

Medway Council
Meeting of Business Support Overview and Scrutiny
Committee

Thursday, 20 August 2020

6.30pm to 9.39pm

Record of the meeting

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

Present: Councillors: Etheridge, Khan, Maple, Murray, Tejan (Vice-Chairman), Wildey and Williams

In Attendance: Mark Breathwick, Head of Housing
Wayne Hemingway, Principal Democratic Services Officer
Councillor Alan Jarrett, Leader of the Council
Vicky Nutley, Assistant Head of Legal Services
Michael Turner, Democratic Services Officer
Phil Watts, Chief Finance Officer

201 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Clarke, Hackwell, Johnson, Opara and Stamp.

(During this period, the Conservative and Labour and Co-operative political groups had informally agreed, due the Coronavirus pandemic, to run meetings with reduced number of participants. This was to reduce risk, comply with Government guidance and enable more efficient meetings. Therefore the apologies given reflected that informal agreement of reduced participants.)

202 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting of the Committee held on 2 July 2020 was agreed and signed by the Chairman as correct.

203 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

204 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests or Other Significant Interests and Whipping

Disclosable pecuniary interests

There were none.

Other significant interests (OSIs)

There were none.

Other interests

There were none.

Whipping

Confirmation was provided that there was none.

205 Covid 19 recovery

Discussion:

Members considered a report which provided the Committee with the opportunity to scrutinise the latest steps taken by the Council to assist Medway to begin recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic.

The following issues were discussed:

- **Re-opening of High Streets and markets** – the question of what the Council could do to enforce social distancing at boot fairs and protect sellers from thefts was raised. The Chief Finance Officer responded that this was more a matter for the police, but that he would refer this matter to Recovery Work Stream 1 to look at what could be done.
- **Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs)** – reference was made to errors at the start of the pandemic where EHCPs had been posted to wrong addresses. The Chief Finance Officer advised that he could not comment on the detail of this issue. Backlogs had inevitably developed in several services and officers were doing their best to try and catch up.
- **Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs)** – it was clarified that it was no longer possible to book a slot at the Pepperhill HWRC via the Council's website as Kent County Council had taken on responsibility for bookings at their sites.

Test and trace – noting the powers being given to local councils, the capacity to provide a test and trace service was queried. Members were advised that the Council had been given £1.5m to mitigate against and manage local outbreaks of Covid-19. In response to whether this funding was sufficient, the Chief Finance Officer commented that it was probably sufficient provided there was not a significant outbreak in Medway.

Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 20 August 2020

Whether the IT systems used by the Council could be used to securely transfer data to the Test and Trace team was queried. The Chief Finance Officer undertook to investigate this.

In response to queries about test and trace data collection in libraries, the Chief Finance Officer undertook to look into why a library card could not be used to provide the necessary personal details and also why residents could not use their own laptops in libraries.

- **Re-opening of leisure centres** – whether the free-swimming scheme had been put on hold was queried, which the Chief Finance Officer agreed to clarify and report back. In terms of when the Strand Leisure Centre would re-open, Members were advised that a lack of certainty and the lead time required for emptying, cleaning and refilling, had led to Gold Command making the decision not to re-open it this summer.
- **Purchase of residents parking permits** – the Chief Finance Officer agreed to establish when libraries and community hubs would re-commence issuing residents' parking permits.
- **Government Covid funding** – Members asked for more detail on lost income and government funding received for Covid, including what elements were ring fenced, the timescales for spending grants, expenditure to date and the remaining balance. The Chief Finance Officer stated further details would be provided in the Quarter 1 revenue monitoring report and gave an assurance that additional funding received had been used to help businesses and residents and any conditions attached to ring fenced grants had been met.
- **Economy Cell** – a request was made for the Medway Trades Cell to be involved in this work. In terms of when the action plans relating to the Strategic Planning Workstream would be finalised, the Chief Finance Officer commented that usually this was the time to refresh the Council Plan but the view of the Corporate Management Team was to instead focus on a more short term plan which focused on the recovery from the pandemic before taking stock of what the longer term strategic plan should be.
- **Economic impact on individuals** – given increased unemployment levels and the cumulative effect of reduced monthly incomes on people furloughed, the point was made that the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) would hopefully consider this wider context when agreeing debt recovery plans. The Chief Finance Officer assured Members that the Council was aware of this risk and continued to work closely with the DWP. The Council would be adopting a phased approach to recovering debts in line with the Government's 'Breathing Space' guidance.

In the light of the reduction in the number of apprenticeship positions, it was asked whether the Council could prioritise apprenticeships and local labour in its large infrastructure projects. The Chief Finance Officer commented that the Procurement Strategy required businesses the Council contracted with on a large scale to include apprenticeships and was also designed to give small and medium enterprises in Medway the same opportunity to win Council business as large suppliers.

Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 20 August 2020

- **Prospect of local lockdown** - an assurance was sought that the Council was prepared for a local lockdown and had learned lessons from other areas. The Chief Finance Officer believed that measures were in place to hopefully prevent a local lockdown, but the Council was well prepared if there was an outbreak. As to whether the Council could do anything to encourage the enforcement of face coverings in supermarkets, the Chief Finance Officer commented that the Council had engaged well with local businesses. There was a limit to what local businesses could do if the rules were not being followed but he did not consider this was a significant problem in Medway.
- **Role of staff** - several Members commended staff for the agility and commitment demonstrated in responding to the pandemic, noting many employees had switched quickly to new roles.
- **Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS)** – given many VCS organisations were now in greater financial difficulties, an assurance was sought that Council contracts which relied on the VCS took that into account and that the Council was realistic about what could be achieved. The Chief Finance Officer replied that the VCS were supported financially in the early stages of the pandemic. Longer term, the VCS Recovery Cell would be assessing the scale of the financial losses suffered by the sector.
- **Recovery plan** – the danger of “silo” working was referred to in the light of the various workstreams and cells set up to work on recovering from the pandemic. The Chief Finance Officer assured Members that a joined-up approach had been adopted and was working well. Tactical Command comprised most of the service managers who took decisions jointly. The various cells looking at specific themes had their own action plans, but a mechanism was built in whereby cross cutting issues were considered.
- **Ending of ban on evictions** – noting this ban was about to end and in response to a question about the preparedness of the Council, the Head of Housing advised that this had the potential to cause bottlenecks in the system. However, the team had been talking to registered providers and were engaging with them on cases to help prevent evictions. If necessary, staff would be redeployed to respond to any increase in evictions and homelessness.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to note the Council’s role in the recovery phase of the Covid-19 pandemic.

(In accordance with Council Rule 12.6, Councillors Khan, Maple and Murray asked that their votes in favour be recorded.)

206 Attendance of the Leader of the Council

Discussion:

Members considered a report which set out activities and progress on work areas within the Portfolio of the Leader of the Council, which all fell within the remit of this Committee (i.e. strategic leadership of the Council, communications and marketing, and finance). The report also included an overview of the Council's role in responding to the Covid19 pandemic.

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

- **The Council's response to the pandemic** – in terms of how the Council had responded overall to the pandemic and what in hindsight he felt could have been done differently, the Leader replied that he did not feel he that would have done much more differently although it was inevitable that the Council had not been successful in everything it had tried to do. The Council had responded well in an often rapidly changing situation and had supported vulnerable individuals with food parcels etc as well as channelling £70m of grants to businesses and individuals. From the outset, his position had been to aim to maintain services as near to normal as possible for as long as possible. Medway was in the lower quartile of similar councils in terms of the number of infections and he assured Members that measures had been put in place to prevent a further significant outbreak. He had some concerns about whether the police were doing enough to enforce the Covid regulations, which he would be raising with them.
In terms of how the Council's response compared to similar sized councils, the Leader considered that it compared very well.
The cross-party approach in responding to the pandemic was welcomed by Members.
The Leader was asked how he planned to recognise the achievements of staff over the last few months through the performance appraisal system. The Leader commented that it would be very difficult to determine who deserved to be rewarded without rewarding everyone, which would not be possible financially.
- **City of Culture Bid** – the Leader confirmed that this bid was still proceeding and agreed with a comment about the importance of how to use outdoor spaces flexibly to deliver cultural events.
- **Climate change emergency** – in response to a question about what the Council could do to ensure new homes were as "green" as possible, the Leader commented that addressing climate change remained a priority and wanted to see homes as "green" as possible. However, the Government's proposals to change the planning system would lead to a state of flux.
- **Remote meetings** – the possibility of the Council asking local MPs to lobby the Government to allow remote meetings to continue when the enabling legislation expired was raised. The Leader undertook to discuss this with Medway's MPs. His preference was to have face to face

Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 20 August 2020

meetings when this was possible again but accepted there was a place for virtual meetings as well.

- **Festivals** – the Leader agreed with a suggestion that pre-purchased cards be made available.
- **Medway Commercial Group (MCG)** – in response to a question asking whether the £300,000 MCG charged for acting as a broker represented good value for money, the Leader commented that he did not feel this represented value for money on the face of it but if the business had developed as intended then it would have done so as MCG would have delivered a substantial dividend.
- **Preparations for a “No Deal” Brexit** – as to whether the Council was prepared for disruptions in supply chains, the Leader stated that Kent County Council were leading on transport issues such as Operation Brock. The Government had acquired land for lorry parks.
- **Financial support from the Government** – noting that unitary authorities had experienced greater financial difficulties due to Covid, the Leader was asked if the Government would reimburse the Council fully for additional expenditure and lost income. The Leader’s view was that there was no sign that the Government would fully reimburse the Council although he would continue to lobby for this. It was likely that there would be a 75% compensation scheme.
- **Use of reserves** – reference was made to the drawdown of £15m from reserves to fund Covid related expenditure and the extent to which this sum would be used was queried, given the already low level of reserves. The Leader stated that the use of reserves represented a best estimate in a rapidly changing environment. The collection funds for council tax and business rates were well balanced but estimated collection rates had not been published to maximise collection.
- **Devolution White Paper** – the possibility of a cross party discussion on the impact on Medway as a unitary authority of the expected white paper was suggested. The Leader commented that this was a big issue for the Council given the Government’s aim of creating more unitaries with a larger population than was the case in Medway. This could lead to a local government restructuring affecting Medway, but the Leader would wait to see what the White Paper contained before taking a view on the need for cross party discussions.
- **“Sense of arrival” into Chatham** – noting the poor visual appearance of the entrance into Chatham from the direction of Gillingham/Luton, the Leader was asked what his vision was for this. The Leader agreed the route needed to be improved, as the other two main routes had been, but there were difficulties in achieving this due the current high risks in another major acquisition in this part of Chatham. The Council was focusing on the western edge of Chatham town centre but would continue to work to attract new retailers and a budget supermarket.
- **Innovation Park Medway (IPM)** – the Leader confirmed that representations had been made to the Government about extending the Enterprise Zone status in response to a question about this risk if that did not happen.

Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 20 August 2020

- **Housing Infrastructure Bid** – the Leader confirmed, in response to a question, that local councillors would be involved in discussions about design.
- **New Learning, Skills and Employment Hub** – the Leader confirmed that this presented an opportunity to all ages to learn new skills, which was particularly important when the furlough scheme came to an end.
- **London Resort** – in response to a question about how this new project was progressing, the Leader commented that plans were well advanced and looked likely to materialise. This would create jobs for people in Medway, both in construction and operational.
- **Voluntary and Community Sector** - the Leader was asked if plans were in place to deliver services without the support of the VCS in the event of a second wave if the sector was unable to provide the same level of services. The Leader responded that this was why the Voluntary Sector Task Group report had not yet been agreed as he wanted officers to assess the implications of the Group's recommendations. He was not assuming that the sector would collapse but he wanted there to be a focus on ensuring the VCS was in a good position in the event of a second wave.
- **Pentagon Centre, Chatham** – whether the impact of Covid on the retail sector had been carried out was queried, given the Council's significant investment in this centre. The Leader commented that this work had been done. The Council had renegotiated several rents to avoid tenants leaving. This had led to lower rents but longer-term tenancies. He had asked officers to look at how well businesses fitted with the wider plans for Chatham when requests for a rent renegotiation were received.
- **Social Worker recruitment** – in terms of whether the 65 new applications was an improvement on previous years, the Leader undertook to provide the figures but pointed out that the significant increases in the social care budget meant a comparison was difficult. 10 international social workers had been recruited and would start work soon.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to thank the Leader for his attendance and to note the report.

(In accordance with Council Rule 12.6, Councillors Khan, Maple and Murray asked that their votes in favour be recorded.)

207 Council Plan Performance Monitoring Report and Risk Register Quarter 4 and End of Year 2019/20

Discussion:

Members considered a report which detailed the Quarter 4 2019/20 performance against the measures used to monitor progress against the Council's priorities.

Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 20 August 2020

The extent to which any more savings could be achieved through the procurement process was queried. The Chief Finance Officer replied that the category management approach was not just about buying goods more cheaply but also looking at how services could be delivered differently to generate efficiencies. The latter approach was being used when considering how best to recover from the pandemic.

Reference was made to measures significantly below target and the fact these tended to affect vulnerable people and how these would be improved was queried. The Chief Finance Officer explained that the Corporate Management Team had undertaken 4 “deep dives” into measures below target and improvements had resulted in 3 of these areas. Some issues took inherently longer to fix than others. There had been no “deep dives” during the Covid period, but these would now resume.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to:

- a) note the Q4 2019/20 performance against the measures used to monitor progress against the Council’s priorities.
- b) to note that during Q4 19/20 risks have been managed through the Council’s Emergency Planning process, and
- c) note that the Strategic Risk Management Group resumed monitoring strategic risks during quarter 1 20/21.

(In accordance with Council Rule 12.6, Councillors Khan, Maple and Murray asked that their votes in favour be recorded.)

208 Remote meetings

Discussion:

Members considered a report which provided an update on how formal meetings had been held during the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, it set out the lessons learned from the introduction of the legislation and technology to allow the Council to hold remote meetings, including possible further Member development needs and the extent to which the Council might wish to use this technology post recovery to facilitate the democratic process.

The Chief Finance Officer commented that a cross directorate officer group had been set up at the start of the pandemic to implement remote meetings and that this had been a great success, although there was still scope for improvement. In excess of 30 IT champions across the Council had volunteered to provide additional support to officers and Members.

Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 20 August 2020

Members agreed the introduction of remote meetings from a standing start had been very successful and welcomed the training and support which had been provided.

Going forward the following suggestions and comments were made:

- How to make Microsoft Teams and Modern Gov (the Council's agenda management system) more integrated.
- How to resolve conflicts when an individual used Teams for two or more different organisations.
- The introduction of online voting in meetings.
- How to include more councillors in remote meetings so that Committees no longer operated on a reduced membership basis, including looking at the start time of meetings.
- That the Council should continue webcasting Member meetings open to the public.
- The importance of training for Members.
- Whether the Council could engage with providers to ensure that the broadband infrastructure in Medway could cope with the increasing needs of the digital age.
- That all councillors should only use a secure Medway email address.
- The need for the microphone system in Gun Wharf to be updated to improve sound quality.

In response, officers agreed to investigate the points about integration between Teams and Modern Gov and electronic voting. Members were advised that a return to meetings operating with a full complement of Members would need to be carefully managed. The importance of training was acknowledged, and the new IT champions would help with this. It was likely that in future there would be a hybrid approach to meetings with some face to face, some completely remote and others by a combination. There was a need for good Wi-Fi coverage across Medway and the Smart Cities programme presented an opportunity for the Council to work with its partners to achieve this.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to note the report.

(In accordance with Council Rule 12.6, Councillors Khan, Maple and Murray asked that their votes in favour be recorded.)

209 Work programme

Discussion:

Members considered a report regarding the Committee's current work programme.

Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 20 August 2020

Reference was made to the cross-party discussions which had led to proposals to change how the O&S arrangements operated and whether these proposals could be implemented in the next cycle of meetings.

The possibility of the recommendations from the new cross-party group on monuments and place names coming to Overview and Scrutiny for pre-decision scrutiny was raised.

Noting the possibility of the Council relocating from Gun Wharf, it was suggested that a cross party group may be needed to oversee this depending on what decision Cabinet took on the matter.

Members noted that this would be the last meeting of the Committee clerked by Michael Turner, Democratic Services Officer as he was taking on new responsibilities and thanked him for his support and guidance to the Committee over the last few years.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to note the Committee's work programme and the work programmes of the other Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

(In accordance with Council Rule 12.6, Councillors Khan, Maple and Murray asked that their votes in favour be recorded.)

Chairman

Date:

Michael Turner, Democratic Services Officer

Telephone: 01634 332817

Email: democratic.services@medway.gov.uk