

BUSINESS SUPPORT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

28 JANUARY 2021

MEDWAY NORSE UPDATE

Report from/Author: Phil Watts, Chief Finance Officer

Summary

This covering report represents a review of the performance of the Joint Venture from the perspective of the Council client for the second quarter of the 2020/2021 financial year. It is accompanied by an update on the Joint Venture's achievements and financial performance prepared by the Partnership Director at Medway Norse.

This report was considered by the Cabinet on 15 December 2020.

1. Budget and Policy Framework

- 1.1 Review of the performance and financial position of the joint venture is a matter of Cabinet and there is a requirement to submit regular reports to Cabinet.
- 1.2 The Business Support O & S Committee has responsibility for scrutinising Medway Norse.

2. Background

- 2.1 In March 2013, Cabinet agreed for the joint venture (JV) company, Medway Norse, to be established for the provision of facilities management (FM) services from 1 June 2013. It was established to:
 - Provide services to the Council more efficiently, giving better value for money;
 - Grow the business through taking on external contracts;
 - Increase employment opportunities for local people.
- 2.2 In 2014, the joint venture also took on responsibility for the grounds maintenance contract and for an initial phase of school transport for children with special educational needs attending three schools (now five). In October 2019, Medway Norse took over responsibility for the waste collection and street cleansing activities, increasing the joint venture's gross turnover to over £25million per annum.

3. Governance

- 3.1 The Company's Board of Directors comprises three representatives from Norse Commercial Services and two from the Council. The Council has two representatives. An elected member, Councillor Rupert Turpin, who is Chair of the Board, and Ruth Du-Lieu, Assistant Director Frontline Services. The Board is responsible for the overall performance of the joint venture.
- 3.2 There is also an Operational Liaison Board, which consists of representatives from Medway Norse and nine representatives from the Council.
- 3.3 Corporate client responsibility lies within a number of areas. Responsibility for the original facilities management core contract sits with the Head of Corporate Projects, whilst the greenspaces and environmental elements are managed by the Head of Environmental Services. Special Educational Needs (SEN) transport is under the School Admissions and Transport Manager.
- 3.4 Services provided by the joint venture sit within the portfolio themes of the Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services and the Portfolio Holders for Children's Services (Lead Member) and Frontline Services.
- 3.5 These update reports comprise a covering report from the Council's corporate client, accompanied by an update on the joint venture's achievements and financial performance prepared by Andrew Mann, the Partnership Director at Medway Norse. As agreed, a "balanced score-card" of performance indicators has been included in the update report at Appendix 1.
- 3.6 On 15 December, Cabinet members noted the contents of this report and Appendix and formally approved the transfer of the graffiti and handyman service to Medway Norse.

4. Facilities Core Contract (from Head of Corporate Projects)

- 4.1 Medway Norse have carried on supporting Medway Council Survey Teams as the COVID-19 pandemic has extended through the year. The Medway Norse hard Facilities Management (FM) team have delivered screens and adapted these to provide the various property service building managers with the necessary screen requirements to facilitate protection measures for this pandemic.
- 4.2 We have engaged in horizon scanning and Medway Norse are ready with resources to continue with further provision of signage and sneeze boards, sanitising equipment and paper towels.
- 4.3 We note that works have continued throughout the pandemic with safe working practices being put in place, these have included the Bishops Palace securing the historic industrial tunnel with a gate, and clearing of vegetation with cherry picker to the Bishops Palace walls, working with our Heritage officers. In the area of green spaces there were playgrounds refurbishments. There have been important changes in personnel and we now understand that a new Medway Norse FM lead should soon be appointed who will lead on many initiatives including a refresh on compliance strategy.

- 4.4 Building Repairs and Maintenance Fund allocation is ongoing and allocated to approximate 50%, which is line with where we need to be on a programme review. Officers will be reviewing at the next Property Board and recommending the next tranche of FM works during the Covid 19 ongoing condition.
- 4.5 Senior Medway Norse managers continue to sit in on Silver Response and Recovery meetings conducted via “MS Teams” thus ensuring our service and operation continued over the extended pandemic and risks in lockdown 2, with risks identified and mitigation put in place.
- 4.6 The Health and Safety status shows no reportable serious accidents or injuries over the period.
- 4.7 In the 95.7% for site audits, and 99.9% vehicle health and safety, there have been no incidents/accidents recorded.
- 4.8 The relationship between Medway Council Hard FM team and the MN team remains good and we look forward to engaging with the new hard FM lead and continuing with the works which are maintaining during the continuing COVID – 19 challenges.

5. Green Spaces (from Head of Environmental Services)

- 5.1 Medway Norse, in partnership with Medway Council, manage the landscaping of the two country parks, 106 play areas, seven green flag sites, five cemeteries, crematorium grounds, a grave digging service and all the open spaces. They also manage the 72 sports pitches, grass bowling greens, grass tennis courts, a Pit and Putt site at Snodhurst Bottom, all of Medway’s grass verges and the 18,000 trees within the public realm.
- 5.2 Medway Norse continues to drive forward the service. Developments this year include further bulb plants along:
- Watling Street, Strood
 - Walderslade Road,
 - Magpie Hall Road, Luton
 - Gravesend Road, Strood
 - Central Reservation Maidstone Road, Chatham
- 5.3 A fantastic public response was received about the stunning bulb floral display in Rainham along the A2. Next year, 2021, this programme will be extended to parks.
- 5.4 The Tree Team continue to develop the planting of tree programme – with another 200 planted this autumn 2020, nearly doubling the number from 2019. This historically unfunded work has been undertaken by finding efficiencies in other areas, freeing up resources for delivery of maintenance along high risk high speed road sites.
- 5.5 Coppicing work continues with wooded areas in Hempsted being programmed for works during the winter months.
- 5.6 During the winter seasons the wardens at the Country Parks continue to undertake various in-house maintenance projects to ensure facilities are up to standard ready for Green Flag assessments and new spring season usage.

- 5.7 The country parks team have continued to develop their online presence with two Facebook pages set up for the Country Parks. These have been well received by the community with Capstone now reaching 2,572 followers, and Riverside 1,717.
- 5.8 Play areas continue to be refurbished where possible within external s106 funding restrictions. Inspections are undertaken monthly by internal staff and annually by a qualified independent assessor to ensure safe standards are maintained.
- 5.9 During 2020 the programme to roll out naturalised verges that have been allowed to grow along high-speed roads and wide urban areas was completed. This is part of the climate change and biodiversity agenda work to encourage more biodiversity in our verges. This has received excellent support from local interest groups. Signs were erected in June 2020 to highlight these areas.
- 5.10 At Cabinet in January 2020 it was agreed that the weed spraying programme would be dialled back within play areas and open spaces. This allowed a one metre ring around tree bases to grow longer as part of the climate change and biodiversity work.
- 5.11 During the COVID crisis, the grounds team maintained parks grass cutting to keep this essential facilities open for the public as a lifeline for mental health. The kerbside grass cutting programme was slightly delayed but commenced in early May. Planting of formal beds started in May despite the crisis. The grounds team also supported the waste services at the start of the pandemic while new procedures were being developed.

6. Transport (from School Admissions and Transport Manager)

- 6.1 Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Travel Assistance across Medway is provided to eligible children and young people in various different ways including solo transport, shared vehicles, cash allowance and personal travel budgets. The provision of transport (e.g. via taxi, mini-bus) is met by a number of different providers who all form part of the transport framework. The previous transport framework expired in July 2019 and a new framework was implemented from September 2019, following a rigorous procurement process. Since then, Norse has continued to play a major part in the transporting of SEND pupils to and from school transporting approximately 394 pupils every day from a total transported (shared vehicles) cohort of 1094.
- 6.2 Since the implementation of the new contracts in September 2019, the provision delivered by Norse has continued to improve and is operating to a good standard, highlighted by the continuous reduction in the number of incidents, customer queries and complaints. Since November, these rates have declined significantly with only two complaints received in December-March and a fall in incident numbers across a high number of routes. Some safeguarding concerns were raised in February and March however, and a high level of co-operation between Norse and Council operatives resolved these quickly.

- 6.3 Schools have a good working relationship with Medway Norse and communication with both schools and Council officers is at a high level, which has been highlighted during the Covid-19 crisis where transport has continued to be provided as necessary in challenging circumstances.
- 6.4 Medway Norse reacted to the COVID situation positively during the lockdown period and this has continued into the full return of pupils into September with all pupils requiring transport on Norse routes being appropriately transported to and from school.
- 6.5 The School Admissions and Transport Team will continue to work with Medway Norse to resolve any concerns raised by parents, so that the service delivered: a) meets the expectations of Medway Council, schools and families; b) focusses on the needs and best interests of the children and young people and; and c) is delivered in the most cost effective manner to ensure best use of public funds.

7. Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRC) (from Head of Environmental Services)

- 7.1 The HWRC contract broadly consists of the following elements:
- The management of three HWRCs;
 - The haulage of all materials arising at the sites with the exception of Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) and household batteries, which are covered by Producer Compliance Schemes (PCS);
 - The marketing and sale of materials arising at the sites with the exception of residual waste, wood waste, and those detailed above;
 - A 50/50 risk share on all materials sold;
 - Achievement of a 60% recycling rate in Year 1, 61% recycling rate at Year 2 and 62% recycling rate for Year 3 onwards.
- 7.2 The main focus for the year was the implementation of safe working practices following COVID 19 crisis. Medway Norse has worked in close partnership with the Councils waste and digital teams to implement a successful booking system to ensure all users of the sites and the operatives remain safe.
- 7.3 Despite all of this work and the need for periods of site closure, the HWRCs continued to offer high quality recycling services for 30 different material streams.
- 7.4 The table below details the recycling performance (excluding rubble and hard-core) of the three HWRCs.

Contract year	Total tonnes	Recycled tonnes	Recycling %
Oct 2017-Sept 2018	22,341	13,341	60%
Oct 2018-Sept 2019	20,774	12,418	60%

Data for Sept 2019-Oct 2020 is being validated and will be available in the next report.

7.6 During the COVID crisis, the three sites were shut for a period of 6 weeks following police advice on 'essential travel' and loss of a key material off-taker due to COVID closures of their facilities. Once Government guidelines on safe operating practices were issued, Hoath and Capstone were safely reopened on Friday 15 May 2020. After one day of excessive queues as staff and public settled into the new site operating rules and booking systems, the sites have been operating safely smoothly with minimal queues.

7.7 As of 8 October 2020 the Cuxton site reopened via booking system offering one-hour time slots to better manage the traffic queuing issues on the A228. The new one-hour time slots have been a success and there have been no queuing issues as a result of the site operation.

8. Waste Collection and Street Cleansing (from Head of Environmental Services)

8.1 A significant amount of work was put into the transfer of the weekly waste collection and street cleaning contract to Medway Norse with the new service commencing on 1 October 2019.

8.2 This work has included:

- A new street cleaning fleet (39 vehicles);
- Depot redesign at Pier Approach Road in Gillingham to house the daily operations of the collection and street fleet;
- New ICT systems for asset management and customer service requests has been developed in partnership with Medway Councils Environmental Service and ICT teams;
- TUPE transfer of the existing 271 staff from Veolia to Medway Norse.

8.3 The project was an excellent example of partnership work, across the Council and Medway Norse and it is through the success of the partnership that the transfer has been delivered seamlessly and on schedule.

8.4 Medway Norse are performing to a good standard. This is reflected in the number of service requests and corporate complaints received, remaining consistent for the time of year. The number of missed waste collections remains low compared to the number of collections that occur each week; over 341k collections of refuse, recycling and organic waste weekly. Medway Norse have carried out over 10 million waste collections since contract start which equates to only 0.056% of collections being missed. Additionally, Waste Services consistently receives one of the highest levels of corporate compliments, again showcasing the excellent service delivered by the teams.

8.5 The first efficiency that has been achieved with the cleansing services joining Norse, is street cleansing and grounds maintenance teams working with Medway Council to combine the cleansing and green space works. Due to the speed and volume of traffic on these roads additional traffic management is required to ensure the safety of the operatives whilst working. Combining both services has provided efficiencies and enabled a holistic provision of services. This means the main roads are litter picked, green space maintained and a final cleanse undertaken to remove grass cuttings, all the same time. During the last few months the teams are now working on combining the litter bin

emptying services for ground and street bins to ensure more efficient collections.

- 8.6 Street cleansing is performing to standard with the NI 195 results showing 97% of land found to be at an acceptable standard at the time of the inspection during quarter 4 of 2019/20, meeting the Council target.
- 8.7 Throughout the COVID crisis the service has maintained delivery with only three lost days of the organic waste service. The public support for the teams has been phenomenal with countless letters and messages of support for the work the teams have continued to in exceptionally challenging times. The street cleansing service has also been maintained with only a few days of lost time on scarab cleaning work when drivers were needed to support the collection services.
- 8.8 The bulky waste service was maintained with only the loss of fridges and freezers during April following closure of the off takers facilities. This was quickly caught up and full services resumed in early May.
- 8.9 Medway Norse worked with Waste services to undertake targeted street cleaning including deep cleans of the high street in advance of July reopening and additional evening cleans to address night time economy litter post hospitality reopening 5 July to 5 September.
- 8.10 In July 2020 Medway Norse commenced the Graffiti service and Handyman roles to enable a seamless service delivery of all frontline street cleaning operations. Whilst this formed part of a wider reorganisation of Front Line Services, Cabinet approval is required to formalise this transfer.

9. HRA Housing Landlord Service (from Head of Strategic Housing)

- 9.1 Estate services continue to be delivered effectively in partnership with Medway Norse. Following five successful years of delivery, the Housing Landlord Service took up an option to extend the existing contract for a further five years. The further 5 years commenced from 5 October 2020.
- 9.2 The suite of KPIs and the open book accounting with profit share have worked well for both parties and indeed for the HRA tenants and Leaseholders. Performance across the contract remains strong with seven of the eight KPIs on target.
- 9.3 Having a fixed price contract for the five year period has meant financial stability and the partnership approach between the service and Norse has allowed successful trials of alternative delivery models that are now enshrined in the contract extension. Customer satisfaction has improved from 67% when the service was delivered by the Council to 83% with Norse.

10. Financial Implications

- 10.1 Although the joint venture has not yet posted final accounts for the 2019/20 financial year, it has forecast a profit of £754,000 and is expecting to return a rebate of around £377,500 to Medway Council. This represents a significant increase over previous years. Medway Norse anticipates returning a similar level of rebate to the Council in 2020/21.

11. Legal Implications

- 11.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from this update report, however as consideration is given to transferring further Council services to the joint venture, this will be undertaken in accordance with all legal and Medway Council constitutional requirements. Any decision to transfer services to the joint venture will be a matter for Cabinet.

12. Risk Management

- 12.1 The Medway Norse Board maintains and regularly reviews its business risk register in conjunction with the Corporate Client Team.

13. Recommendations

- 13.1 Members are asked to note the contents of this report and its Appendix.

Lead officer contact

Phil Watts, Chief Finance Officer
Medway Council
Tel: 01634 332220

Appendices

Appendix 1: Medway Norse Cabinet Report December 2020

Background papers

None.