

Medway Council
Meeting of Business Support Overview and Scrutiny
Committee

Thursday, 28 January 2021

6.00pm to 9.25pm

Record of the meeting

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

Present: Councillors: Buckwell (Chairman), Etheridge, Khan, Maple, Andy Stamp, Tejan (Vice-Chairman) and Wildey

In Attendance: Councillor Howard Doe, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services
Scott Elliott, Head of Health and Wellbeing Services
Perry Holmes, Chief Legal Officer/Monitoring Officer
Anna Marie Lawrence, Head of Business Intelligence
Andrew Mann, Partnership Director, Medway Norse
Stephen Platt, Democratic Services Officer
Phil Watts, Chief Finance Officer
Phil Wright, Gatherwell

680 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Clarke, Johnson, Murray, Opara and Williams.

(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.)

681 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting of the Committee held on 26 November 2020 was agreed and signed by the Chairman as correct.

682 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

683 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests or Other Significant Interests and Whipping

Disclosable pecuniary interests

There were none.

Other significant interests (OSIs)

Councillor Doe declared an OSI in agenda item 7 (Attendance of the Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services), because he is the Chairman and Director of Medway Development Company (MDC) Ltd and Medway Commercial Group (MCG) Ltd and he relied on a dispensation granted by the Councillor Conduct Committee to enable him to take part in the discussion.

Other interests

In relation to item 6 (Medway Community Lottery), Councillor Hackwell declared that he was a trustee of a local charity.

In relation to item 7 (Attendance of the Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services), Councillor Hackwell declared that his wife was a part-time assessor and tutor with Adult Education.

684 Establishment of a Medway Community Lottery

Discussion:

The Chairman welcomed to the meeting Phil Wright of Gatherwell, the External Lottery Manager for Medway Community Lottery. Mr Wright gave a presentation to the Committee, explaining that Gatherwell had experience of running lotteries for 86 local authorities with the aim of increasing funding for good causes.

In his presentation, and in response to questions from members of the Committee, Mr Wright and officers made the following points:

- Tickets cost £1 and could only be bought in blocks or through direct debit or regular card purchases to stop impulse gambling.
- 50% of the sale of a ticket was directly paid to the good causes specified by individual lottery players; 10% was paid into a central fund; 20% was paid in prize money to participants; and 20% was the associated running cost.
- The Chief Legal Officer said that the Council's costs would be met from the central fund. No decision had yet been taken on the remaining amount in the fund.

Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 28 January 2021

- Participants choose 6 numbers and the more numbers that were matched with the numbers drawn, the greater the prize. If winners had opted to share their details, these would be shown on the website.
- The protection of lottery participants' data was paramount; Gatherwell was payment card industry compliant and independently audited.
- Lottery winners were given the opportunity to donate their prize back to the cause they were supporting.
- There was no risk to the Council to cover the cost of prizes as this risk was managed by Gatherwell.
- It was planned to launch Medway Community Lottery on 8 March 2021 with tickets on sale in April for the first draw in May.
- It was projected that between 0.5% and 1.5% of the local 16+ population would participate in the lottery.
- In terms of marketing, the aim was to involve as many causes as possible, subject to them meeting the Council's criteria, as this would increase the amount of money raised. One means of promoting the lottery was through participating organisations' Facebook page.
- The Chief Finance Officer agreed to ascertain whether it was a requirement for lottery cheques to have two signatories.
- All of the 86 local authority community lotteries that had been established were continuing to operate.
- Part of the fee paid to the Lotteries Council went to organisations that supported people with a gambling problem.
- Gatherwell would be raising the minimum age for players from 16 to 18 in advance of the National Lottery, which was making this change from October 2021. At present only 0.054% of players were under the age of 18.
- Gatherwell had not received any feedback that their lotteries had adversely affected lotteries operated by charities in the local authority area.
- Gatherwell had experience of rebranding a community lottery where two local authorities had merged.

Decision:

On behalf of the Committee, the Chairman thanked Phil Wright for attending the meeting to give his presentation and answer Members' questions.

685 Attendance of the Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services

Discussion:

Members received an overview of activities and progress made on work areas within the Housing and Community Services Portfolio, which fell within the remit of the Committee. These were as follows:

- Disabled adaptations to housing
- Homelessness and housing options
- Housing management and allocations
- Housing strategy
- Private sector housing
- Housing Landlord Services
- Development of the Council's housing stock
- Libraries and Community Hubs
- Adult Learning
- Climate Change
- Voluntary Sector
- Medway Development Company Ltd (MDC).
- Medway Commercial Group Ltd (MCG).

Councillor Doe, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services attended the meeting and responded to Members' questions and comments as follows:

- **Capacity of the Welfare Reform team** – Asked whether the team had enough resource to support residents, the Deputy Leader stressed the importance of providing advice in this area to people whose mental health might be under pressure. Adding that it was not easy to measure need, given that it was variable, he assured the Committee that if it was established that the team was under resourced, this would be addressed.
- **Adult Learning** – In response to a question on the role the service would play in helping people get back in to work post-Covid, the Deputy Leader advised that he had joined the Members' Skills Board to facilitate closer liaison and a joined-up approach to this issue. He added that the Board was very sensitive to the need for more adult education referrals and better incentives for people to take up skills training opportunities as a way of increasing their confidence. This required the co-operation of the Job Centre and Job Centre Plus and this was being addressed.

Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 28 January 2021

The Deputy Leader also cited the example of funding that had been secured for an education centre at the Britton Farm Development.

- **Libraries and Community Hubs** – The Deputy Leader agreed that the role of libraries had evolved beyond the traditional model and said that the Community Hub principle was applied to every library so that they provided a central position for the Council within neighbourhoods. The aim was for each Community Hub to offer a range of services to meet the specific needs of its local area.

In response to a question on the click and collect service that had been in operation during the Covid pandemic, the Deputy Leader highlighted that the Community Hub concept was to encourage people back into the buildings as this would allow them to access a range of Council services as well as encourage them to take out books by a range of authors rather than sticking to their favourite author, thereby enhancing their reading experience. He was confident that previous customer levels would be achieved through a post-Covid relaunch of the service.

Asked about the proposal for a Community Hub in Rainham, the Deputy Leader referred to the challenge in finding a suitable venue and feedback that had been expressed in favour of retaining the existing building. The proposal therefore required further consideration during which the views of the community would be taken into account.

- **MDC properties/right to buy protection**– The Deputy Leader explained that the main purpose was to build homes for sale. Leasehold properties were protected from the right to buy whereas affordable homes did not necessarily have that protection.
- **Promotion of Universal Credit payments direct to landlords** – The Deputy Leader considered that making Universal Credit payment to tenants rather than direct to landlords did not necessarily empower the tenant to manage their finances effectively. In cases where tenants were in financial difficulties efforts were made to make payments direct to landlords.
- **Reduction in staffing at Kingsley House due to the Covid pandemic** – The Deputy Leader recognised the need to reduce face to face interactions during the pandemic but acknowledged that not everyone was in a position to access services on-line.
- **Selective Licensing** - The Deputy Leader responded to a question on why this had not been taken forward, by assuring Members that it had not been rejected and that, as part of a new scheme to increase licensing, the need for selective licensing might be identified in certain areas.
- **Children in temporary accommodation** - The Deputy Leader stressed that every effort was made to avoid placing children in temporary

Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 28 January 2021

accommodation, including offering guarantees and other incentives to private sector landlords.

- **Performance against the Government housing delivery test and the implications for the Planning Committee** – In response to concern about Medway's performance on the delivery of housing, the Deputy Leader stressed that the key was to encourage developers to develop land for which planning permission had been granted, which was dependent on the ability of customers to buy properties. He considered that imposing a high number for the Council to achieve was counterproductive as it could lead to developers focusing on easy to develop greenfield sites rather than more difficult brownfield sites that helped areas to regenerate.
- **Appointment of a new contractor for phase 4 of the development of new Council stock** – The Deputy Leader stressed his determination that this be achieved and envisaged that the new contractor would be a local company.
- **Progress on climate change** – In response to whether 2050 was a sufficiently ambitious target for Medway to become carbon neutral, the Deputy Leader considered that steady progress was being made year on year and that 2050 should be regarded as a back stop rather than a target. Should additional Government funding schemes become available, the Council would take advantage of them. For example, 13,000 trees would shortly be planted through the Challenge Fund. He referred to progress on charging points for electric cars which had been at a slower pace due to the Council joining the Kent wide scheme as it offered a better deal due to Kent's greater purchasing power.

The Deputy Leader agreed to establish when the Council would be publishing its annual carbon emissions data.

- **Rough sleepers and Homelessness**– The Deputy Leader praised the team for their effectiveness in helping rough sleepers back into society, often in challenging circumstances. Although it was difficult to establish exact figures, he was in no doubt that the number of rough sleepers was reducing.

With regard to homelessness, the Deputy Leader stressed that prevention remained the first priority and a range of solutions were employed such as liaison with landlords and training on how to be a tenant. One current challenge was that people were not vacating council properties to buy their own property.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chairman thanked the Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services for his attendance and for his detailed responses.

686 Medway Norse Update

Discussion:

Members considered a report which reviewed the performance of the Joint Venture from the perspective of the Council client for the second quarter of the 2020/2021 financial year. It was accompanied by an update on the Joint Venture's achievements and financial performance prepared by the Partnership Director at Medway Norse.

The Partnership Director highlighted the Covid-related challenges that the Medway Norse workforce had faced during the quarter, in particular the increased amounts of waste collection undertaken.

The following issues were discussed:

- **Industrial relations with Unite the union** – The Partnership Director reported that industrial relations were better than this time last year and there was healthy interaction with Unite, although there remained a position of non-recognition.
- **The potential for expanding into security and CCTV services** – The Partnership Director reported that over the past 2 or 3 years an opportunity had arisen for Medway Norse to form a security part of the business. Norse security had a modern surveillance system based in Norwich.
- **Deep cleaning of schools** – The Partnership Director advised that Medway Norse regularly received compliments for its cleaning services and undertook considerable work sanitising schools.
- **Increase in missed waste collections** – The Partnership Director considered that the rate remained very similar to previous years and any increase preceded the Norse contract.
- **Policy on tree planting to avoid causing structural issues in nearby properties** – The Partnership Director confirmed this was considered by the relevant team. He referred to the replacement tree planting programme in avenues which should not cause structural damage.
- **Praise for staff** – Several Members wished to record their thanks to Medway Norse staff. The Partnership Director said that he would pass this back to the workforce and also recognised the support given by voluntary groups in maintaining the county parks.

Decision:

Members noted the contents of the report and its Appendix.

Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 28 January 2021

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

687 Housing Revenue Account Capital and Revenue Budgets 2021/22

Discussion:

The Committee considered a report presenting the Housing Revenue Account capital and revenue budgets for 2021/22 which provided details of proposed rent and service charge levels, and raised the following questions and comments:

- **Void management** – It was important to acknowledge that vacant properties were sometimes unavailable for rent because they were in need of repair or refitting.
- **Garage rents** – The proposed increase of 5% in garage rent seemed high given that the occupancy rate was only 73% and it was suggested that more should be done to increase occupancy levels. In noting this, the Head of Strategic Housing reported that the policy on garages had been relaxed to allow the storage of items other than cars.
- **Proposed social rent increase** – It was questioned whether an increase in social rent of CPI plus 1% was reasonable in the current circumstances. The Head of Strategic Housing advised that the Council's social rents were the lowest in Medway and that there had been a four-year rent freeze despite an increase in costs. He outlined the safeguards that were in place to support tenants on low incomes.
- **Rent arrears in the last year due to the pandemic** – The Head of Strategic Housing advised that there had been no noticeable increase in rent arrears during the pandemic and that there had been no evictions due to rent arrears.
- **Backlog of housing repairs due to the pandemic** – The Head of Strategic Housing reported that the backlog in housing repairs from the first period of lockdown had been cleared although a further backlog was building during the current restrictions as non-emergency works had again been suspended.
- **Delay in the HRA development programme due to the pandemic** – The Head of Strategic Housing advised that a re-tender exercise was underway for phase four of the development programme. The housing market was responding well during the pandemic and there was currently no impact on the programme as a result of the pandemic.

Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 28 January 2021

Decision:

The Committee recommended to the Cabinet:

- a) A proposed social rent increase of CPI plus 1% for the housing stock as set out in Appendix A of the report (based on 52 collection weeks) with effect from 05 April 2021.
- b) A proposed affordable rent increase of CPI plus 1% for the housing stock as set out in Appendix B of the report (based on 52 collection weeks) with effect from 05 April 2021.
- c) A proposed rent increase of 5% to be applied to all garage tenure types with effect from 05 April 2020 as stated in section 4 of the report.
- d) That the service charges increases/decreases as set out in Appendix C of the report for 2021/22 be approved.
- e) That the revenue budget for the HRA service for 2021/22 as per Appendix D of the report be approved.
- f) That the proposed 3 year planned maintenance capital programme budget and the funding be approved as set out in section 8.5.3 & 8.5.4 of the report.
- g) To approve the reduction in 2020/21 planned maintenance underspend capital budget of £1.4m as set out in section 8.5.6 of the report.
- h) That the provision for the repayment of debt based on annuity-based payment of £0.410m, on the HRA's outstanding debt for 2021/22 be approved.
- i) That Members approve the revised 30-year HRA Business Plan model as attached at Appendix E of the report.

(In accordance with Council Rule 12.6, Councillors Khan, Maple and Andy Stamp asked that their abstentions be recorded).

688 Draft Capital and Revenue Budget 2021/22

Discussion:

The Committee considered a report presenting an update on progress towards setting the Council's draft capital and revenue budgets for 2020/21, and raised the following questions and comments:

- **Potential redundancies** – Concern was raised regarding the possibility of redundancies as a result of the budget proposals. The Chief Finance Officer responded that he was not aware of any measures underpinning the proposals contained within the Cabinet report that would require redundancies.

Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 28 January 2021

- **Fees and charges** – Concern was raised regarding the proposal to increase crematorium fees from £480 to £710, given the increase in demand for the service during the pandemic. The Chief Finance Officer confirmed that this proposal was being reconsidered.

Decision:

- a) The Committee noted that Cabinet has instructed officers to continue to work with Portfolio Holders in formulating robust proposals to balance the budget for 2021/22 and beyond.
- b) The Committee was supportive of the proposals outlined in the draft capital and revenue budgets in so far as they related to the services within the remit of this committee, and also agreed to forward the comments from the individual Overview and Scrutiny Committees, as set out in Appendix 4 of the report.

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

689 Voluntary Sector Task Group

Discussion:

The Committee received a report on Cabinet's consideration of the recommendations of the Voluntary Sector Task Group. The Cabinet had instructed officers to undertake a full assessment of the recommendations and report back on the effect the pandemic has had on the needs of the sector, and the Committee noted the revised recommendations approved by Cabinet.

Members were pleased to note the agreed recommendations, particularly the development of a business case to create a voluntary sector liaison post and the development of a written document between the Council, NHS and VCS that signified its commitment to work in partnership.

A brief update was given on the progress to date in taking forward Cabinet's decisions. A more detailed progress report would be provided when the Committee undertook its six month review.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

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

690 Council Strategy and Council Plan Refresh 2021/22

Discussion:

The Committee considered a report on the proposed Council Strategy 2021/22 and Council Plan 2021/22 and raised the following comment:

- **Reduction in performance targets** – Concern was expressed regarding the proposed reduction in target for certain Council Plan performance measures in view of reduced Council activity due to the pandemic. One example was PH13 – rate per 100,000 of self-reported 4 week smoking quitters age 16+. It was suggested that the existing targets be retained and that an accompanying narrative should explain why the target had not been met due to the focus being on Covid related activity. The Head of Performance and Business Intelligence agreed to ask colleagues in Public Health to respond.

Decision:

The Committee:

- a) supported the refreshed Council Strategy as shown in Appendix 1 of the report.
- b) supported the refreshed Council Plan measures as shown in Appendix 2 of the report.

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

691 Risk Management, Emergency Planning and Business Continuity

Discussion:

The Committee considered a report which informed members of the Council's responsibilities for Risk Management (RM), Emergency Planning (EP) and Business Continuity (BC) and how these management processes complemented each other to protect the Council.

During the discussion, the following issues were raised and responded to:

- **Risk Register** – The risk register should largely reflect the risk registers of Kent and the United Kingdom. In response the Head of Performance and Business Intelligence set out the ways in which risk information and best practice was shared, both within the South-East and nationally. She assured Members that this joint working enabled horizon scanning to

Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 28 January 2021

identify potential issues for Medway's Strategic Risk Management Group to consider.

- **Emergency Planning Team** – Assurance was sought regarding the resilience of the Council's Emergency Planning Team which had previously been reduced from six members of staff to two. The Head of Performance and Business Intelligence undertook to liaise with the Assistant Director, Front-Line Services and respond to the Councillor.

Decision:

Members noted the report.

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

692 Risk Strategy Annual Review

Discussion:

The Committee considered a report on the annual review of the Risk Strategy, and raised the following question:

- **Risk registers of Council organisations** – Clarification was sought on whether the same system was used for the risk registers of all Council organisations such so that they were similar and comparable. The Head of Performance and Business Intelligence said that she had held discussions with both MDC and MCG on the risk matrix that they used and she was confident that the way in which they presented and scored risk was very similar to the Council. She undertook to raise this again when she next met with them.

Decision:

The Committee:

- a) The Committee reviewed the 2021/22 Risk Management Strategy at Appendix 1 to the report, setting out the Council's approach to Risk Management; and
- b) noted that the Strategy would be submitted to Cabinet for approval on 2 February 2021.

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

Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 28 January 2021

693 Work Programme

Discussion:

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

In addition to the changes proposed in the report, it was proposed that the Committee receive a six month progress report on the outcome of the Voluntary Sector Task Group recommendations at the appropriate meeting in the 2021/22 municipal year.

Members took the opportunity to pay tribute to the considerable contribution made by Julie Keith who had retired as Head of Democratic Services.

Decision:

The Committee:

- a) agreed the proposed changes to the Committee's work programme (Appendix 1 to the report) as set out in paragraph 3 of the report and the addition of a six month progress report on the outcome of the Voluntary Sector Task Group recommendations at the appropriate meeting in the 2021/22 municipal year; and
- b) noted the work programmes of the other overview and scrutiny committees (Appendix 2 to the report).

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

Chairman

Date:

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