

## **BUSINESS SUPPORT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**1 JULY 2021**

### **ATTENDANCE OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL**

Report from: Richard Hicks, Director of Place and Deputy Chief Executive  
Phil Watts, Chief Finance Officer

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#### Summary

This report sets out activities and progress on work areas within the Portfolio of the Leader of the Council, which all fall within the remit of this Committee. This information is provided in relation to the Leader of the Council being held to account.

#### 1. Budget and policy framework

1.1 The areas within the terms of reference of this Overview and Scrutiny Committee and covered by the Leader of the Council are:

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

#### 2. Strategic Leadership of the Council

##### **Achievements for 2020/21**

2.1 I would firstly like to thank our residents for their support throughout the pandemic; the vast majority of our communities have adhered to the Government's guidance and restrictions, ensuring that our vulnerable residents were kept safe throughout the last 18 months and enabled us to re-open our services and enjoy all that Medway has to offer.

2.2 I would also like to thank our Communications and Marketing team for their support ensuring key messages were available for our communities across Medway's social media platforms. We have continued to show strong leadership throughout the pandemic, despite the challenges surrounding Covid-19 and the effect on our income generating services. We were able to

set a significant Budget for 2021/22 with commitments to the following areas as part of the Modern Medway investment programme worth £400K. Our Economic Development team secured £70K, Climate Change programme secured £75K, the Careers Hub secured £12,500, NEETS secured £100K, as well as significant investment for our City of Culture Bid and Child-Friendly Medway aspirations.

- 2.3 Since being held to account in August 2020, our services have been impacted by the global pandemic, however, our ambitious plans to progress our Putting Medway on the Map agenda have not been paused during this time.
- 2.4 The pandemic has not deterred us from our ambition to become the UK City of Culture 2025. Our Bid Director has engaged with our communities, bringing together an array of programming ideas for 2025. We have established our Trustees Board and our Working Groups who will support our Bid Director with shaping our Bid and Programming proposals. The competition was officially announced by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport on 29 May and our Expression of Interest is due to be submitted by 19 July, with the announcement of the longlist by early September. Our competitors are Southampton, Bradford and the County of Lancashire. We are expecting panel visits in Spring 2022 with the winner being announced at the end of Coventry's year in May 2022. We watch the cultural events and activities being offered to residents and visitors in Coventry, together with the benefits being the UK City of Culture has had for the City and we look forward to enjoying the same in Medway.
- 2.5 We have recently announced that we will be entering the Civic competition which has been launched to celebrate Her Majesty The Queen's Platinum Jubilee in 2022. Her Majesty The Queen has agreed for a competition to be held to grant the prestigious and rare civic honours of 'city status' to a select number of towns and cities in the United Kingdom. This will be the first time in 10 years that Her Majesty awards civic honours and the occasion comes as part of celebrations to mark The Queen's Platinum Jubilee. We have so much to be proud of in Medway, including everything that has been achieved in the past ten years, and we want to make the people of Medway proud to take part in this city status bid. In many respects we believe that Medway is already a city in all but name. Achieving city status would bring significant benefits to residents and businesses across Medway putting us firmly on the map and shining a spotlight on all we have to offer. The deadline for submission is 8 December.
- 2.6 Our Housing Infrastructure Fund Programme continues at pace, with recent consultation and engagement sessions highlighting areas residents wish to see addressed, together with the benefits and opportunities from establishing a new vibrant community on the Peninsula. As I have mentioned previously, we have secured £170m and this will provide significant improvements to road and rail connections, as well as triggering investment to support healthcare, leisure, education and greenspace facilities for the Hoo Peninsula. We will create a new community at Hoo and this funding will help to unlock the potential for new homes. We are continuing to work alongside Homes

England, Network Rail and other key stakeholders, including the Hoo Consortium, to progress the work required to ensure the £170m improvements are delivered by March 2024. The proposals for a new town on the Peninsula will also present an opportunity to explore and pilot our smart cities aspirations for Medway's residents, including improvements to Broadband network connectivity. Let us not forget, this work is being undertaken as a result of Government's determination of the number of homes required for Medway's future. This investment in infrastructure is an extremely positive development in supporting that Government-directed increase in housing numbers.

- 2.7 Our monumental regeneration programme continues at pace despite the challenges of the pandemic and we are working to our 'Growth for all' ambition, ensuring all our residents benefit from regeneration wherever they live in Medway and that regeneration reaches all our communities. We are currently exploring options for the Strood Waterfront site, including the opportunity for Medway Development Company to progress the development. And we are making tremendous progress with our city centre, Chatham. Medway Development Company is progressing the development at Chatham Waterfront, bringing forward 170 new homes, a new City Square and commercial opportunities. Works have also commenced at Garrison Point (Whiffens Avenue), on a council-owned car park, bringing forward a further 100 homes for our city centre. The off-site affordable provision at White Road has now been completed, working with TopHat and MHS homes, and is fully occupied with outstanding positive feedback.
- 2.8 We have been successful with our Future High Streets Fund, securing over £9m to develop the City Centre. Our programme will seek to make improvements to the public realm, as well as making investments for further economic growth, increasing housing and employment opportunities and helping to create a vibrant city centre.
- 2.9 We are progressing our investment programme for our Heritage Creative Quarter, focusing on the area between Star Hill and Sun Pier. The £3.2m project is due to be completed by March 2024.
- 2.10 And the Queen Street development is now progressing, together with our proposals for Mountbatten House, and alongside our investment in the Pentagon, we are rounding out our ambitions and coherent proposals to establish Chatham as our City Centre.
- 2.11 Countryside, the developer for our flagship regeneration site at Rochester Riverside, is continuing the excellent build programme at speed, with future phases being accelerated. Sales have continued strongly throughout the pandemic and house occupation has continued over the last year. Indeed, homes in Rochester are selling faster than anywhere else in the country.
- 2.12 Medway's economy was around £5.6bn pre-pandemic according to the latest available Gross Value Added (GVA) figures. This rate of growth is higher than the South East and the national averages. We continue to focus on Skills here

in Medway, supporting students and residents to extend their skill-set, working with our Universities, MidKent College and the Waterfront UTC. Our Adult Education Centre has provided new courses throughout the pandemic, helping residents to upskill and seek alternative employment opportunities. We have established a Medway Learning Partnership which involves all four Universities and MidKent College, with a focus on working together and fostering collaboration.

- 2.13 We have adopted the Local Development Order for Innovation Park Medway, establishing a fast-track planning process for potential businesses. The development will deliver around 3000 high value, high GVA employment opportunities in advanced manufacturing and in the engineering supply chain, focused around BAE, adding to the vibrancy of Medway's economy. We have recently secured an additional £780K for IPM through the Local Growth Fund; this brings our total to around £11m of external investment for this project.
- 2.14 We are progressing the development of Britton Farm Mall, Gillingham. We have secured £2m funding and will create a new learning, skills and employment hub. We are also working with Legal and General on an affordable housing development at this site. This development will be a positive addition to Gillingham's High Street and we are exploring opportunities for further bids through the Levelling-Up Fund. All with the intention of improving the sense of arrival and of place for our residents and visitors.
- 2.15 We are continuing to develop our Local Plan, working with a number of landowners and key stakeholders to finalise our proposals. We are seeking opportunities to comply with Government targets to bring forward 28,300 new homes together with 17,000 new employment opportunities for our Medway residents. We will report to Council in October, due to delays with Highways England's Strategic Transport Assessment, moving through the stages to submission in January 2022.
- 2.16 We are committed to providing new and improved fun, family-friendly leisure facilities for our young people and their families at Splashes. We have committed significant funding for this new facility in the East of the Borough and work continues to develop our proposals.
- 2.17 We have secured an additional Green Flag, bringing our total to 8 sites across Medway, and we continue to invest in our play areas. We know that sport and play are important to people, in particular seeing a rise in visits to our Country Parks and greenspaces throughout the pandemic. We continue to offer free swimming to under 16s and over 60s.
- 2.18 Our Place Branding journey continues, even through the pandemic. The Place Board meets on a quarterly basis, chaired by the Principal at MidKent College and supported by Medway's Place Manager. The Medway Champions programme has held meetings via Zoom throughout the pandemic, with around 60 people attending each session. Recent presentations have included Medway Hospital, Kent Police, Locate in Kent, Creative Estuary, City

of Culture and Visit Kent.

- 2.19 Whilst we have not been able to put on our much-loved festivals and events we have supported Medway's first digital festival, Electric Medway. We look forward to attracting visitors to Medway, starting with Medway's first Rapture Gaming and Creative Festival happening this weekend!
- 2.20 Following the Children's Ofsted Inspection in 2019 and the 'Inadequate' rating we received, I am pleased we are now out of special measures, having worked closely with the Children's Commissioner. Our teams have worked tirelessly to improve the service we offer to our children and families across Medway. Lee-Anne Farach is now our new Director for People, following the departure of Ian Sutherland, and given Lee-Anne's vast experience having worked in Children's Services I am confident we can continue to develop and improve this area within the Children and Adults Directorate.
- 2.21 We have progressed our longer-term vision and aspiration for Medway becoming a Child-Friendly City, by appointing a Project Officer to lead on this initiative. We will be working with a number of partners and our children and young people to determine their ambitions for Medway and how they can be involved in shaping Medway's future.
- 2.22 We are committed to supporting older people living more independently in their own homes, through the greater use of technology, and over the forthcoming period, a range of significant changes and innovations will be brought forward in how we deliver Adult Social Care, not least through the opportunities that Kyndi offers.
- 2.23 We are continuing to work with Greater North Kent Leaders, across Dartford, Gravesham, Maidstone and Swale Councils to identify opportunities for joint initiatives. There is the opportunity to jointly work on the Climate Change agenda for the North Kent area, with options currently being explored.
- 2.24 Our Climate Change programme continues at pace, with the action plan being agreed by Cabinet in June. I have also encouraged pan-Kent collaboration, given the need for all to play their part.
- 2.25 There are new opportunities on the horizon to support Medway's ambitions, including the Levelling-Up Fund. Our teams within the Regeneration, Culture and Environment Directorate have worked together to submit a bid for external funding and we look forward to hearing the outcome of the Round 1 process in the Autumn. If we are successful, the spend will need to be completed by March 2024, a significant date across our Regeneration programme in Medway.
- 2.26 County and regional meetings are attended in order to influence others and build relationships which are of value to Medway, such as the SE7; Transport for the South East; meetings of Kent MPs and Kent County Council (KCC); meetings of Kent Leaders, including KCC and Medway, and informal meetings with District Councils. Medway continues to be part of the Key Cities Group,

including authorities such as Wakefield, Coventry and Portsmouth, to discuss how as a collective group the cities can play a key role in the national economy.

- 2.27 We are continuing to work with external partners on developments outside Medway which will have an impact here. We meet with London Resort colleagues on a regular basis to support their development, as it will see 33,000 jobs created, providing opportunities for Medway. We continue to work with Highways England around the proposals for the Lower Thames Crossing, identifying the opportunities for North Kent as well as the potential impacts on our local road networks. This development will bring £8bn to the regional economy and thousands of jobs during construction. Whilst both projects are currently undertaking further assessment and refinement, they both remain key strategic opportunities for Medway.

### 3. Communications and Marketing

#### **Achievements for 2020-2021**

#### **COVID-19 Communications**

- 3.1 Our year, unsurprisingly, was dominated by communications to support our monumental COVID-19 response and recovery.
- 3.2 Extensive and consistent communication with our residents, staff, Councillors and partners was a critical part of the council's activities during the pandemic. The objectives of our communications were to:
- Keep people informed about any changes to services in a fast and efficient way with an emphasis throughout on slow to close, fast to reopen.
  - Ensure we successfully reached people who needed to take action such as applying for grants.
  - Show local leadership in a national crisis through information and reassurance.
  - Ensure our staff were clear about how the pandemic was affecting their work, what changes were being made to working patterns and policies and to provide wellbeing support at all times through this period. We also wanted to retain a sense of community throughout the pandemic.
  - Ensure councillors were kept up to date on all developments in Medway and to services on a regular basis.
  - Share important Public Health England and government messages locally to reinforce them.
- 3.3 We used a wide variety of communications channels to reach people. This included social media, email bulletins, our website, messages from the Leader, press releases, media and digital media advertising and promoting

messages via our partners too.

3.4 These were some of our main COVID-19 related campaigns during the year:

3.4.1 **Symptom-free testing** - major communications have supported the different phases of our symptom-free testing facilities since launch last December. We started with specific community groups, requiring careful targeting of businesses and residents, which gradually opened out to the whole community and also moved to include pop-up centres and test collection facilities. A fully integrated communications campaign, including direct text messaging, social media, email campaigns, posters, community group and local business groups communication, signage, website publicity and FAQs, ensured that we reached the right people at a time when ensuring awareness of the facilities and the importance of regular testing was key. We also communicated to the public what to expect when visiting a test centre. A joint media campaign with our military colleagues resulted in widespread national coverage of our project featuring lovely images of the site at Rochester Cathedral. More than 135,000 tests have now been carried out demonstrating the success of the campaign.

3.4.2 **Supporting Medway's businesses** - Supporting Medway businesses and enabling them to access important funding streams has been a priority for the council and we have run a number of campaigns to communicate important messages and provide advice. We promoted all the grants widely via all our social media channels and the media. We also used the opportunity to encourage businesses to sign up to a newsletter. We regularly issued other posts for businesses and, working closely with our business advice and trading standards teams, coordinated with the Digital Team to create a really useful resource on our website for businesses including advice and guidance.

3.4.3 **Household Waste and Recycling Centres** - To ensure our HWRCs could reopen safely, an online booking process was set up for our Capstone and Hoath Way (Gillingham) sites. An extensive marketing campaign ran from to promote our new booking service. This three-phase approach saw an extensive campaign using over 20 areas of activity, with a social media organic reach of over 50,000 (with over 3,000 engagements). Alongside digital advertising across third-party websites, Kent Online and our own Medway.Gov page, we also installed new signage across all three HWRCs. As a result of our communications, visits to the sites were largely very well managed and orderly and the system continues to operate well.

3.4.4 **Recovery** – Both last July and this April we've worked to ensure our high streets could open safely for both workers and visitors. We pulled together a significant communications campaign for retailers and visitors to our high streets. Our aim was also to give people confidence in coming back to our high streets. Our work included a guidance pack for local businesses, an online toolkit with posters, postcards to show how to access guidance, design and print of extensive signage across our five town centres, 3,400 posters for bus stops and railing banners erected across Medway. We carried out widespread digital communications across Medway via social media, emails

and our website.

We also launched a major drive to support the reopening of our sports centres this Spring to encourage people to take out new memberships and return to much loved activities such as swimming lessons.

- 3.4.5 **Medway Council Services online** – Many of our services provided an excellent and innovative range of services online throughout the pandemic including our sports teams, libraries services and A Better Medway health and wellbeing services. We promoted these heavily through our social media pages and regular newsletters resulting in great viewing ratings and e-book borrowing. One of our sports trainer's exercise lessons featured on ITV's Good Morning Britain programme.
- 3.4.6 **Events** – Even though our very popular festival programme was cancelled last year we still kept the spirit alive with a number of online events that we achieved great engagement and reach for. This included the online Dickens 150 events with a reach of 511,000 and many shares and likes. We commemorated Armed Forces Day with a video featuring the Lord Lieutenant of Kent and CO of HMS Medway and of the Royal Engineers at Brompton. Although we couldn't celebrate Christmas with our traditional markets, panto and Dickensian Festival, a video we created to celebrate what Christmas means to people and to encourage residents to shop local reached 6,000 people with many people clicking through to our campaign online. More recently our communications support for our highly innovative Rainbow Effect installations across Medway have generated huge acclaim and feature on regional media. Our social media campaign reached 260,000 people with the website receiving nearly 10,000 visits and the video watched more than 2,500 times.
- 3.4.7 **Community groups (BAME)** - As people from BAME groups were identified as being more susceptible to the worst symptoms of COVID-19, we supported our Public Health team with a campaign to ensure we can reach members of those communities more effectively and help make COVID messaging appeal to more groups whose first language may not be English. We worked closely with Public Health to appoint BAME champions and develop questions that would help inform our communications going forward. As part of the insight work, we also re-designed and designed new posters to show community members and get feedback. Specific communications were then designed and put up across Medway in ten different languages and videos created with community faith leaders.
- 3.4.8 **Young people's campaign** – Following research carried out through Public Health, it became clear that young people did not understand some of the government's important messages around COVID-19 and were not following guidance or understanding its significance. Working with an agency, we have created and distributed through channels such as Tik-Tok, campaigns to remind people of the importance of the latest guidance using imagery and wording they relate to better. We had seasonal campaigns for example, encouraging people to stay safe over Halloween and we have also run



messages encouraging them to focus on their mental health and wellbeing. The campaign was the winner of the UKPHR Innovation in Public Health Award earlier this year.

3.5 Other campaigns we have run through the year included:

3.5.1 **Regeneration** - We launched our Future Hoo communications and branding this year as work on the project has got underway. Last September we supported the Cockham Community Parkland proposal consultation and early in 2021 ran all the communications for the formal consultation on our infrastructure proposals. Communications for the latter consultation included leaflets to every household on the peninsula, extensive advertising, social media and other digital communications including information on our website. The consultation generated more than 700 responses.

We have also supported other regeneration projects including the Chatham Heritage Action Zone consultation and IPM consultation,

3.5.2 **Climate Change** – While the Action Plan was being created the Communications Team got work underway to support the plan. An overall identity was created for all our climate change work that is now being seen and a number of initiatives put in place including:

Social media channels set up for climate change that are performing well.

- Signs erected across Medway highlighting why we've left grass verges to grow and asking people to not litter nature's home.
- We have created an infographic detailing what we've done in year one to support climate change.
- Creation of an air quality video now being given to schools.
- Social media posts with information on subjects such as why trees, marsh lands etc are so critical in the fight against climate change.
- We have encouraged people to take part in the EV charging point survey to better inform the Integrated Transport team when making decisions on where these are placed.
- Promoting the 13,000 new trees planted
- Supported national days including Early Day, World Bee Day and promoted No Mow May.

3.5.3 **Public Health** - During the year we also continued with a number of important public health campaigns which were very important at a time when we couldn't see people face to face. This included:

- Flu Vaccination
- Kent and Medway PreHab service
- Staying active
- Combatting social isolation
- Stoptober
- Stay well this winter
- Kent and Medway Mental Health booklet
- Suicide prevention campaign
- Domestic abuse campaign

- Illegal tobacco

3.5.4 **Environment** - Recycling rates at kerbside collections increased during the lockdown and we were keen to continue to encourage this through marketing campaigns this year. As well as thanking people for recycling more we have been running campaigns reminding people how to sort their recycling and supported the Great British September clean as well as many other initiatives.

3.5.5 **Safer Streets** - We provided all the communications support for joint council, Medway Task Force and Police and Crime Commissioner's office on their excellent initiative to reduce acquisitive crime in an LSOA area of Gillingham. The Communications Team joined a group meeting with the Home Office on best practice communications to showcase our work in this project.

3.5.6 **Children's Services** - To support our ongoing improvement work, a new social media campaign was developed to drive up recruitment of children's social workers to the service. A new brand was developed for the service and recruitment and campaigns have been running in a series of sprints, supported by a PR campaign and social media blogging.

Throughout October we continued to run the national 'You Can Adopt' recruitment campaign which aimed to dispel the myths regarding who is eligible to adopt. The campaign ran across digital and social media and had excellent engagement, reaching more than 340,000 people, with 156 people clicking through to our web page from social media posts. The team is also supporting our Fostering team with their new marketing approach.

3.5.7 **Shared Lives** – We continue to need new Shared Lives carers. In February this year we ran a recruitment and awareness campaign 'Now is the time to join us' for Shared Lives. The key media deployed was digital advertising with placement of website impressions via Global. This ran from 1 February until 2 March. 98,000 impressions produced 168 engagements which resulted in five positive enquires in that month. This activity was in addition to ongoing digital and social media support. Social media reached 220,000 people and resulted in 126 clicks for more information or to apply.

## 3.6 **Media**

3.6.1 Our press office has continued to provide a professional, proactive and reactive media service and have done an outstanding job during the pandemic managing huge demand and interest through the past year on a wide range of topics and reacting swiftly to enquiries as the national picture changed from day to day. The office played an important role in demonstrating strong local leadership in our community through the pandemic and we regularly put the Leader and our Director of Public Health up for interview throughout the year.

3.6.2 The figures speak for themselves: during the year, we issued 351 press releases compared to 222 in 2019/20 and we responded to 942 media enquiries.

- 3.6.3 We facilitated 125 interviews with local and national media during the year.
- 3.6.4 The team also worked as an integral part of the communications cell for the Kent Resilience Forum with the Head of Communications and Senior Media Officer regularly chairing weekly Kent councils COVID communications updates.
- 3.6.5 In addition to our COVID-19 media work, the team also managed media coverage on important stories including:
- Historic England's High Streets Heritage Action Zone programme
  - Census Day
  - HIF and Cockham Community Parkland consultations
  - SWEPP in place
  - No smoking day
  - New ward boundaries
  - Secondary school offer day
  - Multi-agency press release on The Docking Station
  - Budget
  - Electric vehicles for social workers
  - Commissioner's report into Children's Services
  - Future High Streets Fund
  - Ofsted letter on our Children's Services improvements
  - Launch of the City of Culture website and activity
  - The installation of four CCTV cameras overlooking the river, thanks to funding from the Medway Community Safety Partnership

### **3.7 Digital communications**

- 3.7.1 Digital communication has been a huge part of the Communications Team work over the past year and it proved invaluable in getting out important messages to Medway residents. As well as increased use of social media, we issued weekly Medway Matters e-newsletters with important updates and created weekly infographics to demonstrate the wide range of work we were doing. We made greater use of video to get information out to the public as channels such as YouTube become ever more important
- 3.7.2 Our electronic email news services now have 41,000 subscribers signed up with a total of nearly 100,000 subscriptions. Our average open rate is 42 per cent which is excellent and an engagement rate of 77 per cent.
- 3.7.3 Our social media channels have continued to grow and we now have over 21,500 Twitter subscribers, 15,700 friends on Facebook and 8,700 followers on LinkedIn. Our Instagram channel has seen strong growth since launch and now has more than 2,000 followers.

## 3.8 Internal Communications

3.8.1 Internal communications has been critical over the past year as we moved swiftly at the start of the pandemic to most people working remotely. Our priority was to ensure staff and councillors were kept up to date with all service developments and important decisions, keep people informed about important COVID messages and ensure that they were supported and looking after themselves when largely working at home either isolated or facing the challenges such as having children at home while trying to work.

3.8.2 Our key areas of activity included:

- Regular COVID bulletins – daily for the first three months then gradually reducing eventually to weekly.
- Regular video updates from the Leader and Chief Executive updating on key issues and answering questions sent in by staff.
- Videos with senior representatives including James Williams and Ruth Du Lieu.
- Weekly emails from the Chief Executive updating on issues from the week.
- MedSpace news articles COVID and non-COVID related. Advice was also given on health and wellbeing during the pandemic and where people could turn for information.
- Sharing information on team activities and different ways teams were keeping in touch, running events to keep in touch and helping each other.
- Supporting other initiatives through the year including Census 21, Time to Change, commemorative days including LGBTQ History month, Holocaust Memorial Day, Workers Memorial Day, International Apprentice Week.

3.8.3 A short survey conducted with staff showed that 88 per cent of staff were very satisfied or satisfied with the level and quality of information received about the council and pandemic.

## 4. Finance

4.1 Though the Council's 2019/20 Statement of Accounts were completed, and the majority of the external audit work was carried out by the Autumn of 2020, at the time of preparing this report the audit had not been completed. While disappointing, the National Audit Office reported that the majority of local authority audits for 2019/20 were not signed off by the deadline, with just 29% of audits of Unitary authorities having met the deadline. The auditor reported to the Audit Committee in September that they anticipated giving an unqualified opinion on the financial statements, and that their Value for Money conclusion would be that the Council had proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources except for the Ofsted's inspection report on the Council's children's social care services, which judged services to help

and protect children in Medway to be 'inadequate. Council staff continue to work with the auditors to resolve a number of matters identified late in the process, and the auditors have indicated that they would like to be able to formerly sign off the 2019/20 financial statements by 31 July 2021.

- 4.2 The closure of the 2020/21 accounts has been completed, with the Capital and Revenue Budget Outturn considered by the Cabinet on 8 June reflecting an underspend of almost £4million, comfortably funding the £3.155million of general reserves needed to fund the shortfall in the 2021/22 budget, as Full Council agreed in February. Work is underway to prepare the 2020/21 Statement of Accounts in advance of the auditors beginning their work in August 2021.
- 4.3 The first round of budget monitoring for 2021/22 is underway and will be discussed by Cabinet on 24 August. As in previous years that marks the beginning of the process to deliver the Medium-Term Financial Strategy and Capital Strategy to set the Council's budget for 2022/23. The Round 1 budget monitoring forecasts will reflect the continued impact of Covid-19 on Council's finances and the extent to which the government's financial package mitigates that, but the more difficult task will be forecasting the longer-term impacts on the economy and the implications for our tax base, the demand for statutory services and the Council's income generating services for some time to come. To that end, this year the process to prepare the MTFS is being delivered in collaboration with the Business Change team to more closely align the development of our transformation programmes with our MTFS and Capital Strategy.
- 4.4 Significant work has taken place across Finance to deliver more than £99million in financial support to Medway's Businesses, with our Revenues and Benefits service at the forefront of that work, which is detailed in the report from Cllr Turpin elsewhere on this agenda.
- 4.5 Throughout the pandemic, the teams across Finance have continued to deliver their core roles and additional duties to deliver that financial support package whilst working remotely, readily adapting to new ways of working across all elements of the service and presenting significant opportunities to work differently moving forward. I'm proud of how well teams such as finance have embraced the technological solutions available to work together and maintain relationships over the last 15 months, with Finance being one of many teams across the Council to welcome new members of staff through the government's Kickstart scheme entirely remotely.
- 4.6 Since the onset of the pandemic, to ensure suppliers are paid as quickly as possible all invoices authorised for payment have been processed on daily pay runs, and in addition all suppliers have been set to immediate payment terms meaning they have been paid immediately. This includes payment of the Covid related business grants which were paid to businesses within twenty-four hours of the grant being awarded.

- 4.7 The service has continued work to ensure as many payments can be paid online as possible, not only ensuring a better experience for our customers but also to improve the internal processes and money reaching the right accounts far more quickly. The need for paper is being reduced in many processes with the aim of making the finance operations processes paperless, with a variety of solutions including use of email and new eForms meaning that audit requirements continue to be met.
- 4.8 The Council's new Insurance System is continuing to be developed which will see the implementation of improved reporting as well as again more online processes in the coming year. Other system developments within the division are always ongoing and have included the following:
- Preparation to move the financial system to Microsoft Azure platform to improve the resilience of the product,
  - Upgrades of various financial systems have been undertaken on a regular basis.
- 4.9 The teams are well placed to continue to strive for improvements in the coming year whilst also supporting customers both internal and external on a day-to-day basis.

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#### Appendices

None

#### Background documents

None