

**Medway Council**  
**Meeting of Business Support Overview and Scrutiny**  
**Committee**

**Tuesday, 3 February 2015**

**6.30pm to 9.05pm**

**Record of the meeting**

**Subject to approval as an accurate record at the next meeting of this committee**

**Present:** Councillors: Avey, Carr, Clarke (Chairman), Pat Gulvin (Vice-Chairman), Harriott, Iles, Juby, Mackness, Maple, Murray, Price, Royle and Wildey

**In Attendance:** Nick Anthony, Strategic Property and Energy Manager  
Marc Blowers, Head of Housing Management  
Stephen Gaimster, Assistant Director, Housing and Regeneration  
Stephanie Goad, Assistant Director Communications, Performance and Partnerships  
Mick Hayward, Chief Finance Officer  
Perry Holmes, Assistant Director, Legal and Corporate Services/Monitoring Officer  
Jon Poulson, Revenues and Benefits Contract Manager  
Ian Price, Managing Director, Medway Norse  
Michael Turner, Democratic Services Officer

**735 Chairman's Announcement**

Noting that this would be Mr Mick Hayward's (Chief Finance Officer) last meeting of the Committee before his retirement, the Chairman, on behalf of the Committee, thanked Mr Hayward for his support and sound advice to the members over the years and wished him a long and happy retirement.

**736 Record of meeting**

The record of the meeting held on 4 December 2014 was agreed and signed by the Chairman as correct.

**737 Apologies for absence**

There were no apologies for absence.

**738 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances**

There were none.

**739 Declarations of interests and whipping**

Disclosable pecuniary interests

There were none.

Other interests

In relation to agenda item no. 7 (Update on Medway Norse) the Assistant Director Communications, Performance and Partnerships disclosed that she was a Director of Medway Norse.

**740 Attendance of the Leader of the Council**

**Discussion:**

Members received an overview of progress on the area within the terms of reference of this Committee and covered by Councillor Rodney Chambers, the Leader of the Council, i.e. Democracy and Governance.

The Leader responded to members' questions and comments as follows:

*The Rochester and Strood Parliamentary By Election (19 November 2014)* – In response to a question about the Council's organisation of the by election, the Leader stated that he felt this had been a success and he was not aware of any complaints or concerns about the administrative arrangements. However, he felt that with just 6 months to go before the national elections the by election had been unnecessary and had wasted significant amounts of scarce public resources.

*May 2015 Parliamentary Elections* – regarding the process for the count and the likely timescales for the result being announced, the Leader pointed out there were inevitable complications when there were multiple elections on one day. Tonbridge and Malling also had elections that day and the ballot boxes from that part of the constituency would need to be transported to the count, another reason why verification would take some time. Learning from previous elections he was confident the Council had the capacity to undertake the count as quickly as possible in the circumstances. Officers advised that at close of poll the verification for both elections would take place that evening. The count for the Parliamentary election would take place immediately after the verifications. After a break, the count for the local elections would start mid Friday afternoon with the same team.

A member asked if it would be possible to have separate ballot boxes for the Parliamentary and the Council elections in order to help speed up the count. Officers advised that whilst this was legally possible an exercise to determine whether it was any quicker had concluded that it was marginally quicker to have one combined ballot box. An undertaking was given to send the details of this study to the member concerned.

## **Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 3 February 2015**

*Individual Electoral Registration (IER)* – in the light of national concerns about certain groups not registering to the same extent as before and whether the Council needed to do more to encourage people to register, the Leader replied that he recognized the national concerns about levels of registration – particularly amongst the student population and in residential and care homes. He understood the rationale for the introduction of IER but felt not enough thought had gone into planning for its introduction at a national level. He estimated that the electoral register contained 7,250 fewer electors than expected. The Council had started to proactively encourage registration amongst students and people in residential homes. In response a member commented that he welcomed this approach but felt a strategy was needed to tackle this issue on an annual basis to maximize registration.

### **Decision:**

The Committee thanked the Leader for his attendance and noted his report.

## **741 Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services**

### **Discussion:**

Members received an overview of progress on the area within the terms of reference of this Committee and covered by Councillor Howard Doe, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services, i.e.

- Adult learning
- Bereavement and Registration Services
- Disabled adaptations to housing
- Homeless and housing options
- Housing allocations for social housing
- Housing Strategy
- Private sector housing
- The development and management of the Council's housing stock

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services responded to members' questions and comments as follows:

*Medway Crematorium Improvement Programme* - . The Portfolio Holder agreed with members' comments on the positive outcome of this project and paid tribute to the team responsible for the project, as well as his predecessor as Portfolio Holder. Regarding a suggestion that a window crest or plaque be commissioned to recognise Medway Councils involvement, the Portfolio Holder agreed to investigate this suggestion.

*Registration Service* – a member asked if the Council was intending to market Medway as a place for same sex marriages, which would also generate income for the Council. The Portfolio Holder replied that the Council promoted all of its registration services as far as possible and wanted everyone to use this service. In response to a question, an undertaking was given to provide to a

## **Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 3 February 2015**

member a breakdown of the 850 weddings, Civil Partnerships and same sex marriages.

*Housing* – in response to a question about the number of people on the housing register in Band X, the Portfolio Holder undertook to provide a written answer.

*Repairs and Maintenance* - a member asked if there were any issues or concerns following the award of the HRA repairs and maintenance contract to Mears Group PLC in September 2014. The Portfolio Holder commented that, as ever in a procurement exercise, it was important not to award a contract solely on the basis of the lowest price. The aim was to achieve both quality and value for money and he was confident there were adequate measures in place to accurately assess quality. Levels of satisfaction with the repair service amongst tenants were high.

*Housing waiting lists* – in response to a question the Portfolio Holder stated that those who quoted figures of 20,000 people on the waiting list should be expected to justify this figure themselves but he did not believe there were 20,000 people in severe housing need. There were approximately 6,000 people on the list of whom 500 were in severe need. There had been a very significant rise in the number of homeless applications this year (about 77%). The Council was ambitious in its plans to build council houses within available funds.

### **Decision:**

The Committee thanked the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services for his attendance and noted his report.

## **742 Update on Medway Norse**

### **Discussion:**

The Assistant Director Legal and Corporate Services introduced a report which outlined the Company's achievements and performance up to the third quarter in its second year of trading and its plans for future growth and development.

Members welcomed the actions of Medway Norse in stepping in to provide 'Meals on Wheels' to the elderly and infirm on the Peninsula following the previous provider ceasing this service without notice. Members asked questions about the current situation and whether there was an opportunity for Medway Norse to win this contract and extend it to schools who were struggling to provide hot meals due to small kitchens. The Committee was advised that the service had been provided for a short period. Discussions were ongoing about providing services across Medway, including schools, given the importance of growing the business.

A member asked if there were any plans to maximise the use of the Norse minibuses given they were often unused outside of school hours. The Committee was advised that this was a priority for the company but they were

## **Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 3 February 2015**

not allowed to make a profit, only to recover the running costs of the mini buses. Discussions were ongoing to operate and extend the Villager bus service and there were proposals to extend SEN transport.

In response to a question about pay increases for Medway Norse employees, the Committee was advised that there had been a 1% increase above the minimum wage level in 2014/2015. Negotiations about the 2015/2016 award were ongoing.

Regarding plans for collaboration with neighbouring councils, members were advised that a Business Development Manager was being recruited. Hopefully this would allow better communication and collaboration with other councils. The priority though was to increase business in Medway first, particularly with schools.

Members asked whether there was any scope for Medway Norse to help with non emergency patient transport to hospitals and also to occasionally transport people to day centres etc. where the NHS or Age Concern were unable to do this. Whilst no guarantees could be given Medway Norse would consider any requests from members to help constituents.

A member referred to a waterlogged nature reserve in Rainham and asked if Medway Norse were able to help with maintenance works to restore this site. Medway Norse would discuss this with the Council's Greenspace team but would only get involved if this was a priority for the council.

### **Decision:**

The Committee noted the report.

## **743 Six Monthly Review of Welfare Reform Task Group Review**

### **Discussion:**

The Revenues and Benefits Contract Manager introduced a report which provided Members with an update on progress made with the Committee's recommendations from the Welfare Reform in-depth review, which were agreed by the Cabinet on 2 September 2014.

Members were advised that Medway was likely to be in tranche 3 in the national roll out of Universal Credit, although this was still to be confirmed. Some concern was expressed by a member at the likely negative effects of Universal Credit when it was introduced.

Reference was made to the wish to understand the cumulative impact of the Welfare Reforms including the impact on groups with protected characteristics and it was felt the recently agreed approach on this would adequately address what the Task Group had asked for.

### **Decision:**

## **Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 3 February 2015**

The Committee noted the progress made against the actions from the review. and placed on record its thanks to Fawad Bhatti for his work on this initiative.

### **744 Housing Revenue Account - Capital and Revenue Budgets 2015/2016**

#### **Discussion:**

The Head of Housing Management introduced this report which presented the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) revenue budgets for 2015/2016 and:

- contained details of the proposed 3 year capital programme budget;
- provided details of proposed rent and service charges levels for 2015/16;
- provided an update on the HRA Business Plan which was an integral part of the strategic planning and setting of priorities for the HRA Service.

Members welcomed in particular the proposal to move to a three-year capital works budget programme instead of an annual programme and felt this would be more helpful for tenants, officers and councillors.

#### **Decision:**

The Committee agreed to recommend to Cabinet

- 1) a proposed average rent increase of 2.2% for the housing stock as set out in Appendix A to the report (based upon 50 collection weeks) and a rent increase of 1.2% for garages.
- 2) the harmonisation of all garage rents, charging across all garage sites managed by the HRA Service specifically those as set out as per Appendix B to the report.
- 3) that the service charges and increases as set out in appendix C of the report for 2015/16 be approved
- 4) that the revenue budget for the HRA Service for 2015/16 as per Appendix D to the report be approved.
- 5) that the provision for the repayment debt continues to be based on a minimum revenue payment of 2% on the 2015/2016 HRA opening outstanding debt.
- 6) that a three year capital programme as set out in paragraph 8.5 of this report be agreed.
- 7) to increase the 2015/16 HRA housing building development programme amount by the 2014/2015 MRP payment as set out in paragraph 9.4 of the report.

## **Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 3 February 2015**

- 8) to adopt the attached HRA Business Plan 2014 – 2044 as at Appendix E to the report.

### **745 Capital Budget Monitoring 2014/15 - Round 2**

#### **Discussion:**

The Chief Finance Officer introduced this report which detailed the capital monitoring forecasts as at the end of November 2014.

A member noted that the reference to Laburnum Sycamore Rec Play Area in paragraph 5.1 of the report should have read: Laburnum Rec Play Area.

#### **Decision:**

The Committee agreed to note:

- (1) the spending forecasts summarised at Table 1 in the report;
- (2) the £1.0 million virement referred to at 6.1 in the report;
- (3) the new approvals referred to at 6.2 in the report;

### **746 Revenue Budget Monitoring 2014/15- Round 2**

#### **Discussion:**

The Chief Finance Officer introduced this report which detailed the revenue budget forecasts as at the end of November 2014.

This report also highlighted the major financial risks remaining in respect of the 2014/2015 General Fund revenue budget.

#### **Decision:**

The Committee agreed to note the forecast outturn position from the latest round of 2014/15 revenue monitoring and Cabinet's declared moratorium in response

### **747 Capital and Revenue Budgets 2015/16**

#### **Discussion:**

The Chief Finance Officer introduced a report which presented the draft capital and revenue budgets for 2015/16, which were based on the principles contained in the Medium Term Financial Plan 2014/18 approved by Cabinet and reflected the latest formula grant assumptions announced as part of Local Government Finance Settlement 2014/2015 and 2015/2016 Technical Consultation in July 2014.

## **Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 3 February 2015**

### **Decision:**

The Committee agreed to note the draft capital and revenue budgets for 2015/16, proposed by Cabinet on 2 December 2014, insofar as they affected the Committee.

### **748 Draft Capital and Revenue Budget Proposals 2015/2106 (Report back from other Overview and Scrutiny Committees)**

#### **Discussion:**

The Chief Finance Officer presented a report which detailed the comments and recommendations of all Overview and Scrutiny Committees on the initial budget plan for 2015/16 proposed by Cabinet on 2 December 2014.

The Health and Adult Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 11 December 2014 had agreed to recommend to Cabinet that the 2 WTE vacant administrative posts in the Mental Health Social Work Team be reinstated, thereby bringing the establishment back to 3 WTE.

Members were advised that there were 5 posts in this section and Cabinet were being recommended, at its meeting to be held on 10 February, to delete 2 of these posts. However, the two vacant posts the Health and Adult Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee had asked to be reinstated were still budgeted for but had not been unfrozen.

Members supported the decision of the Health and Adult Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee to ask Cabinet to reinstate these two posts.

#### **Decision:**

The Committee:

- (1) noted the comments from the Overview and Scrutiny Committees on the budget
- (2) agreed to support the recommendation made by the Health and Adult Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee that Cabinet reinstate 2 WTE vacant administrative posts in the Mental Health Social Work Team and to forward this decision to Cabinet.

### **749 Refresh of Council Plan Indicators 2015/2016**

#### **Discussion:**

The Assistant Director Communications, Performance and Partnerships introduced this report which asked members to consider the proposed suite of Council Plan indicators, with the committee's views being reported to Cabinet on the 10th February 2015, alongside the 2015/16 budget proposals.



## Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 3 February 2015

The following indicators were discussed in detail:

- *The percentage of children permanently excluded from school*

It was suggested this be removed as many schools were outside the control of the council and also the target was difficult to understand. Members asked if it could be expressed as both the number of children and a percentage and also clarify that it related to all schools including academies. Other members felt that the target should be retained as it was still a useful statistic for the council to be aware of even if it did relate to non council controlled schools. It was agreed the target should be made more meaningful and retained.

- *Percentage children who were absent from school for more than 15 percent of the school year*

Again it was suggested this be removed but other members argued against this and for its retention particularly as it was a key indicator for Ofsted to scrutinise. Officers agreed to clarify if it related to authorised and unauthorised absences, express the target in terms of numbers and clarify if academies were included. Members questioned whether 85% was too low and impacted on school performance.

- *Carer satisfaction with adult social care services*

It was agreed that the target should be retained at its current level of 46% otherwise moving to the national average of 42.7% represented a drop.

- *The percentage of service users who report they have control over their daily life*

It was agreed this should be retained provided it could be demonstrated that this was a meaningful target and did not involve any additional work for officers given that it formed part of a survey the Council was required to undertake.

- *The proportion of carers who felt that they had been included or consulted in discussions about the person they care for*

It was agreed that the current target of 75% should be retained.

- *Percentage of opiate users that left drug treatment successfully (free of drug(s) of dependence)*

Members felt this target appeared to have been set at a very low level. Confirmation would be sought from the Director of Public Health that the target was appropriate and had been built into the new contract.

## **Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 3 February 2015**

- *Number of cardiovascular health checks completed.*

Members queried the relevance to the council of cardiovascular checks but proposed no change after the commissioning role of public health in this matter was explained.

Generally, Members found the removal of indicator numbers unhelpful and asked for them to be reinstated. The report to Council would summarise which measures and targets were outstanding, why and when the information would be available. Members were happy overall with the plan and its state of development, and felt it compared favourably with a few years ago when no target information was available or targets were not challenging enough.

### **Decision:**

The Committee noted the Council Plan Indicators for 2015-16 and Key projects for 2015-16 and agreed that their comments, as detailed above, be forwarded to Cabinet for consideration on 10 February 2015.

## **750 Call in of the Housing Strategy**

### **Discussion:**

Members considered a report regarding a call-in received from the Labour Group of a Cabinet decision (200/2014) to approve the Draft Housing Strategy 2015-2018 and delegate authority to the Director of Regeneration, Community and Culture, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services, to make any necessary minor changes prior to publishing the strategy. The Committee was requested to consider the Cabinet decision and decide either to take no further action or to refer the decision back to Cabinet for reconsideration.

Councillor Maple, the Lead Call in Member, noted that his Group rarely called in Cabinet decisions and the fact that they had called in this decision demonstrated the extent of their concerns. He felt the Strategy showed a level of complacency towards the housing crisis in Medway. Council housing was becoming for emergency use only and the housing strategy agreed by Cabinet should challenge this. His reasons for calling in the decision were as follows:

- Concerns about private sector housing.

Some councils had established a social letting agency and he urged the Council to follow this approach which would help address the exploitation of tenants and sometimes landlords by unscrupulous letting agents

- A selective licensing scheme should be established by the council to prevent tenants from being mistreated

## **Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 3 February 2015**

- Whilst he welcomed the building of council homes the pace was too slow and the strategy should contain more ambitious targets. The Council should lobby the Government to allow it more flexibility to build new homes
- The Strategy did not go far enough to tackle the problem of empty homes. The Council should use its legal powers and other measures to tackle this issue
- More should be done to increase levels of affordable housing by working with developers. He did not accept that developers would be deterred by higher levels of affordable housing

He then moved that the decisions be referred back to Cabinet for reconsideration for the reasons set out above. Another member supported this and felt the language of the Strategy was complacent and a more ambitious one would help not just with the housing crisis but would have much wider benefits for society and individuals. Claims that there were about 14,000 people on the housing waiting list who did not need to be there were insulting to the many people in desperate need of decent and appropriate housing. Affordable housing providers did not work together and the housing strategy should address that weakness. Whilst there was still affordable housing in Medway even this was still unaffordable for many on low incomes due to the size of the deposit needed.

The Assistant Director Housing and Regeneration commented that the Council had set up a successful accredited landlord scheme which it wished to expand. In addition, initiatives had been developed to tackle rogue landlords. A social letting agency had been attempted in the past and whilst it had not been successful it could be revisited to see if it was now viable. Medway had a lower level of empty homes than comparable councils and responded quickly to dilapidated homes or homes presenting problems. The Council worked proactively with developers to maximise the number of affordable homes. He also advised that a forthcoming survey of housing needs in Medway would feed into the Local Plan process and could lead to designation of additional housing sites. There would also be a review of the allocations policy later in the year. The Chief Finance Officer advised that there was no ability for the Council to go beyond the set borrowing headroom limits to build new homes.

A member commented that he shared some of the concerns about the Strategy but could not support the referral back to Cabinet. He felt there was still an issue about the definition of affordable housing and did not accept that the accredited landlord scheme referred to was a success as it did not guarantee quality accommodation. A better approach would have been for the Housing Task Group to have looked at these issues. Other members agreed with the suggestion that the Task Group could play a useful role in strengthening the Strategy.

## **Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 3 February 2015**

The motion to refer the decisions back to Cabinet for reconsideration was put to the vote and was not carried. A motion that no further action be taken was then put to the vote and carried.

### **Decision:**

The Committee agreed to take no further action in respect of the call in of the Cabinet decision (200/2014) to approve the Draft Housing Strategy 2015-2018 and delegate authority to the Director of Regeneration, Community and Culture, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services, to make any necessary minor changes prior to publishing the strategy.

## **751 Petitions**

### **Discussion:**

The Democratic Services Officer introduced this report which advised the Committee of any petitions (including e-petitions) received by the Council which fell within the remit of this Committee including a summary of the response sent to petitioners by officers

### **Decision:**

The Committee noted the petition responses and appropriate officer actions in paragraph 3 of the report and referred the petitions and responses to the Asset Management Group for information.

## **752 Work programme**

### **Discussion:**

The Democratic Services Officer introduced the report advising the Committee of the current work programme which allowed them to adjust it in light of the latest priorities, issues and circumstances. The report gave details of the items listed on the Cabinet Forward Plan that fell within the remit of this Committee and Appendix 2 to the report set out the work programmes of the other three Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

There was some disappointment that it would not be possible to start and conclude a new Task Group on Housing in Medway before the local elections in May. Noting that the option of a Task Group on Housing could be included in the list of prospective topics to be chosen by members for the first round of reviews after the local elections, the Committee asked for their view that this should be the first task group following the elections to be made known at that point.

### **Decision:**

The Committee:

## **Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 3 February 2015**

- (1) noted and identify items for inclusion in the work programme;
- (2) agreed the changes to the work programme as detailed in paragraph 3.4 of the report
- (3) noted the work programmes of all overview and scrutiny committees (set out in appendix 2 to this report).
- (4) noted there will be insufficient time to start and conclude the Task Group on housing in Medway before the local elections on 7 May 2015.
- (5) agreed that the member group looking at prospective topics for Task Groups after the elections be advised of this Committee's view that the first Group established should be the Housing in Medway Task Group.

**Chairman**

**Date:**

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