

REGENERATION, CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

23 MARCH 2021

ATTENDANCE OF THE DEPUTY LEADER AND PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

Portfolio Holder: Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services, Councillor Doe
Report from: Richard Hicks, Director of Place and Deputy Chief Executive

Summary

This report sets out progress made within the areas covered by the Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services Councillor Doe 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 Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services Councillor Doe are:

- Archives
- Armed Forces Covenant
- Events and Festivals
- Greenspaces
- Heritage
- Leisure Services
- Sporting Legacy
- Theatres and Arts
- Tourism

1.2 Achievements for 2020 are detailed by service area below.

2. Medway Archives Centre

2.1 Medway Archives Centre (MAC) continues to be the core location for any resident who is keen to explore the history of Medway and its people.

- 2.2 Staff have been able to fulfil essential research and reprographics enquiries, such as building control plan requests required for house sales and mortgage applications, internal Medway Council enquiries, and external data subject access requests, throughout each lockdown.
- 2.3 Staff have continued to work on in-person, remote, and online engagement activities for new and current researchers throughout the year.
- 2.4 At the beginning of 2020 MAC hosted three exhibitions:
- Picture Medway
 - Pembroke: From naval barracks to university campus
 - Women Power.
- 2.5 During the spring 2020 lockdown MAC launched [three new online exhibitions](#), including one on William Cuffay. Two further online exhibitions (which will also be physical exhibitions when the MAC is able to reopen to the public) are planned for February/March 2021, one on hospitals and health care in Medway, and another on epidemics and Medway.
- 2.6 MAC continue to share interesting aspects of the collections through Facebook and Instagram.
- 2.7 MAC's online resources have continued to be popular, with over 17,500 unique page views to the online archive catalogue, which provides free online access to historic parish registers, a rich family history source, and over 51,000 unique page views to our Medway Images website of historic local photographs.
- 2.8 MAC is sending an increasing number of study packs (physical and electronic copies) to local schools, some of which have not used MAC's services before. Current study packs available look at 'Dickens, Victorian England, and the lives of the poor', 'World War 1: Medway 1914-1919', and 'Workhouses'.
- 2.9 MAC has had renewed interest during lockdown in its reminiscence resources from care home staff and has been able to send reminiscence packs as electronic resources.
- 2.10 MAC has been creating a new community archive collection comprising material about, or created because of, the current Covid-19 pandemic, to ensure that the experiences of those that live or work in Medway is documented during this time. Submissions so far have included diaries, photographs and artwork.
- 2.11 A visitor survey conducted in February/March 2020 showed that overall visitor satisfaction is very high with 94% of respondents scoring their experience as good or very good. 88% of respondents rated MAC staff as very good with very good knowledge delivering a high-quality service.

3. Armed Forces Covenant

- 3.1 Medway Council have continued to uphold the armed forces covenant and in August 2020 were recognised by receiving the Employer Defence Recognition Scheme, Gold Award. This was a result of Medway Council being a forces friendly employer, with a positive policy for reservists in place and hosting a reservist recruitment day. Medway Council also continues to work very closely with the local Armed Forces, offering help and support where possible.
- 3.2 Medway Council also secured £10,000 to run an Armed Forces Veterans Hub, which will be a place for all veterans and their families to attend, for social reasons or to get help and support. The hub will commence in 2021 and be hosted by Gillingham Football Club.

4. Events and Festivals

- 4.1 In a normal year the Events and Festivals team directly produce one of the largest free outdoor events and festivals programmes in the country reaching over 300,000 residents and visitors.
- 4.2 2020 has been an extraordinary year where the entire programme has been cancelled to ensure Coronavirus restrictions are upheld.
- 4.3 In January 2020, the Committee asked that future reports include attendance stats at festivals and events for recent years, to enable a year-on-year comparison. With no events taking place in 2020 this is deemed unnecessary but has been noted and will be included in future reports.
- 4.4 Over Spring, the pandemic was having a huge impact on the lives of residents and young people in Medway. Our theatres and museums were closed, and festivals and events cancelled but throughout self-isolation, creativity has nonetheless flourished. As a population we looked to artists and performers, who were tapping into their creativity to relay health guidelines and share messages of hope – that saw neighbours singing to each other on the streets, online choirs and digital making and creating rainbows for our windows and going to local online music gigs.
- 4.5 It was felt that in the lead up to our UK City of Culture bid it was important to continue to showcase the work of Medway's creatives, young people and diverse communities, by providing the opportunity to create digital programmes that help build skills and capacity, develop radical partnerships, and illustrate our pioneering approach to culture and creativity.
- 4.6 In June, it was agreed that some of the festivals and events budget would be used to develop a series of new creative digital commissions that take inspiration from and reflect the Covid-19 emergency.
- 4.7 Over the following two months [Electric Medway](#), Medway's first digital arts festival was developed in partnership with Chatham based arts organisation [SparkedEcho](#) and [Arts Council England](#).

- 4.8 From 28 August to 6 September 2020, Electric Medway presented 84 events, over five virtual zones that over 7,000 people participated in or viewed.
- 4.9 The festival took place online and outside, featuring newly commissioned works including live theatre, Virtual Reality, geolocated audio, interactive film, coding, illustration, workshops and talks.
- 4.10 26 new commissions provided opportunities for creatives to develop digital skills and prototype new technology. Feedback included:

"The commission was the perfect opportunity to explore the visual side of my practice further, with new skills in visual editing."

"I developed tech skills in visual effects, video, using a green screen. First time I've been part of a festival."

"This was great for me. I had decided (about 5 years back) to retire from sound projects, and just concentrate on performing. When the world fell apart in March, I decided to resurrect the digital art side of my practice. This opportunity was a great way for me to get into the general public and get started again!"

- 4.11 A specific Electric Medway Young Creatives programme sat at the heart of Electric Medway, supporting local young people looking to work in the creative industries with opportunities to undertake paid commissions, showcase work, volunteer and benefit from creative coaching. Four young people were employed, four young artists were commissioned, 70 young people were involved in showcasing existing work and six young people participated in the creative coaching scheme giving them access to professional creatives to support the development of their careers.
- 4.12 The team are currently delivering a new project **The Rainbow Effect**. Supporting COVID-19 community safety messaging The Rainbow Effect uses funding awarded to the Council from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government for re-opening High Streets Safely Fund. Ten local creatives have been commissioned to deliver ten temporary public art pieces across different shopping areas in Medway. All the pieces complement and reinforce existing public safety messaging outlined in the current government guidance.
- 4.13 All pieces are temporary with a life span of 3 to 12 months and will be removed after this time.
- 4.14 Three of the commissions were originally live performance based. These will now be offered as digital experiences, due to national restrictions, reaching residents via a range of digital channels and installations.

5. Theatres

- 5.1 Both the Central and the Brook Theatres have been closed to public performances since late March 2020.
- 5.2 The Brook Theatre has on occasion and in compliance with COVID-19 restrictions, hosted educational dance and drama classes in a socially distanced manner.
- 5.3 The Theatres team have been working hard to reschedule the public programme and support customers to transfer their tickets to new dates.
- 5.4 56 shows have been rescheduled and 44 have been cancelled.
- 5.5 The Box Office team dealt with over 6,500 customers and 26,000 tickets; moving 16,000 tickets to new dates and refunding over 10,000 tickets from postponed and cancelled shows.
- 5.6 The ticket retention rate is very positive at 62%.
- 5.7 The box office team have had many compliments, with one customer asking to *'pass on his thanks to everyone concerned with the theatre for the way you have informed people about cancelled shows and switching tickets to new dates or offering refunds without arguments. You are a credit to the theatre industry.'*
- 5.8 We have launched the new [Medway Tickets Live](#) website which will be more accessible and smart phone and tablet friendly.
- 5.9 In a brilliant partnership between The Marlowe Theatre and the Adult Care Team, the Theatres Team facilitated the showing of The Marlowe's pantomime 'Nurse Nellie Saves Panto' in 24 care homes across Medway reaching over 300 residents. The show also reached over 1,000 residential households and 4,500 Medway residents.
- 5.10 The Theatres Team have also been supporting the Libraries Team with the filming of digital content, supporting the Public Health Team with the food packages programme, as well as the management and storage of PPE, and as a base for the Medway Greeters Chatham town centre team.
- 5.11 The energy reduction Re:Fit programme will invest reduced energy lighting and heating in The Brook and Central Theatre.
- 5.12 Alongside this, with the now successful Future High Streets Fund bid, plans are in place to grow co-working and managed office space for the creative sector in The Brook Theatre, to provide contemporary, flexible, affordable workspace, that complements the existing performance and rehearsal space that will drive innovation and creative collaboration.

6. The Rochester Corn Exchange

- 6.1 Like all other hospitality venues, The Rochester Corn Exchange has been closed for events since the first lockdown. Although this has been hugely detrimental to the growth of the business it provided the opportunity to complete the capital refurbishment programme, review and update the business plan taking into consideration the impact of the pandemic on the hospitality sector and prepare for the Corn Exchange's relaunch.
- 6.2 The £470,000 capital programme has included essential health and safety works to glazing in the Queen's Hall, the redecoration of each public room and facilities, as well as a beautiful new piece of art from local artist Luna Zsigo in the foyer. We have successfully ensured that the building has retained its classical elegance, whilst also balancing the demands of a contemporary audience with new audio visual and Wi-Fi provision.
- 6.3 A new five-year business plan for the Rochester Corn Exchange has been developed that positions the venue as an exclusive location for weddings, business events and celebrations. A new brand has been developed that connects a new website and digital assets with traditional marketing, alongside a strong public relations plan to ensure the venue is strategically positioned in this competitive market.

7. Culture Development

- 7.1 Medway's Culture Development team supports and works in partnership with artists, companies, organisations and departments from across the council, to enable them to deliver creative projects and activities that form part of Medway's cultural offer. By ensuring our communities have access to and can meaningfully engage with creativity, we can nurture and develop the professional expertise of the local artists, companies and organisations delivering for them.
- 7.2 **Medway Cultural Strategy and Creative Medway** is a bold new vision that speaks to Medway's broadest aspirations to put culture centre stage. This new ten-year strategy is a ground-breaking model that reflects [both the UK Cultural Cities Enquiry](#) Cultural Compact model; it brings together a Medway-wide partnership called [Creative Medway](#) with a shared ambition for the future.
- 7.3 Built on extensive engagement across Medway, the new strategy creates a new way of partnership working, that in the short-term shapes opinions and behaviours leading to social and economic benefits. Longer term, it should positively transform Medway.
- 7.4 As the council we want to advance access for all of Medway's residents to the wealth of culture on their doorsteps; for children and young people to be able to consider a sustainable career in the arts, to nurture a resilient and sustainable creative economy through support for businesses, the growing

night-time and digital economies. All this is underpinned by the vital recognition and protection of the strong sense of place and building strong, healthy communities.

- 7.5 There are significant opportunities offered by our regeneration programmes, our economic potential, our geographical location, our profile with UK City of Culture bid, as well as our aspiration to be a Child-Friendly City. The strategy establishes how the council, as a key partner, can participate, contribute, and facilitate, understanding that our resources and influence are considerable, and we can therefore effectively support and enable the vision, values, and themes in the strategy significantly.
- 7.6 The aim is to embed culture within all Council priorities, developing a consistent cross-council approach. The strategy provides a framework for the council to work collaboratively with stakeholders and partners to understand, promote and secure Medway's cultural and creative landscape for present and future generations.
- 7.7 [Theatre31](#) is a £1m, Arts Council England funded, youth theatre and performance project running across Medway and Sheppey until the end of 2022. Theatre31 focuses on authentically co-creating impactful youth-led performance projects with partners, introducing and exploring new writing, performance and stagecraft with 2,000 children and young people, across areas of Medway and Sheppey with low cultural exposure, higher than average deprivation and increasing levels of social isolation.
- 7.8 As the accountable body and on behalf of Medway and Sheppey Local Cultural Education Partnerships, Medway Council has procured the services of Chatham based [Icon Theatre](#) to deliver the programme.
- 7.9 As for so many organisations, COVID-19 restrictions have challenged much of the planning and delivery over the last year. Online engagement has proved more difficult as children and young people have been attending online lessons, and levels of exhaustion from young people, partner organisations and teachers has been very high.
- 7.10 A great success has been the touring production of *The Snow Queen's Magnificent Message*. This co-production with Circo Rum Ba Ba, for KS2 (years 4, 5 and 6) toured seven primary school playgrounds reaching over 1,000 children, with full social distancing in place. The show centred on a visit from the Snow Queen, who had a mission for the children: Many messages of love and care are needed for the wise elders of the community. Participating children were given craft packages with which to create and write a Christmas card, before heading outside to the playground where the show takes place. Their completed Christmas cards were presented (in a socially distanced manner) to the Snow Queen, and later collected and taken to residents of local care homes and sheltered housing.
- 7.11 [Ideas Test](#) is one of a number of Arts Council England funded Creative People and Places programmes across the UK. Running for over 9 years

Ideas Test 's mission is to enable and support the communities of Medway and Swale to live more creative lives. Below are a few examples of the work Ideas Test have delivered in 2020.

- 7.12 In June, Ideas Test officially became a charity as a CIO or Charitable Incorporated Organisation. They now have more opportunities for fundraising, sponsorship and crowdfunding. This means more money can be invested in creative arts projects for and by local communities in Medway and Swale.
- 7.13 Ideas Test support creativity throughout Medway and Swale in many different ways and an example of their brilliant work is Sea Folk Sing. Created in 2018 with SparkedEcho it explored North Kent's maritime and folklore history through music and singing. 2020 changed the live in-person events and all participants we were keen to keep the Sea Folk Sea community together in a safe and creative way. To ease the isolation that the lockdown had brought to many people and to provide some creative escapism for our 55+ community, a valued team of artists and musicians, together with input from those who had taken part in previous years, created a series of interactive online workshops. Each workshop focused on a wide range of skills and activities and was open to anyone aged 55+ in who lived in Medway and Swale.
- 7.14 Sea Folk Sing has been shortlisted for a Hearts for the Arts Award 2021 for Best Arts Project. Discussing Sea Folk Sing's nomination Hearts for the Arts Award partners said:
- “At a time when so many are isolated and alone, especially older people, it was great to hear about a project like this that built on people's sense of pride and ensured their voices were still being heard. A wonderful project that has clearly brought joy to all those who participated at a time when joy was in short supply.”*
- 7.15 **Rochester Art Gallery** was closed during the first lockdown and reopened on 7 July. *Echoes* by Zara Carpenter remained in place for three weeks after reopening and received 500+ visitors during that time with excellent feedback rating the show highly.
- 7.16 Two six-week exhibitions were developed specifically to focus on and celebrate creativity during, and re-emergence from the first lockdown.
- 7.17 Explore & Draw - Life in Lockdown, ran from 5 August to 26 September Curated by Luna Zsigo the exhibition featured a massive 150 works by 88 amateur and professional artists created during lockdown on a range of themes. The show has proved very popular with great responses from visitors and artists, many of whom had not exhibited previously.
- 7.18 Out of Sight Not Out of Mind ran from 10 October to 5 November, was the second of two community shows and curtailed by the second lockdown. It featured work created by 38 people with sight loss making artwork at home in Medway, led by Wendy Daws from the Mess Room. The show featured paintings, crafts, portraits and a host of 'mini me' sculptures, as well as films

of the artists made for Electric Medway. It is estimated the show welcomed at least 700 visitors over its 19 days and received considerable media coverage.

- 7.19 Plans for **Dickens150** were greatly affected by the pandemic with some activity being postponed to 2021. To mark the 150th anniversary weekend the Culture team contributed to a Virtual Dickens festival which included:
- [Empty Chair Podcast](#) by Wordsmithery was a 35 min podcast of local and national writers reading their words and poetry inspired by Dickens.
 - Dizzy O'Dare created a funny online tutorial on ['How to write a Dickensian Masterpiece'](#).
 - *Geraniums for Mr Dickens* created by Animate Arts helped people to make their own paper floral tributes to Dickens using his favourite flower, the scarlet geranium.
 - Medway Print Festival provided follow-at-home printing activities deliberately focussed on a Dickensian and Victorian theme.
 - The winners of the Rochester Art Gallery Dickens150 Print Open Call were announced via the Virtual Dickens Festival.
- 7.20 **Medway Print Festival 2020** was a lockdown edition with activity and exhibitions transferred online and new content developed specifically. The programme included talks, interviews, demonstrations, follow-at-home print workshops using household objects and materials, written pieces/essays, provided by local artists and national/international specialists in print.
- 7.21 **Windrush 2020** was a community arts and heritage project delivered by Medway African and Caribbean Association (MACA) to celebrate the contributions of the Windrush generation. MACA were awarded £12,350 funding from Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government and supported by the University of Kent, Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust and Medway Council.
- 7.22 As with many projects, much of the delivery of the project has had to transition to online digital activity. A Hip Hopera project, working with local young people to create a performance that tells the Windrush story through drama, storytelling, new music and dance has been delivered in partnership with Theatre31. Young people adapted well to online delivery, using music recording/editing packages to record vocals in isolation and then mix them to make a choral piece. [A film of the performance and interviews](#) about the piece as premiered at the Theatre31 Digital Stage launch is available on-line.
- 7.23 Alongside this, MACA has delivered an intergenerational research and photography project which has now been shared as an audio/visual digital exhibition of portraits, stories and voices of the local Windrush Generation. It is hoped that this will be exhibited at Chatham Historic Dockyard's Namur Room later in 2021.
- 7.24 Unfortunately like all live events **The Wigmore Lectures** were cancelled this year. A recent survey of past attendees suggested many would welcome a

ticketed online lecture series and plans are developing to pilot this in spring 2021.

- 7.25 **Make U. Dance 2020**, a huge celebration of young people and dance, was a partnership dance platform between Medway Council, Loop Dance Company, South East Dance and One Dance UK, and took place on 8th March at The Brook Theatre, as part of the South East Regional U. Dance programme. Held over a single day over 200 young people took part in eight workshops and 19 performances to an audience of 175 people.
- 7.26 **South East Creative Cultural and Digital Support (SECCADS)** - The Culture Team is working with several other local authorities on SECCADS, aka [South East Creatives](#), a three-year European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) programme that provides grants and business support for business development in Essex, Kent and Medway.
- 7.27 The programme, originally running between March 2019 and December 2020, aims to help more than 370 companies and sole traders with business support or grants, giving a £2.5 million boost to the creative economy in the South East of England. SECCADS offers grants that cover up to 35% of individual project costs – typically grants are between £1,000 and £3,000.
- 7.28 As the lead authority, Thurrock Council appointed a range of delivery partners, to reach out to creative freelance, small and medium enterprises to offer business support in this area. In October it was agreed to extend the programme for six months because of the impact of the pandemic, and it will now finish in June 2021.
- 7.29 Medway Council has been connecting Medway creatives with the programme managers and from July 2020 a focused engagement programme reached further into the creative sector. To date 19 Medway creative businesses including [SparkedEcho](#), [Spaghetti Western](#) and [Kalikas Armour](#), have been successful and received grants of on average £1,800 totalling over £34,000.
- 7.30 In September 2019, the area known locally as Intra that runs from Sun Pier to Star Hill, was awarded **Heritage High Street Action Zone (HHSAZ)** status. The Culture and Economic Development Teams and Town Centre colleagues have been working on the development of a Cultural Consortium and a £100k funding bid to support a new cultural programme for the area, that will be complementary to the main HAZ programme.
- 7.31 **The Docking Station** is a partnership project led by the University of Kent (UoK) with key partners Medway Council (MC) and Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust (CHDT) that will transform the Police Section House located on the Interface Land at the CHDT, into an environmentally sustainable, innovative and dynamic 'University of the Future'.
- 7.32 It will unite industry, creatives, students, academics and young people in state-of-the art digital facilities, co-working space and innovative research and development space. It will offer digital skills development, knowledge

exchange, and drive innovation, fuelling the growth of the Medway creative economy.

- 7.33 The Docking Station project fits with national, regional and local government strategies by supporting investment in the creative sector as part of the Thames Estuary Production Corridor and its first funded programme Creative Estuary. It also supports the ten-year ambitions of Medway's new cultural strategy, as well as the bid for Medway City of Culture 2025 alongside Medway 2035, our skills and employability plan and the business growth plan to transform Medway.
- 7.34 The project will include a significant extension of the original property that will ensure the creation and safeguarding of upwards of 272 jobs, assist up to 8,000 learners, provide business support for up to 40 businesses, and create vital new creative workspace and research and development facilities. It will be at the centre of a 'hub and spoke' model, linking to existing University spaces as well as connecting and maximising future creative developments in Medway, such as The Brook Theatre.
- 7.35 [Creative Estuary](#) is the government backed £6m programme to transform 60 miles of the Thames Estuary across Essex and Kent into one of the most exciting cultural hubs in the world. Part of the Thames Estuary Production Corridor, Creative Estuary is using culture as the catalyst for growth, that will provide much-needed space for expanding creative businesses and provide the scale of services, skills and infrastructure sought by both UK organisations and international creative producers.
- 7.36 The Docking Station is one of the many projects in Creative Estuary that will lead to culture-led economic growth and productivity that develops critical cultural infrastructure, research and development and innovation, training and capacity building for local businesses. The investment in Creative Estuary will help support the creation of over 500 creative industry jobs, provide skills and qualifications to 200 workers and 60 apprenticeship opportunities for young people in the region.
- 7.37 In the extraordinary circumstances of 2020, Creative Estuary continues to deliver across Medway including:
- [Estuary Festival 2021](#), 23 days of art, music, literature and film
 - [Estuary Commissions](#) including the [Ebb & Flow Festival](#) in Chatham
 - The launch of the new [place branding](#) and associated [film](#)
 - Announced the first [Estuary Growth Champions](#) including Medway's own Jatin Patel
 - Continued work on the development of The Docking Station.
- 7.38 Platform 1 is a project in the wider, now successful Future High Streets Fund programme, that will develop the Brook Theatre into a contemporary, flexible, affordable, digital creative hub that will drive innovation and collaboration, kick starting a creative revolution in the heart of Chatham as part of Medway's bid for City of Culture in 2025.

- 7.39 The vision is to support creative businesses and organisations to grow and thrive by providing a desirable, high quality and creative working environment including performance, rehearsal, digital, co-working and serviced offices, at affordable scales for emerging and growing creative individuals and organisations.
- 7.40 For this to succeed, The Brook Theatre will be significantly developed opening-up spaces, providing flexible workspace solutions, enhancing existing features and character that celebrate the buildings heritage and maximise the user experience.

8. Greenspaces

- 8.1 Greenspace Development was successful in securing eight Medway Green Flag Awards. The eight Green Flag sites are Hillyfields, Gillingham Park, Broomhill Park, The Vines, Capstone Farm Country Park, Great Lines Heritage Park, Riverside Country Park and new winner in 2020, Ranscombe Farm Reserve, which is managed by Plantlife. The Green Flag Award recognises and rewards well managed parks and green spaces, setting the benchmark standard for the management of recreational outdoor spaces across the United Kingdom and around the world. Due to Covid-19, judges only met staff at the new applicant site Ranscombe Farm Reserve, with the other 7 sites receiving a mystery shop visit. Work is now underway to ensure the above eight sites achieve similar status in 2021. As part of the action plans for Green Flag, a consultation took place in autumn 2020 on Riverside Country Park. Over 750 on-line and paper questionnaires were completed and an inaugural Riverside Forum meeting was held virtually in December 2020.
- 8.2 The customer experience of Medway's two key country parks remains very high. Trip advisor for Riverside Country Park supports 434 reviews, which is up from 383 reviews in 2018, of which 89% were either 'excellent' or 'very good' and is rated as the No.2 things to do in Gillingham. Capstone Farm Country Park received 221 reviews – up from 195 in 2018, of which 84.5% were either 'excellent' or 'very good'. Capstone is rated as the No. 3 thing to do in Chatham. Both sites received the Travellers' Choice Award in 2020 (attractions that consistently earn great reviews from travellers and are ranked within the top 10% of properties on Tripadvisor). Ranscombe Farm Reserve (managed by Plantlife) received far fewer reviews of which 79% were either 'excellent' or 'very good' – up from 66% in 2019. Ranscombe Farm Reserve played a very important role for local people in 2020 during the period when travel was most restricted. By mid-August 2020, the footfall-loggers had registered more than 66,000 visits, a 50% increase on 2019. Plantlife has now completed improvements to create a new visitor hub with fully accessible parking for events, alongside a small office, education facility and compost toilets.
- 8.3 Greenspace investments: Medway's Priority Play is seeing capital improvements of £135,000 at Darnley Road in Strood (completed November

2020), Maidstone Road Sports Ground in Chatham and Heritage Drive in Gillingham (due on-site in March 2021). This was supported by additional funds from Section 106 for Darnley Road. S106 has also supported enhanced play provision in Rainham including Rainham Recreation Ground, Ryetop and Bayswater Drive; as well as in Strood North Ward, including Cliffe Road, Church Green, Hancock Close and Broomhill Park. Improvements continue at Horsted Valley including a new footpath, improved access points through Horsted Farm and interpretation about the importance of the site.

- 8.4 The Command of The Heights (a Heritage Lottery Fund project with Fort Amherst) has seen significant capital investment of over £2m to restore and enhance Chatham's historic defences. This project was completed in July 2020 and the funds have transformed the former Riverside 1 area into a new open space completed with high quality public realm and archaeological features (the three discovered case mates). Improvements at Fort Amherst include, Barrier Road being developed into a new arrival space, creating greater accessibility and opportunities for small events and gatherings. Spur Battery has seen the creation of a new amphitheatre for 200 people.
- 8.5 Community engagement: The Team continue to support a suite of "Friends of" Groups including the Medway Urban Greenspace Forum (MUGS). Three new groups were established in 2020 including Friends of Vinall Park, Rainham Recreation Ground and Luton Millennium Green. Covid-19 has delayed active volunteering tasks in Medway, but volunteers have still been able to meet virtually to carry out research and surveys through MUGS. Other projects supported by volunteers include compiling data for the emerging Tree Strategy which was developed in 2020.
- 8.6 As part of the Housing Infrastructure Fund scheme (HIF), Greenspace Development appointed and worked with consultants on proposals for a new 50-hectare parkland in Hoo (Cockham Community Parkland). Consultation took place from July to September 2020 which helped inform the design of the proposed parkland. A planning application was submitted in December 2020 and if permission is granted, we will see the new parkland created in 2023.
- 8.7 The council was successful in securing funding from the Forestry Commission as part of the Urban Tree Challenge Fund to plant over 13,000 trees in Medway's open spaces. Covid-19 means planting cannot be done with volunteers or schools as previously planned but will continue with the support of Medway Norse by spring 2021.
- 8.8 In 2019, the Council agreed with Medway Norse to review the best environmental approach in managing the grass verge environment, with the aim to create a more diverse habitat and reduce CO₂. The proposed plan for 2020 created over 12 routes for naturalising and 8 sites planted with some crocuses and daffodils to give some visual display. 2020 was the first display which was well received by residents. Some Local residents and volunteers were so happy with this mixed approach of naturalised areas that they undertook a habitat survey, resulting in a diverse habitat which they supported by stating:

Continuing with late and less cutting after lockdown is vital in order to grow on this success and is a great news story for Rainham and Medway more widely if this is to continue across the whole authority. It is felt anecdotally, that whilst from an access point of view, there will be a need to keep some green space mowed and clear of flowers, but more broadly a more nature centric point of view has huge value for nature.

- 8.9 In 2021, Medway Norse extended this approach adding ten sites in Chatham, Rochester and Strood, and will continue with naturalised areas on high speed routes. There are also plans to survey the naturalised routes to assess any flower mix, and consider if adding more native meadow flower seed in this area is a suitable approach.
- 8.10 Medway Norse have surmised that by cutting grass verges to a reduced cutting frequency helps towards reducing CO2 in managing Medway's parks and verges.

9. Sport and Leisure

- 9.1 The Council directly operates four sports centres across Medway, plus The Strand seasonal open-air swimming pool. In addition, the Council works in partnership with external providers on a further two community facilities at Lordswood and Kings Rochester.
- 9.2 The sport and leisure teams offer a range of facilities, programmes, projects and events to maximise opportunities for residents to Play – Compete – Spectate, including bringing national and international sporting events to Medway and staging an array of activities from mass participation events such as the Medway Mile through to the annual Mini Youth Games primary schools' competition throughout the year.
- 9.3 Medway Council Sports Centres generate £3.5m income and attracts 1.5m visitors per year.
- 9.4 Splashes Sports Centre
- 9.4.1 Last year we announced a multi-million redevelopment of Splashes Sports Centre in Rainham with the aim of creating a centre which offers fun family-friendly activities that will complement sessions held at Medway's other sports centres. Since then we have carried out a number of detailed surveys which are now being analysed and used to help the council decide on the best way to proceed with this exciting and transformative project.
- 9.5 Medway Park, Strood Sports Centre and Hoo Sports Centre
- 9.5.1 All three centres have been impacted by the pandemic and the restrictions imposed by national and local lockdown measures.
- 9.5.2 Following the first lockdown the centres began to reopen in late July with

Covid-compliant control systems in place, limiting numbers and activities. Thanks to overwhelming support from centre users these measures operated effectively and continued until the centres were forced to close again in November, currently remaining closed.

- 9.5.3 The closure periods have inevitably hit income, whether memberships, swimming lessons, events or general usage. However, the sports team have initiated a programme of online classes for customers to undertake at home.
- 9.5.4 With the hoped-for easing of lockdown measures as the year progresses, which is likely to focus initially on outdoor physical activity, the team are looking to develop a suitable programme of activity, including running groups, bootcamps, soccerfit, cycle fit and circuit training classes.
- 9.5.5 The team are also working closely with colleagues in the Communications and Marketing Team to develop an effective marketing campaign aimed at promoting Medway's sporting and physical activity offer, to encourage as many residents as possible to develop Covid-safe exercise programmes.

9.6 The Strand

- 9.6.1 The Strand swimming pool celebrates its 125th anniversary this year, and it is hoped to welcome back swimmers after a dormant 2020.
- 9.6.2 With Covid safety measures likely to remain in place even if the pool can open, the numbers using the pool at any one time will be significantly reduced compared to previous years. Thus, to avoid disappointing customers a booking system has been developed and will be implemented if guidelines allow the pool to open this summer.
- 9.6.3 To commemorate the anniversary landmark an exhibition celebrating the history of The Strand is being undertaken. At this stage it is unclear whether this will be a physical or virtual exhibition, depending on relevant Covid guidance.

9.7 Football

- 9.7.1 Medway has successfully secured a grant of nearly £900,000 from the Football Foundation (the charitable arm of the Football Association) to build a full-size artificial football pitch and associated changing rooms at the Watling Street playing fields.
- 9.7.2 This is one of the largest grants ever given by the Foundation for this type of development and is the culmination of a three-year partnership to identify and develop improved football facilities in Medway.
- 9.7.3 Work on the project began last month (February 2021) and is due for completion in September.

9.8 Workforce Development

- 9.8.1 The skills of the workforce across the whole Sport, Leisure, Tourism and Heritage service have developed significantly this year, not always in the areas that we would have anticipated a year ago.
- 9.8.2 During the first lockdown the service switched from delivering sport and heritage programmes to delivering shopping – working with colleagues in Public Health to identify residents in need of support and provide practical assistance where necessary. The shopping delivery service not only did what it said on the tin by undertaking shopping for residents in need, but also ensured regular contact was being made with residents who may otherwise have been left isolated.
- 9.8.3 As residents have been able to adapt to the impact of the pandemic, there wasn't an ongoing need for the shopping service during the current lockdown. The priority then switched to Covid testing, with the staff being trained and redeployed to operate an asymptomatic testing centre at Medway Park. This has been very successful, and the staff have been praised for the way they committed to the effective operational delivery of the centre.
- 9.8.4 Alongside these activities, there has been a strong programme of development through online courses, with all members of the team undertaking role-specific training as well as wider developmental opportunities.

10. Tourism and Heritage

10.1 Tourism

- 10.1.1 The most recent Cambridge Economic impact study for Medway using visitor figures from 2019 showed a significant growth in tourism up until the beginning of Covid. The total visitor spend in 2019 was £358 million compared to £333 million in 2017. It is estimated that there were approx. 5 million trips to Medway in 2019 and that there are 7,000 tourism related jobs in Medway.
- 10.1.2 Medway is a partner this year in the Visit Kent INTERREG project called Experience which is supporting both our bid for City of Culture and our development as a destination, helping to put Medway on the Map. This project has helped to research experiential product gaps and support new small business start-ups in Medway in readiness for a post Covid recovery.
- 10.1.3 Medway Council is also developing a post Covid recovery campaign working with Visit Kent and other partners to build consumer confidence and re-establish relationships with the travel trade, as well as supporting the wider tourism sector.

10.2 Visitor Information Centre

10.2.1 The Visitor Information Centre offers an important opportunity to:

- Promote Medway's bid to become the 2025 City of Culture
- Provide a welcoming gateway for visitors
- Invite visitors to discover the history and heritage of Medway
- Develop Medway's Place branding

10.2.2 The lockdown has been used to undertake a review of the internal appearance of the VIC and to develop proposals which will strengthen the messaging of the four strands identified above, encouraging visitors to discover the stories that have made Medway and to prominently promote the vast array on offer.

10.2.3 Once the proposals are finalised it is envisaged these new designs will be in place for June, to tie in with the Government easing of restrictions. The VIC will then, once again, become an important gateway for welcoming back visitors and delivering pro-active tourism activity through the development of key online platforms such as the Visit Medway website

10.3 Guildhall Museum

10.3.1 Work on the new "The Making of Mr Dickens" gallery continues to progress and will be launched later in 2021. The gallery will tell the story of Dickens, the man and his links with Medway throughout his life and career. The gallery will be an immersive, educational and fun addition to the museum and is the starting point to any Dickens related visit to Medway. It will also highlight many of the other Dickens related sites in the area. An accompanying guidebook about Dickens has also been written and will be for sale.

10.3.2 The Guildhall Museum is an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation working in partnership with the Historic Dockyard Chatham and the museum services of Canterbury and Tunbridge Wells. This funds the museum to employ a visitor experience officer and undertake increased research into our visitors in order to make improvements to the visitor experience. A new interpretation plan has been developed for the museum which includes phased plans to improve the museum. These include a re-developed introduction gallery, the production of a Shorts Brothers experience, and implementing new interpretation and experiential improvements across some of the existing galleries. Research into these plans have been taking place during 2020/21. Plans for a museum staff training programme to support this will follow later in 2021.

10.3.3 The Heritage Education Team were successful in obtaining funding from the Royal Opera House Bridge to work with local artists to develop a series of virtual school sessions promoting the museum and its collection to local school children. These will enhance the already popular talks and virtual activities which have been created during the last year.

10.4 Rochester Castle

10.4.1 Rochester Castle reopened to the public in July 2020 with Covid restrictions in place. The castle proved to be popular and was praised for the innovative redesigns in visitor flows which Covid required, given it only has one spiral staircase. Unfortunately, the Keep had to be closed due to a debris fall later in the summer. A new canopy is being installed over walkways in partnership with English Heritage, as is a programme of wall inspections and remedial works. Plans for major improvements to the keep and castle grounds have been in progress throughout the year, working towards 2027 which marks the 900th anniversary of the building of the keep.

10.5 Eastgate House

10.5.1 Although Eastgate House was not open during 2020 due to Covid, plans for a series of exciting exhibitions and events going forward have been devised and developed, subject to Covid safety measures allowing the building to reopen in 2021. Future plans include an exhibition on locally born Peter Rogers the producer of 30 Carry On films amongst others, and also an exhibition celebrating Isaac Newell, from Strood, who went on to pioneer football in Argentina.

10.5.2 A new conditions survey has been undertaken on the Charles Dickens writers Chalet with a report and action plan currently being developed. The heritage team will work with local timber specialists to cost a phased programme of repairs with the long-term aim being to enable visitors back into the chalet.

10.6 Upnor Castle

10.6.1 Upnor Castle reopened in the late summer to visitors and due to its popularity stayed open longer than normal into the winter months before having to close again, under Tier 3 lockdown restrictions.

10.7 Dickens 150

10.7.1 In June 2020 a virtual Dickens 150 campaign was launched to commemorate 150 years since the author's death. This included downloadable quizzes and activities for all ages, 'how to' videos for screen printing, writing a masterpiece tutorials, and a collection of videos about Dickens the man, and Medway in Dickens time, as well as a virtual blue plaque trail.

10.8 Visitor website

10.8.1 The impact of the pandemic on physical visitors has further illustrated the importance of a strong digital presence to promote Medway as a destination.

10.8.2 Extensive work has been undertaken to improve the content of the Visit Medway website (www.visitmedway.org), highlighting relevant visitor experiences on offer when restrictions are relaxed and improving the visual imagery of Medway and its attractions.

10.8.3 The website is viewed as a key gateway to helping visitors understand and enthuse about Medway's visitor and cultural offer, promoting the staycation message.

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Appendices

None.

Background papers

None.