 7.1. I am very proud of all that has been achieved within my portfolio in the last year and I am excited to support the developments and transformation planned across these services in the year to come.

### Lead officer contact

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### Appendices

None

### Background papers

None