

## Council – 18 April 2024

### Schedule of written responses to Members' questions not answered at the meeting

10 Members' questions

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## **Full Council 18 April 2024 – Schedule of written responses to Members’ questions not answered at the meeting**

**Note:** Questions A to C and E to I were answered during the meeting. These questions and responses are set out in the minutes of the meeting.

### **Question D – Councillor Gulvin asked the Leader of the Council, Councillor Maple, the following:**

“The Leader of the Council talks a good game on the administration's so called "sixth pledge" of reducing locums. Following the response given to the Member question at the October 2023 Council meeting, what further progress is being made in this area?”

Thank you for your question, Cllr Gulvin. The Council is committed to reducing its workforce reliance on locum staff and, in the last 12 months, the number of locum staff in some key services, such as Children’s Social Care, has reduced significantly from 114 in April 2023 to 76 in April 2024. Across the whole Council there has been a collective reduction in the number of locum staff from 211 in April 2023 to 185 in April 2024.

In the past 12 months, across the organisation, there have been 22 temp-to-perm conversions of locum staff who have become permanent employees, plus an additional 7 conversions of more expensive Project/Bank team Social Workers to locum roles. These 29 conversions have saved a total of £816,686, compared to the costs that were being paid for these staff in their pre-conversion roles.

The Council has also recently committed resource for the setting up of a specialist Children and Adults Recruitment team, which will seek to further our goals of attracting and nurturing our social work talent pool, increasing temp to perm conversions and thereby reducing our reliance on interim staff; helping us to achieve workforce sustainability and more cost efficiencies in the next twelve months.

### **Question J – Councillor Perfect asked the Portfolio Holder for Children’s Services, Councillor Price, the following:**

“Medway's recent SEND inspection demonstrates the progress made under the previous Portfolio Holder and officers on SEND services, particularly in relation to positive co-production within the service.

Please can the Portfolio Holder update on what he will do to support further improvements as laid out in the Ofsted report from 2nd April?”

Thank-you for your question.

We are pleased that the inspection report recognised the progress made so far in improving the experiences of children and young people with SEND and the improvements since the previous SEND inspection. Recognising that there is further work to do on our journey of improvement, the Joint Area Partnership is continuing their improvement work to further reduce waiting times for assessments and broaden the range of provision available. There is renewed focus on ensuring clear communication with our families and other partners and that the voice of children and young people consistently inform our work.

The SEND partnership board, which I jointly chair with Paul Lumsden, the chief nurse, ICB, is the forum where key partners hold each other to account for the delivery of the SEND Strategy and for the performance of partners. The focus of this Board will now include the implementation of the Local Area Improvement Plan which is being developed in response to the specific areas raised in the inspection report.

**Question K – Councillor Tejan asked the Portfolio Holder for Economic and Social Regeneration and Inward Investment, Councillor Edwards, the following:**

“In light of the Labour and Co-Operatives group’s high-profile campaign over many years in support of the docks, supported by Sir Keir Starmer. The Association of Chatham Docks, which includes commercial entities, have shared their proposals for the future of the Docks with two thousand high value jobs protected.

Could the Portfolio Holder update the Chamber on the current number of people employed in a “high skilled job” at Chatham Docks as well as the number of high skilled job vacancies there currently are at Chatham Docks?”

Thank you for your question.

You will be aware that there are disputed figures between the Association of Chatham Docks and the landowners Peel Ports in respect of the direct and indirect jobs at the Chatham Docks Industrial Estate. The figures are all in the public domain. The Council, under the previous administration, commissioned an independent report from Aecom, which provided figures somewhere in the middle of both sets of estimates.

Both parties have submitted representations in relation to current work on the Local Plan, in particular the Call for Sites and the land availability assessment – for both housing and employment.

The Leader, Councillor Maple, has facilitated meetings between the Association of Chatham Docks and the landowners Peel Ports and is ensuring that they continue to communicate to consider if there could be a negotiated agreement.

**Question L – Councillor Lammas asked the Portfolio Holder for Education, Councillor Coombs, the following:**

“What steps will the Council take to improve the consistency of outcomes for children with SEND across Medway, given the recent OFSTED Inspection found Medway’s Local Area Partnership’s arrangements lead to inconsistent experiences and outcomes for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and/or disabilities?”

Thank-you for your question, Cllr Lammas.

The inspection report from the regulators highlighted the progress we have made so far and we are pleased with this result however we are not complacent and recognise there is further work to do in improving the experiences of children and young people with SEND and the improvements since the previous SEND

inspection. The Joint Area Partnership is continuing their improvement work to further reduce waiting times for assessments and broaden the range of provision available. We will continue to work closely with our Parent Carer Forum to ensure clear communication with our families and other partners in schools, and health, and that the voice of children and young people consistently inform our work.

The SEND partnership board, chaired jointly between me and the ICB Chief Nurse, Paul Lumsden, is where we hold key partners to account for the delivery of our Joint SEND Strategy and for the performance of partners. The focus of this Board will now include the implementation of the Local Area Improvement Plan which is being developed in response to the specific areas raised in the inspection report.

**Question M – Councillor Kemp asked the Portfolio Holder for Community Safety and Enforcement, Councillor Osborne, the following:**

“Further to the response given at the January 2024 Full Council meeting, which did not set out a start date, is the Portfolio Holder now able to advise when we will see the promised wardens out on the streets of Medway?”

Thank you for your question, as you will appreciate, we are working hard to deliver on the promised wardens and will deliver on this pledge as available resources permit.

As part of this workstream we are exploring innovative reporting solutions using Medway 2.0 that will allow residents to have a virtual warden in their pocket, using an APP like experience on their mobile phone. This will fast-track issues to the correct Council service and enable residents to accurately and quickly report their concerns.

We are also bolstering our Frontline Services Street Scene Team who provide core services relating to environmental crime, monitoring and engagement to our residents and business. They also are moving to a more geographical based service to provide continuity of service in the areas they cover in our communities.

**Question N – Councillor Brake asked the Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Strategic Regeneration, Councillor Curry, the following:**

“There is not a road across the length and breadth of Medway that can be identified as being free of potholes. From Halling to Grain, Walderslade to Cliffe and Strood through to Rainham and the surrounding villages and communities, it is recognised there is much to be done.

With over half a million pounds allocated to Medway by Central Government to assist with dealing with this issue, would Councillor Curry please advise how and where this money has been spent?”

Thank you for your question.

We maintain 827km of publicly maintainable highway which spans more than 3,000 roads which we must maintain, so to keep every single road free from defects all the time is a challenge with the funds available to us.

The redirected HS2 funding from the DfT for last year and this year is £401,000. Last year these funds were spent on resurfacing a large section of Wouldham Road in Rochester and carrying out larger patching works across Medway. We also looked at innovation in the industry, particularly that which would reduce our carbon footprint and successfully trialled Velocity jet patching repairs which are less than half the cost of traditional pothole repairs, which is also a repair method we will look to utilise again in the future.

For 2024/25, this funding will be used to carry out larger patching repairs to improve the condition of the highway network at various sites such as Montgomery Road, Gillingham which is a key route into Medway Maritime Hospital. Much needed surfacing works here will help improve passenger and patient journeys into the Hospital.

In line with the requirements from the DfT to publish our plans where to spend this additional funding, more information for 2023/24 and 2024/25 is available on the website on the resurfacing page.

**Question O – Councillor Etheridge asked the Portfolio Holder for Economic and Social Regeneration and Inward Investment, Councillor Edwards, the following:**

“Seeing as you stated in a recent scrutiny meeting that you were having meetings with officers and other Portfolio Holders in relation to the Local Plan, can you elucidate on any of your proposals that have received support?”

As mentioned at the scrutiny meeting, these regular meetings between officers and Portfolio Holders are to progress the Local Plan and make sure it remains on track, which I am pleased to say remains the case. Unlike the previous administration, we are united in our commitment to deliver a Local Plan as soon as possible.

Work continues in accordance with the timetable set out in the Local Development Scheme agreed at Cabinet on 13 February. The intention is to consult on a Regulation 18 stage of the Plan in June this year. This will then enable us to move forward to Regulation 19 and then to submission for examination in June 2025.

The consultation in June will include reporting to Overview & Scrutiny Committees. As I am sure everyone agrees, delivering a sound Local Plan that meets our growth needs with the necessary infrastructure is essential.

**Question P – Councillor Williams asked the Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Strategic Regeneration, Councillor Curry, the following:**

“Could Councillor Curry confirm what engagement the administration has had with the Lordswood and Walderslade litter picking group after the Full Council meeting where it was confirmed, via an amended motion, that the Administration will engage with them along with ward Councillors Lammas and Hyne?”

Thank you for your question, I pleased to say that Ian Gilmore, Head of Regulatory & Environmental Services, and I have maintained an open dialogue with the various parties involved in the Lordswood and Walderslade Litter Picking Group.

We held a further meeting with another representative of the group in which discussed the challenges presented to them and listened to their concerns. It was agreed that the suggested arrangements would be adopted with a promise to meet, if required, in the spring to review the situation.

At the time of our meeting the group were advised that they could include any ward Councillors they wished, although none were present at the meeting. Both officers and I are happy to discuss the situation and the present arrangements again with the ward Members mentioned.

**Question Q – Councillor Barrett asked the Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Strategic Regeneration, Councillor Curry, the following:**

“Councillors in Rainham have had feedback from residents on the proposed cycle lane for Maidstone Road and most of it has been negative. Given Councillor Curry's track record of ignoring feedback he does not agree with, can he advise Council how he intends to keep cyclists and other road users safe in his new cycle lane given the large number of parked cars and heavy traffic using Maidstone Road and the narrowing of the road that would occur from the introduction of the cycle lane?”

In giving his answer, I would expect Councillor Curry to provide evidence that cyclists would use the cycle lane in sufficient numbers that makes the costs worthwhile.”

Thank you for your question, Councillor Barrett. Maidstone Road, Rainham was identified as a location where we could improve cycling infrastructure, and some high-level concepts for making the road safer and easier for cyclists were included in our draft Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan. The public consultation on the Plan generated a lot of interest and we were pleased to receive feedback on walking and cycling in Medway and the opportunities that better infrastructure could bring in terms of promoting health and well-being and improving congestion and air quality.

No decisions have been made on the infrastructure improvements we included in the draft plan, as we are currently analysing the consultation responses. The views of residents and business are very important and will be carefully considered. If any of the proposals were to progress, and there is no guarantee they will at this stage, then we would need to do a lot more work on them. Any scheme that we take through a design process would be in consultation with residents and Ward Members. This would provide further opportunities for engagement, discussion, and feedback.

**Question R – Councillor Clarke asked the Portfolio Holder for Economic and Social Regeneration and Inward Investment, Councillor Edwards, the following:**

“Can the Portfolio Holder please update the Council on what businesses and inward investment she has secured for Medway since her appointment in May 2023?”

Thank you for your question. In my Cabinet role, I have represented Medway at the South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP) and Kent and Medway Enterprise Partnership. Through working closely with these partnerships, I have secured £300,000 Getting Building Fund investment for the new Innovation Hub co-working space in the Pentagon Centre in Chatham. This additional funding for the project has

enabled the expansion of the site and will be instrumental in revitalising the town centre and supporting local businesses.

As part of the SELEP transition of responsibilities to local authorities as mandated by Government, I have secured significant legacy funds for Medway in the region of £2m, which will be finalised following LEP closure. This funding will be used to develop an inward investment strategy, which the Council lacked under the previous administration. It will also support the continuation of our Shared Prosperity Fund programme into future years, which has already supported many local businesses and communities, including our fantastic Light Nights and Chinese New Year festivals, as well as business support schemes such as our green grants. £180,000 Historic England Capacity Building Fund has been secured to enable heritage led regeneration over the next 3 years, building on from the High Street Heritage Action Zone Funding (£1.6 million over last 4 years), supporting a number of businesses and revitalising the high streets.

**Question S – Councillor Fearn asked the Portfolio Holder for Education, Councillor Coombs, the following:**

“Can the Portfolio Holder please confirm how regularly she meets with primary and secondary Headteachers?”

I am part of the Medway Education Partnership Group which meets termly and is the more formal opportunity for education leaders to meet with me and senior officers. All headteachers are invited to this meeting.

I have attended the North Kent MAT Alliance meetings, which are attended by CEOs of multi academy trusts.

I also attend focus meetings looking at specific aspects of education, which are attended by relevant members of leadership teams and other staff from schools and early years settings.

More informally, I have visited a number of Medway schools and early years settings when I have the opportunity to talk to staff and pupils, and often I am invited to attend specific events. On average I attend a school each week during term time.

**Question T – Councillor Gilbourne asked the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Property, Councillor Khan, the following:**

“The travellers located at the former Wigmore Coach Park remain in situ several months after the end of the temporary licence granted in July.

Can Councillor Khan please update the Council with the action taken since last full Council and legal costs incurred in attempting to seek possession of the land?”

Thank you for your question, Cllr Gilbourne. The Council has issued proceedings at Court to regain possession of the land. The occupiers have, as is their legal right to do so, submitted a Defence to the claim for possession. The claim has now been listed for a hearing to decide if the claim needs to go to trial or if the Council can be granted a possession order at this stage. The bulk of the work on this matter has been carried out by the Council's in house legal team and therefore this doesn't incur

a cost to the Council save for Counsel's fees which will be confirmed at the conclusion of the claim.

**Question U – Councillor Hyne asked the Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Strategic Regeneration, Councillor Curry, the following:**

“What initiatives are the Council bringing forward to reduce litter in our towns?”

Thank you for your question regarding litter reduction in Medway.

Medway Council works in partnership with local groups to support non statutory education and litter picking activities, where resources allow:

- Sustained annual support of Keep Britain Tidy's Great British Spring Clean since 2016 (357 bags collected by 350 participants across 28 Council supported events in 2024).
- Regular community litter picks undertaken by volunteers.
- Seasonal beach and riverside cleans with the Medway & Swale Estuary Partnership.
- New litter picking stations at Riverside Country Park in partnership with Medway Norse to facilitate ad hoc litter picks.
- Age-appropriate littering education as standard in all talks delivered to school and community groups.
- Partnership working with Mid Kent College and the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme to support young people's environmental activities in the authority.
- First Council in the UK to work with Police to use litter picking as a discharge for low level offending in lieu of prosecution.

Littering is a national anti-social behaviour the results of which degrade our local environment and places pressure on public funds to remedy. Medway Council has statutory duties to maintain street cleanliness and take enforcement action on littering perpetrators within the authority.

**Question V – Councillor Joy asked the Leader of the Council, Councillor Maple, the following:**

“How are things progressing in relation to the discussions around the next steps in relation to the exceptional financial support?”

Thank you for your question. As Members will know, the Minister for Local Government, the Right Honourable Simon Hoare MP, wrote to me on 27 February 2024 to inform me that “With respect to the financial year 2024-25, the Secretary of State is minded to approve a capitalisation direction of a total not exceeding £14.742 million.”

That letter was accompanied by an annex outlining the conditions attached to this approval. These were principally that the Council would be required to undergo an external assurance review, that it would be required to produce an improvement and transformation plan within six months and would be contingent on the Council reporting to the Department the final amount required, as confirmed by the Council's external auditors.

The Chief Operating Officer has recently written to the Department requesting clarity around these timescales, however the response he received simply reiterated the conditions as laid out in the Minister's letter.

You will be aware that Cabinet have now agreed the Financial Improvement and Transformation Plan which gives a clear roadmap to financial sustainability.

**Question W – Councillor Spring asked the Portfolio Holder for Community Safety and Enforcement, Councillor Osborne, the following:**

“In the Administration's budget, it was stated that you are scrapping the free swimming for the over 60s and under 16s. This was despite strong and proven evidence that this could have been protected.

It was also announced that parking charges across Medway would increase as of 8 April by up to 85%.

I have had constituents communicate to me that they are very concerned about the increase in charges as they feel it may deter people from using the local shops thus damaging the local family run businesses and the larger national companies.

It is this deterrent that is a current concern. Constituents are already alive to the fact that your administration has made multiple U-turns. The Cozenton Park Sports Centre (which from many I have spoken to in the Rainham North ward consider the re-naming to be a waste of money and will be called Splashes (and the administration is going to spend unnecessary costs amending all the street signs)), constituents are worried that, albeit it has been stated that the parking at the venue will remain free as it has always been.

They fear that in line with your apparent anti-car policies you will do a U-turn and put them in.

They fear that by doing so you discourage residents from attending. This fear along with the scrapping of the free swimming will not be well received by constituents.

Can the Portfolio Holder categorically confirm to my constituents that for the remainder of your time in administration you will not place any parking charges at the Cozenton Park Sports Centre (Splashes) given that they have never been there previously?”

Thank you for your question, Cllr Spring.

As you will be aware, the Council has a number of car parks with a range of different operating models.

As happens currently, we will continue to review arrangements to ensure the most pertinent operating model is used at any specific car park.

**Question X – Councillor Doe asked the Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Strategic Regeneration, Councillor Curry, the following:**

“Further to the response given at the October 2023 Council meeting which was before the statutory consultation was undertaken, could the Portfolio Holder confirm

if any further action has been taken on listening to the results of the public consultation on the Rainham Red Route where the overwhelming number of respondents were against such a proposal, or do the administration still intend to railroad this plan through despite genuine concerns of the public and businesses?”

Thank you for your question. As part of the statutory Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) process, we delivered over 800 letters to residents and business in the local areas to the proposed red route sites and updated the Council website to keep the community informed.

During the 3-week statutory TRO consultation 53 submissions were received, 34 of which were objections, 11 were submissions of support and eight general comments. The details of each submission can be found within Appendix B of the Delegated report that were considered and officer’s comments provided.

Having considered all feedback to the statutory consultation, it was felt there was insufficient relevant compelling reasons that has been presented during the statutory consultation to require a significant change to the proposals and subsequently to the traffic orders, therefore the Red Route restrictions on A2 Rainham High Street will proceed and the traffic order made permanent.

**Question Y – Councillor Mrs Turpin asked the Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Strategic Regeneration, Councillor Curry, the following:**

“Further to the road closure on Frindsbury Hill, one week later there was another road closure on Medway City Estate due to the need for resurfacing. This could have been predicted and the risk eliminated by timely resurfacing ahead of the major and long-term road closure on Frindsbury Hill. Instead, traffic issues were inevitably exacerbated as there were then two road closures in close proximity. Therefore, can the Portfolio Holder ensure that the Council, before any planned major road closures of long duration, diversion routes are surveyed and roads so that any resurfacing can be prioritised before the road closure takes place?”

Thank you for your question.

The works that took place on Medway City Estate shortly after the closure of Frindsbury Hill were unavoidable due to a defect in the carriageway that posed an immediate safety risk, particularly to HGVs which frequent this stretch of road throughout the day.

Rather than close the road, the decision was made to erect temporary signals in order that the defect could be repaired and whilst this negatively impacted peak time traffic for a short period of time, it was unavoidable.

Our Streetworks and Highways Team now cohabit at Pender House since the displacement from Gun Wharf and as such this has enabled improved communications between officers to ensure that instances such as this do not reoccur. Regular meetings are taking place to look at future planned closures and the network surrounding them to ensure that works ahead of a closure are considered before implementation.

**Question Z – Councillor Campbell asked the Portfolio Holder for Children’s Services, Councillor Price, the following:**

“What is the Portfolio Holder for Children’s Services doing following the announcement that British Youth Council will be closing after 75 years, due to financial challenges?”

Thank you for your question. We were saddened to hear the news that the British Youth Council will be closing, as it has offered valuable opportunities to young people from Medway and across the country for many years. As we know, the British Youth Council supported the national work of the UK Youth Parliament. This included training, regular communications, and the coordination of both regional and national events. This February two new Members of the UK Youth Parliament were appointed following a Medway record breaking election involving 8089 local young people.

The new Members of Youth Parliament (MYPs) will be supported by staff from Medway Council Youth Services to carry out their work locally, including offering local training and support. The team are also keeping a close eye on national developments to ensure they are up to date with opportunities and changes concerning the support for the UK Youth Parliament as a whole. On a local level, we are keen to give the MYP’s good quality opportunities to fulfil their roles, if anyone had thoughts or ideas that they would like to share, please contact Roy Smith, Operations Manager. This could include shadowing, training or opportunities to represent the young people of Medway on the regional or national stage.

**Question AA – Councillor Jones asked the Leader of the Council, Councillor Maple, the following:**

“Building on the points raised at the Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 4 April 2024, regarding spending reserves to balance the budget, and the point that the budget which needs to be balanced this year is that of the outgoing administration, and whose Leader has alluded in media interviews, to cutting huge amounts from Directorates on the day of Council budget setting meetings, leaving officers with the challenge of closing this gap over the financial year, there being no plan in place as to how to make these savings.

Are you confident that the collaborative approach you have taken in setting the budget with the corporate management team, from the bottom up, will lead to a better outturn position?”

Thank you for your question. The use of reserves to balance the budget out turn position is something which we have previously criticised the previous Conservative administration for doing. It is regrettable that despite our best efforts to close the £17m budget gap we inherited when taking control of the administration in May, this is an action we will have to take at the outturn position of last year’s budget. However, it is worth remembering that this was not a budget we set, and the process which the previous administration took to set their budgets led constantly led to near impossible savings having to be found in year by departments.

The approach we have taken has been much more collaborative. There we no surprises on budget night, and departments have agreed to savings which they

believe are realistic to achieve, and with more time to put actions in place to achieve them.

Whilst it is always impossible to predict what will happen across the course of one financial year, and factors which require statutory spending like the amount of people presenting as homeless and needing temporary accommodation, or turning to the council for social care are completely out of our control, I am confident we have done everything in our power to set a realistic budget which is based on the realities as we found them at the beginning of this year.

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