

REGENERATION, COMMUNITY AND CULTURE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

12 DECEMBER 2013

ATTENDANCE OF THE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

Report from: Richard Hicks, Deputy Director, Customer Contact,
Leisure, Culture, Democracy and Governance

Author: Daniel Kalley, Overview & Scrutiny Co-ordinator

Summary

This report sets out progress made within the areas covered by the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services which fall within the remit of this Committee.

1. Background

1.1 The areas within the terms of reference of this Overview and Scrutiny Committee covered by the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services are:

- Events and Festivals
- Greenspaces
- Heritage
- Leisure services
- Libraries and Community Hubs
- Sporting Legacy
- Theatres and arts
- Tourism.

2. Achievements for 2012-13

2.1 Sporting Legacy

2.1.1 En Route To Rio: Delivering Medway's Sporting Legacy 2013-16

Increasing participation in sport is at the heart of the "En Route To Rio: Delivering Medway's Sporting Legacy 2013-2016" programme. This will deliver benefits to the Medway community across all ages and abilities, creating opportunities for everyone – to engage in physical activity.

The work to deliver a sporting legacy in Medway so far has included:

- Establishing the annual Medway Festival of Sport that has involved more than 22,000 participants in 50 sporting events this year
- Creating a range of mass participation events including the Medway Mile – where more than 3,000 walkers and runners come together every year to celebrate healthy living and physical activity, the Medway Big Splash and the Medway Big Ride
- Creating the £11m Medway Park regional centre of sporting excellence – transforming a council leisure centre into a world-class sporting venue where international sportspeople can train and compete using the same facilities as local people
- Successfully hosting a number of national and international sporting events to provide inspiration to Medway’s young people, including the Modern Pentathlon World Cup in 2010, the Modern Pentathlon European Championships in 2011, the British Transplant Games in 2012 and the Wheelchair Rugby League World Cup earlier this year
- Establishing the “On your marks...” legacy programme to break down barriers and support community participation in sport. It includes a low intensity “pay as you play” programme designed for newcomers to sport and exercise, supporting the creation of new sports clubs with a focus on non-traditional facilities to engage hard-to-reach communities in sport and activity, and a range of other initiatives targeting families, new mothers, seniors and 16-25s.

2.1.2 Wheelchair Rugby League World Cup

Medway hosted the hugely successful Wheelchair Rugby League World Cup in July. The tournament received a number of accolades from both competitors and spectators, with Rugby Football League Chairman Brian Barwick writing in a national article that the wheelchair world cup final was the highlight of his first six months in the role.

2.1.3 Festival of Sport

Medway’s biggest-ever Festival of Sport started in May and ran for ten weeks with 22,000 participants and spectators involved over the course of 50 events, ranging from schools competitions to new events including the Medway 10k and Medway Masters football tournament.

The festival culminated in the annual Medway Mile at Rochester Cathedral, with a capacity 3,000 participants taking part and many more turning up to enjoy the evening’s fun which culminated in a spectacular fireworks display.

2.1.4 Medway Park

Medway Park has continued to attract ever-increasing numbers to participate and compete at our regional centre of sporting excellence.

With year-on-year increases in nine of the ten completed months this year, Medway Park is on course to top 750,000 visitors for the year for the first time.

In addition to the Wheelchair Rugby League World Cup, a number of other large sporting events have been held at Medway Park. These have included:

- Badminton England Veteran Tournament
- Table Tennis Grand Prix
- London Broncos Under 18s Training
- Medway Youth Games
- Kent School Games
- GB Wheelchair Rugby
- Kent School Basketball Finals
- International trampoline and gymnastics event
- International Korfball events.

2.1.5 The Strand

A comprehensive maintenance programme has been put in place at the Strand over the winter period to improve its appearance. Work already undertaken has included repainting a number of areas, a programme of grass cutting, selective pruning of overgrown shrubbery, replacing worn fencing and regular cleaning of pathways.

Further winter work will be concentrated on improving the natural environment for the pitch-and-putt course and further refurbishment will be undertaken in the spring, ready for the 2014 summer season.

Interim repairs have been made to the Strand Sea Wall.

2.1.6 Deangate Ridge

The golf driving range at Deangate Ridge has now been completed. Work has started on building a new Par 3 Academy course and practice facilities.

2.1.7 Stirling Centre

The Kings School has taken over operational responsibility for the Stirling Centre and are investing significantly in to the facilities, which will improve the offer for the local community as well as the school. This arrangement has removed the cost to the Council of operating the Stirling Centre.

This year's Tracker Scores have show satisfaction with Leisure facilities of 94%, 93% and 94% against a target of 85%.

2.2 Tourism

2.2.1 Destination Management Plan

Entitled "Celebrating World Class Heritage" the draft document provides an action plan for delivery of a range of key projects which will enhance Medway's appeal as a visitor destination.

The action plan is based on an attract-and-disperse strategy, using the tourism hotspots of Rochester and the Historic Dockyard to initially attract visitors and then making it easy for visitors to enjoy other attractions throughout Medway.

The plan will be completed and publicly launched in spring next year and will seek to maximise the opportunities for Medway of the successful HLF bids from the Cathedral and the Historic Dockyard, the new railway station at Rochester and the developments at Paramount Park and Chatham Waters.

2.2.2 Tourism Bus

The Explore Medway bus operated for a period of 50 days from the end of June to 1 September, carrying over 3,000 passengers. The purpose of the bus was to provide the linkage between our heritage and visitor attractions throughout Medway and an additional tourist offer in line with other major leading tourist destinations.

The service was exceptionally well received by customers. Particular praise was reserved for the bus driver and for the costumed characters who travelled on the bus, supplementing the excellent recorded commentary voiced by Brian Blessed. As well as running the service again next summer, it is envisaged the bus will be used at Medway festivals and events to promote our tourism offer.

Number of visitors to tourist attractions in Medway:

Q1 2013/14 – 205,775

Q2 2013/14 – 447,203 (cumulative)

Target for 2013/14 700,000.

2.3 Greenspaces

2.3.1 National Accreditation and Awards

Green Flag has been successfully secured for 5 sites – The Vines, Riverside Country Park, Capstone Country Park, Hillyfields and Broomhill.

2.3.2 Play Area Improvements

Since the last annual report to Overview and Scrutiny (December 2012), the Greenspace Development Team has delivered £420,000 of play area improvements, funded by Developer Contributions and Member Priority Funding.

Member priority schemes saw improvements to existing provision at Priestfields and Cliffe Woods play areas. Developer Contribution investments have seen improvements to the Hamilton Road, Mill Road, Rookery Fields, Cobham Rise, Ballens Road and Pottery Road play areas. A new skate facility has been created at Pottery Road in Hoo and a new play area opened at Hoo Leisure Centre. Partnership working between

Greenspaces and Youth Services invested capital funding in the creation of a SportActiv play area at Ryetop playing fields in Rainham – only the second in the country.

A further £70,000 of investment in play improvement is due for completion in the 2013/14 financial year at Brompton Recreation Ground (Developer Contribution) and Rushdean Road (Member Priority).

2.3.3 Park Improvement Projects

Projects to improve Princes Park, Copperfields, Lyall Way and Otway Street closed play areas and Motney Fields have been completed.

Projects funded by External Grants, Member Priority and Developer contributions totalling £540,000 are in various stages of delivery at the following sites:

- Gillingham Green: Completion of landscape improvements following investment in footpaths, entrances and play provision
- Gillingham Park: Extension of horticultural interest and site infrastructure improvements following the creation of a timber play trail and winter garden in the last 12 months
- Borstal: Entrance and access improvements. This scheme budget included £30,343 grant from Veolia Environmental Trust
- Broomhill Park: Improvements to junior play area and footpath network. £60K of SITA funding has been secured to support the delivery of this park improvement project.

2.3.4 Allotments

We have continued the ongoing investment programme in Allotments and currently we are at 98% site occupancy across all sites. Improvements made this financial year in conjunction with the Allotment Federation are to site security and an extensive programme of shed refurbishments.

2.3.5 Volunteers

Year to date, we have achieved 9,914 volunteer hours supporting our greenspaces activity. We are currently working with 29 groups and our forecasts for 2013/14 predict over 14,000 hours of volunteering.

2.3.6 Grounds Maintenance Contract

Despite very challenging weather conditions during spring and summer we have continued to deliver high standards of maintenance to meet customer expectations through our Integrated Management Model with Quadron Services. The contract is now in its final year and the service is taking forward through Category Management a new partnership arrangement for grounds maintenance that will be based on our existing integrated management model to continue to safeguard service standards.

This year's Tracker scores have shown satisfaction with Parks and Open Spaces of 82%, 81% and 84% against a target of 85%.

2.4 Heritage

2.4.1 Eastgate House and Gardens

The Eastgate House Stage 2 Application was awarded funding by Heritage Lottery Fund in February 2013. This £1.2 million grant is being used along with Council match funding and other external funding streams to fund a £2.1 million conservation project for this nationally important Grade 1 Listed Building. The project is currently going through sign-off of planning consents and the appointment of a contractor with a programmed start on site in February 2014. Once completed (opening April 2015) Eastgate House will be re-opened as a key visitor attraction with a Business Plan target of achieving 48,000 visitors per annum.

Following the award of funding for the conservation of the House, a Stage 1 Heritage Grant application was submitted to Heritage Lottery Fund in November 2013 for a project development grant for the restoration of the Sir Guy Dawber Eastgate House Garden and conservation of the Dickens Swiss Chalet. Project match funding is being provided in officer time and through Developer Contributions. Total project cost is estimated at £650,000.

2.4.2 Rochester Castle

- Floodlighting project completed and formally launched as part of Medway Mile in July 2013.
- Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Scheme accreditation has been secured for Rochester Castle and Upnor Castle following assessment in September. Focus of the VAQAS scheme operated by Visit England is on customer experience and achieving the standard highlights the value of the offer at these important sites.

2.4.3 Guildhall Museum

Museum re-accreditation has been submitted to Arts Council England (ACE) and a decision is expected in February 2014. The Guildhall Museum has retained VAQUS accreditation and at the end of last financial year achieved 70,000 visits and has run a number of new events including "Night at the Museum" to grow visitor numbers.

The Guildhall Museum is planning a temporary exhibition commemorating the First World War from June 2014 through to the end of February 2015. The exhibition will be designed and inspired by a partnership between The Royal Engineers, Medway Archives, Medway Matters readers, The University of the Third Age students, local businesses as well as the Guildhall Museum. The idea is to provide a central hub of information about Medway the place at wartime and how the War affected the towns and the community throughout the four years.

This year's Tracker scores have shown satisfaction scores of 87%, 87%, and 90% against a target of 80% and with museums and galleries of 93%, 89% and 94% against a target of 85%.

2.5 Libraries

2.5.1 Community Hub Development

Community Hubs have been relaunched this year at Gillingham, Chatham and Rochester. Community Hubs provide a gateway to Council Services within our vibrant Libraries. New dedicated reception points and improvements to self-serve have been provided at all three sites, providing enhanced customer experience through improved/wider access to Council services.

Community Hub Development will be the main strategic driver for Library development, and further funding has been secured to fund provision of a new high street location for Strood Library and the establishment of a Community Hub at Twydall library.

2.5.2 Customer Service Excellence Award

The Library Service gained this award in 2011 and this year was reviewed and renewed with an increased number of best practice examples. The Library Service is one of only 4 Council services that have secured Customer Service Excellence.

2.5.3 Library Events Programme and Community Engagement

The wide ranging programme of events continues to attract an increasing number of residents into our Libraries, last year for example over 19,000 people attended these events. They ranged from those for the very young like Baby and Rhyme Time and Toddler, Shake and Boogie to evening talks and author events for adults. Libraries now support 16 readers groups and this number includes 2 visually impaired groups, a hard of hearing group and a poetry group.

This year's Tracker scores have shown satisfaction with Libraries of 86%, 88% and 92% against a target of 80%.

2.6 Festivals and Events

The Festivals and Events team has successfully delivered the Council's programme to much acclaim, whilst attracting very high attendance numbers. These include:

The English Festival – 97% satisfaction – 15,000 footfall

Sweeps Festival – 99% satisfaction – 90,000 footfall

Dickens Festival – 99% satisfaction – 60,000 footfall

National Armed Forces Day – 98% satisfaction – 20,000 footfall:

Held for the first time on the Gillingham great lines, this event was held in conjunction with The Royal Engineers as part of their open day.

Medway Festival of Music:

The inaugural Medway festival of Music has established the basis for the future of music development in Medway and has resulted in the production and delivery of a fully equipped recording and rehearsal facility within the Sun Pier House Hub; a Music Audit for Medway and the establishment of a music conference and seminar, attended by professionals within the music industry who have committed to attend future events.

This year's event included the launch of James Taylor's new album 'Closer to the Moon' which was performed for the first time at Rochester Cathedral, several concerts and musical events, culminating in the appearance of the 'Proclaimers' at the Central Theatre.

Medway River Festival – 97% satisfaction – 6,500 footfall

The Castle Concerts Series:

This year's line-up sold more tickets than ever before and was regarded by many as the best concert series to-date.

Under Siege – over 5,000 footfall

Will Adams Festival – 97% satisfaction – 4,500 footfall

Still regarded as a significant tribute to the Gillingham born explorer, this event continues to develop a bigger audience each year and was visited by representatives from the Japanese Embassy.

Bonfire and Fireworks – 20,000 footfall

Dickensian Christmas Festival and The Christmas Markets are currently in the planning stage and ready to be produced and delivered in December.

By the end of the festival season the events team will have entertained over 500,000 people.

Plans are currently being put into place for Medway's commemorative events to mark 100 years of the start of World War One, in conjunction with the office of the Lord Lieutenancy of Kent.

2.7 Arts

2.7.1 Rochester Art Gallery

A series of high profile gallery events have attracted significant attendance. Footfall in 2012/13 was over 130,000, and in 2013/14 year to date is over 160,000.

This year's Tracker scores have shown satisfaction with Museums and Galleries of 93%, 89% and 94% against a target of 85%.

The Arts Development team has been working with The Economic Development team to support Nucleus Arts Hub, which offers creative workspace for artists and networking opportunities as well as meeting the wider agenda of encouraging students to populate Chatham High Street and supporting the night-time economy.

The team has also Supported Sun Pier House, which is continuing to develop and now hosts 14 artists and creative businesses in 11 studios and 3 shared spaces.

2.7.2 Theatres

The theatres continue to attract successful shows resulting in an increase in audience attendances. These successful shows include: A Night with Suggs, Sean Lock, Billy Ocean, Jack Dee, The Nutcracker, Reginald D Hunter and Nigel Kennedy, as well as the climax of the Medway Festival of Music on 3 August. The theatre also hosted the Try Angle Awards as well as working with schools on the Hoo's Got Talent show.

This year's Tracker scores show satisfaction with Theatres of 91%, 86%, and 86% against a target of 85%.

Background Papers

None

Lead officer contact

Richard Hicks, Deputy Director, Customer Contact, Leisure, Culture, Democracy and Governance.

Tel: (01634) 338121 Email: richard.hicks@medway.gov.uk