

Medway Council
Meeting of Business Support Overview and Scrutiny
Committee

Thursday, 4 April 2019

6.30pm to 8.49pm

Record of the meeting

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

Present: Councillors: Mrs Josie Iles, Joy (Vice-Chairman), Khan, Maple, Murray, Royle, Stamp, Tejan, Tranter and Wildey

Substitutes: Councillors:
Steve Iles (Substitute for Etheridge)

In Attendance: Mark Breathwick, Head of Strategic Housing
Katey Durkin, Head of Finance Strategy
Perry Holmes, Chief Legal Officer/Monitoring Officer
Carrie McKenzie, Assistant Director - Transformation
Michael Turner, Democratic Services Officer
Phil Watts, Chief Finance Officer
Tracey Munton, Lauren Munson and Steve Randall -
Department of Work and Pensions

963 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Etheridge and Fearn.

964 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting held on 31 January 2019 was agreed and signed by the Chairman as correct.

965 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

966 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests or Other Significant Interests and Whipping

Disclosable pecuniary interests

There were none.

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Other significant interests

There were none.

Other interests

In relation to agenda item no. 6 (Universal Credit and Welfare Reforms Six Monthly Progress Report), Councillor Wildey disclosed that his wife was in receipt of a Personal Independent Payment.

967 Attendance of the Leader of the Council

Discussion:

Members received an overview of progress on the areas within the terms of Reference of this Committee covered by Councillor Alan Jarrett, Leader of the Council, i.e.

- Strategic leadership of the Council
- Communications and marketing
- Finance

Before Members considered the report, a Member remarked that this would be Councillor Royle's last meeting of the Committee as he was standing down at the elections. Councillor Royle had served as Chairman of the Children and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee for many years and was well-respected across the Council and would be missed. Councillor Jarrett concurred with the comments, noting that Councillor Royle had successfully navigated the Committee through many difficult issues.

Councillor Jarrett responded to Members' questions and comments as follows:

- **Pentagon Centre** – in response to whether two further independent market valuations should have been obtained regarding the purchase of the Pentagon Centre, the Leader stated the advice received was from a nationally recognised firm at a cost of £50,000. For a major strategic project such as this obtaining more quotes would have been expensive, delayed the decision to purchase and not affected the eventual outcome. The Council also hoped to purchase Mountbatten House which would greatly enhance the opportunities to regenerate Chatham.
- **Tourism** – a Member asked what more could be done to promote Medway. The Leader commented that Medway was already extensively promoted and he hoped local residents would promote the heritage and history that Medway offered.
- **Medway's economy** – noting the growth in the local economy, a Member asked what plans were in place to increase the pace of growth. The Leader replied that the economy had increased from £3.5b to £5.2b in eight years. Innovation Park Medway was expected to create 1,400 high skilled jobs and the large number of SME businesses in Medway, which the Council supported, added to the economy's resilience.

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- **Alcohol Awareness and Domestic Abuse campaign** – a Member congratulated the Communications Team on this very effective campaign.
- **Marriage Brochure** – in response to a question, the Leader made a commitment that the next version of this brochure would also include civil partnerships.
- **Luton Road** – a Member referred to a meeting with residents where the Council had promised follow up action which had not materialised. The Leader undertook to ensure this action was taken.
- **City of Culture** – the Leader concurred with comments from a Member that the Council should bid to become City of Culture 2025. Learning from previous unsuccessful bids for City status, he had concluded that Medway needed a coherent city centre. The Council would seek to achieve this in Chatham.
- **Regeneration activity across Medway** – the Leader agreed with a comment that there had been an imbalance in terms of regeneration activity across Medway. The focus had been on the west of the borough and more needed to be done in the east. He was looking to correct this imbalance.
- **Review of Local Government Finance** – the Leader agreed with a comment that the possible removal of deprivation from the fair funding formula was regrettable and the Council was making representations on this matter.
- **Chatham railway station** – the Leader agreed that lifts were needed at the station, as well as an overall refurbishment, and commented that a recent Government announcement had stated the station would be made DDA compliant, which presumably would include lifts.
- **Strood road network** – regarding the need for improvements to the main east/west road through Strood, the Leader acknowledged this was inadequate. Some improvements were planned and he would look at what further could be done.
- **Rochester Riverside** – a Member queried whether the composition of the Community Board represented all the communities affected by the development. The Leader commented he would be watching how this developed and hoped the new and existing communities would become inter-connected.
- **Parking charges** – a Member noted that income from car parking charges was £5m pa, the highest level in Kent, and that this should be invested in roads. An example was also given by a Member of what appeared to be ineffective road maintenance, which the Leader undertook to look into. The Leader commented the income figure was inevitably higher in Medway given it was the largest council in Kent with responsibility for off street car parks. Income from charges was used to fund roads and charges had only increased by 11% over the last 7 years.
- **Crime Task Force** – referring to a significant increase in knife crime in Medway and the recent creation of a multi-agency Task Force, a Member commented on the need for investment from the Council for this Task Force to be effective. The Leader replied the Task Force would be

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accommodated at Gun Wharf which meant rent etc. would be paid for by the Council. He would be keeping a watching brief on this.

- **Investment in high streets** – Members asked why the bid for Gillingham High Street to the Future High Streets Fund had not been made simultaneously with the Chatham bid, as indicated at the last Council meeting and whether this was due to a lack of capacity in the Council to deal with two bids at once. The Leader replied that there had been no change in the Council's position on this and a bid for Gillingham would be made as soon as possible. Any requests from Directors to increase officer capacity would always be considered.
- **Medway Matters** – a Member asked why the administration had commissioned an extra edition of Medway Matters, contributing to an overspend. The Leader replied this had been done to ensure effective communications with residents.
- **One Stop Shops** – in response to a query about the extension of the One Stop Shop in Gillingham to other areas, the Leader commented this was a pilot and, if successful, could be rolled out.

Decision:

The Committee thanked the Leader of the Council for his attendance.

968 Universal Credit and Welfare Reforms - Six Monthly Progress Report

Discussion:

The Chairman welcomed Tracey Munton, Lauren Munson and Steve Randall from the Department of Work and Pensions.

Members considered a progress report regarding Universal Credit (UC) and Welfare reforms, including the work of the Welfare Reform Steering Group.

A Member asked what the current waiting times were for UC applicants in Medway amidst concerns some had to wait for five weeks. DWP representatives replied that the five weeks were the assessment period of a UC claim, which were paid calendar monthly, and did not represent a delay. Claimants could request an advance of up to 100% of the claim on day one and were provided with information about re-payment figures and timescales for repayment. Budgeting support was also offered and claimants were made aware of the Local Welfare Provision scheme. Claimants were advised to claim for only what was needed. The advance was divided in up to 12 monthly payments but the Government was looking at possibly extending this period.

A Member asked if there had been any changes to the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) process. DWP representatives commented that they were looking to see if the PIP process could be streamlined and to ensure the mandatory reconsideration process was applied in a uniform way. DWP would make enquires to see if any changes to the process were planned and, if so, this would be shared with Members.

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Members welcomed the introduction by DWP of Defrazzle cafes where people could access mental health support and be signposted to other services. This had started in Sittingbourne and was now a national programme that helped tackle social isolation. DWP undertook to look into a suggestion that the new community Café in the Rochester Community Hub could play a part in this.

In response to a query about outreach work in the community, DWP advised that DWP staff did as much outreach work as possible.

A Member expressed concern about the Local Welfare Provision (LWP) service. Calls to Imago went unanswered and messages were not returned. DWP advised Imago no longer provided this service and LWP had been delivered by the Citizens Advice Bureau since January 2019. However, a Member commented that the Council was still directing residents to contact Imago. The Chief Finance Officer undertook to feed this back to the service.

Reference was made to a recent spate of benefit sanctions applied by the DWP for seemingly odd reasons. DWP representatives expressed surprise at this as sanctions were a last resort and agreed to look into these cases.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to:

- a) note the work referenced in this report and recognise that the Member Task Group's recommendations are embedded in the Council's policies, practices and contracts and those of its partners;
- b) note that, in line with the Cabinet's decision that the Welfare Reform Officer Group should continue until the introduction of Universal Credit, the Group has now been disbanded, and;
- c) agree that reports in future should be on an annual basis and that at the next agenda planning meeting Members should discuss whether reporting should be to this Committee or the Health and Adult Social Care O&S Committee.

969 Council Plan Performance Monitoring Report Quarter 3

Discussion:

Members considered a report which summarised the performance of the Council's Key Measures of Success for Quarter 3 2018/19 as set out in the Council Plan 2016/21.

Members commented on the large number of measures which were significantly below target, many of which related to children or vulnerable people. A Member made the point that the Council's emphasis should be on matters it could directly change. The Chief Finance Officer commented that, where a measure had been significantly below target for two consecutive

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quarters, the Corporate Management Team would commission a deep dive to see what could be done to improve performance or whether the target needed revising.

A Member expressed concern at the high number of private sector households the Council had assisted in having their properties improved, noting the year-end target had already been exceeded. This suggested there may be an endemic problem in Medway and officers were asked what was being done to reduce the figure and whether any comparative information from other unitaries existed. The Head of Strategic Housing advised that the private housing sector in Medway had doubled between 2001-2011. Future reports would give more details of the type of interventions as these ranged from easily resolved to quite complex. Efforts would be made to find comparative information. The Council was keen to take more enforcement action to send out a stronger message.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to note the quarter 3 performance of the measures of success used to monitor progress against the Council's priorities.

970 Revenue Budget Monitoring 2018/19 - Quarter 3

Discussion:

Members considered a report which presented the results of the Council's revenue budget monitoring for Quarter 3 of the 2018/19 financial year.

Referring to Medway Commercial Group's (MCG) intention to cover a budget shortfall with a one off receipt from the disposal of Aburound House, a Member queried how MCG could be using a capital receipt from a property the Cabinet had agreed to sell in 2016. The Chief Legal Officer advised that the property had been sold to MCG.

Some Members expressed concern that since the urgent closure of Deangate Golf Course in April 2018, costs of £150,000 had been incurred and, also, that this financial information had not been made available at the time of the decision. The Chief Finance Officer advised that no budgetary provision for Deangate had been made in 2019/20 and the costs referred to related to preparing the site for future use.

In response to a query, Members asked for a briefing note on the underspend in parking services, detailing the ratio between penalty charge notices and income permits and, also, what assumptions had been made in setting the budget.

A Member expressed surprise at the favourable variance of £910,000 in highways services, arguing the poor condition of roads warranted additional spending. The Chief Finance Officer advised that the Council had received additional Government funding of £1.1m for highways. The underspend had been used to offset pressures elsewhere in the Council.

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Decision:

The Committee agreed to:

- a) note the result of the third quarter of revenue monitoring for 2018/19;
- b) note that Cabinet has instructed officers to identify further management action to ensure a breakeven position is achieved by year end, and;
- c) request a briefing note on the underspend in parking services, as detailed above.

971 Capital Budget Monitoring 2018/19 - Quarter 3

Discussion:

Members considered a report which presented the results of the Council's Capital monitoring for Quarter 3 of the 2018/19 financial year, including out-turn forecasts and reference to any new schemes for approval.

Referring to the forecast overspend of £122,000 on the Command of the Heights Phase 2 scheme, a Member queried the origin of the Section 106 contributions identified to fund this. Noting that the Chief Finance Officer would be seeking agreement from the Leader of the Council to add these Section 106 contributions to the capital programme, a request was made that this information be shared with Members before a decision was taken. The Chief Finance Officer undertook to provide this information.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to:

- a) note the spending forecasts summarised at Table 1 of the report, and;
- b) note that information regarding the addition of Section 106 contributions to the Capital Programme in relation to the Command of the Heights Phase 2 scheme will be shared with Members.

972 Six Monthly Review of the Corporate Risk Register

Discussion:

Members considered a report regarding the 6 monthly review of the Council's Corporate Risk Register.

A Member asked what discussions were taking place with other bodies regarding the recent Government announcement that extra police officers could be drafted into Kent to deal with any consequences of the UK exiting the European Union without a deal.

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Decision:

The Committee agreed to:

- a) review the amended Corporate Risk Register presented at Appendix 1 to the report;
- b) consider whether any further changes are required or whether any risks should be added or removed;
- c) submit the Corporate Risk Register to Cabinet on 11 June 2019;
- d) note that from 2019/20, updates to the Corporate Risk Register will be produced every quarter, and;
- e) request a briefing note on the recent announcement that extra police officers could be drafted into Kent to deal with any consequences of the UK exiting the European Union without a deal.

973 Work programme

Discussion:

Members considered a report advising the Committee of the current work programme.

Decision:

The Committee:

- a) noted the work programme, as set out in Appendix 1 to the report;
- b) noted the work programmes of the other overview and scrutiny committees (Appendix 2 to the report), and;
- c) agreed that the briefing notes referred to in paragraph 3.3 of the report are no longer required.

Chairman

Date:

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