

**Medway Council**  
**Meeting of Business Support Overview and Scrutiny**  
**Committee**

**Thursday, 7 July 2022**

**6.04pm to 9.50pm**

**Record of the meeting**

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

**Present:** Councillors: Buckwell (Chairman), Tejan (Vice-Chairman), Clarke, Etheridge, Johnson, Khan, Maple, Opara, Rupert Turpin and Wildey

**Substitutes:** Councillors:  
Adeoye (Substitute for Murray)  
Edwards (Substitute for Curry)  
Thorne (Substitute for Williams)

**In Attendance:** Mark Breathwick, Head of Strategic Housing  
Councillor Howard Doe, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services  
Councillor Adrian Gulvin, Portfolio Holder for Resources  
Dee O'Rourke, Assistant Director, Culture & Community  
Stephen Platt, Democratic Services Officer  
Phil Watts, Chief Operating Officer

**100 Apologies for absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Curry, Murray and Williams.

**101 Record of meeting**

The record of the meeting held on 10 May 2022 and the record of the Joint Meeting of Committees held on 18 May 2022 were agreed and signed by the Chairman.

**102 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances**

There were none.

**103 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests or Other Significant Interests and Whipping**

Disclosable pecuniary interests

There were none.

Other significant interests (OSIs)

Councillor Doe disclosed that he was a Director of Kyndi and Medway Development Company (MDC) and he relied on a dispensation granted by the Councillor Conduct Committee to enable him to take part in the discussion of the report at agenda item 5 (Attendance of the Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services).

Other interests

Councillor Buckwell disclosed that he was an Immigration Judge and did not take part in the discussion on refugees under agenda item 6 (Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Resources).

Councillor Opara disclosed that her business had participated in the Kickstart scheme, as HR was included in the report at agenda item 6 (Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Resources).

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

**Discussion:**

Members considered a report setting out activities and progress on work areas within the Housing and Community Services Portfolio, which fell within the remit of this Committee.

The following issues were discussed:

**Homelessness and housing options:**

- Asked to comment on the practice of relocating people out of the area and accepting homeless people from other areas, the Portfolio Holder said that the object was to avoid sending anyone out of area. The service was sensitive to the fact that people had links and support networks within Medway which would be lost if this happened.
- The Portfolio Holder was asked to comment on the risk of homeowners, for the first time, losing their homes as a result of the cost of living crisis. He said that he had held discussions with officers about this and the situation would be monitored. Support that could be offered included discussions with mortgage companies, signposting residents to the

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Citizens Advice Bureau, and financial advice. There would always be circumstances which could lead to people becoming homeless, such as family arguments, and the lockdowns had led to an increase in such circumstances. The Council had been successful in helping to prevent this, for example by supporting reconciliation efforts. The aim was to identify the issue and support people before a situation reached the point of possible homelessness. However, sometimes people were determined to go down the repossession route, for example where the relationship between landlord and tenant had completely broken down.

- Asked how many of the 310 households in temporary accommodation were in Medway and how many included children, the Portfolio Holder said that he believed all were in Medway. The service tried to house families with children as quickly and sympathetically as possible, recognising that children needed a strong base. Where it was no longer possible for a young person to live in the family home, the Council had a number of tools to assist, which included placing them in temporary accommodation whilst alternative solutions were sought. He confirmed that no children were in bed and breakfast accommodation. The Portfolio Holder highlighted the close links which had been strengthened between Housing and Children's services.

### **Housing management and allocations**

- The Portfolio Holder responded to concerns expressed about some Housing Associations' unresponsiveness when contacted by the Council or tenants. He considered that some had become too large. There remained the option to remove a Housing Association from the Council's list should there continue to be issues. Complaints could also be made to Homes England which could result in a loss of funding. It was requested that Councillors be sent a point of contact for all social landlords.
- Responding to a case where an applicant had waited 11 years for accommodation, the Portfolio Holder said that this was very much a one-off case and was likely to be due to someone wanting a specific property.

### **Housing strategy**

- Commenting on the initiatives introduced in response to the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, the Portfolio Holder said that these were up and running and discretionary grants were processed as quickly as possible, as were other support mechanisms. He added that it was not always necessary to place victims of domestic abuse far away and the service worked with them to find the right solution. Asked to comment on how trust was being built with hard to reach communities, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that links were developed and maintained with a diverse range of communities. He added that the Council did not seek to identify

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incidents of domestic abuse within communities as this would be seen as a gross intrusion and interference.

### **Private Sector Housing**

- The Portfolio Holder said that the Planning Department monitored whether planning consents for disabled units were being met. He added that it was better to build such units than adapt existing units.
- The Portfolio Holder was asked to comment on a case where a tenant in dispute with their landlord had been advised to remain in the property and wait for the landlord to take legal action. He responded that it was the general policy not to make repossessions easy and that landlords needed to be held to account. Equally, it was not the intention to put people in difficult situations where landlords were being difficult.
- Asked about the three cases of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) licence breaches with the legal team, the Portfolio Holder said that the Council would always seek to work with landlords and licensees to resolve issues before taking court action.

### **Housing Landlord Services**

- Referring to the backlog of repairs that had built up during the covid pandemic, the Portfolio Holder reported that this was being tackled.
- Regarding energy, the Portfolio Holder reported that the Council had employed a Warmth Sustainability Officer. Insulation within homes was being improved where necessary as a priority to ensure they were fit for purpose.

### **Libraries and Community Hubs**

- Asked about the ownership of buildings that were occupied by libraries being transformed into Community Hubs, the Portfolio Holder said that the legal position of any leasehold issue was examined before any transformation programme proceeded as it was important that the Council's investment was protected.
- The Portfolio Holder was asked if any benchmarking or surveys had been undertaken to establish how the scope of services available at Community Hubs could be expanded to meet all the needs of residents. He responded that there was continued development so that the range of services offered to the community was expanded. The Portfolio Holder said that feedback from service users was always encouraged, and he agreed that a customer survey would be beneficial.

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### **Climate Change**

- In response to a question on innovative thinking, the Portfolio Holder referred to liaison with Greenwich University and encouraged all Members to contact the Climate Change team with any ideas for alternative solutions.
- The Portfolio Holder confirmed that the team had contacted a number of the 30 local authorities whose Climate Change Action Plan had been ranked higher than Medway's, to see what further improvements could be made as, although the Council was in the top 10%, the aspiration was to be first.

### **Voluntary Sector**

- Concern was expressed that smaller local charities, were seeing their income streams reduce as a result of the cost of living crisis. The Portfolio Holder said that the Council liaised very closely with voluntary organisations and would always seek to help any organisation that was in difficulty. If it could no longer provide the services, the Council would seek to retain it if it was viable.

### **Kyndi/Medway Development Company (MDC)**

- Asked about the recruitment service returning to the Council from Kyndi, the Portfolio Holder said that the recruitment sector had changed and the Council had taken the view that Kyndi should focus on CCTV and Telecare.
- The continued existence of Kyndi was questioned, and the Portfolio Holder advised that it was improving and was now making sound profits.
- Asked about the impact of the increased cost of building materials on MDC, the Portfolio Holder said that all MDC schemes were evaluated and were only pursued if they were viable. Schemes such as Mountbatten House, Garrison Point and Chatham Waterfront were justified by the benefits they would bring.

### **Decision:**

The Committee thanked the Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for his attendance and for his detailed responses.

## **105 Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Resources**

### **Discussion:**

Members considered a report setting out activities and progress on work areas within the Resources Portfolio, which fell within the remit of this Committee.

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The following issues were discussed:

### **Transformation and digital services:**

- In view of residents' different views on the extent to which services were accessible digitally, the Portfolio Holder was asked if the right balance was being achieved. He responded that the use of digital services was promoted and was increasing. However, it was recognised that there were residents who did not have access to digital services and whilst this continued, non-digital services would be available. Responding to a question on the benefit of face-to-face contact, for example at Community Hubs, the Portfolio Holder recognised the good service that the hubs provided. He had observed that during the lockdowns, some older people had learnt how to use digital services but emphasised that services should be readily available to all.
- On the suggestion of a directory of the different ways that Council services could be accessed, he said that it was important that residents were signposted to the right service, either on-line or by Community Hubs.
- Asked to expand on the digitisation of Planning microfiche files, the Portfolio Holder said that the Council's planners regularly needed to refer to previous planning applications and the digitisation of microfiche and paper records would improve their accessibility.
- The Portfolio Holder responded to a question on the use of partner organisations' CCTV records, referring to CCTV consortium meetings and his liaison with his counterpart at Gravesham Council. He said that his initial focus was on those cameras connected to Kyndi's system and the host of others owned by the Council. The Portfolio Holder referred to the appointment of an officer who was the main point of contact for all CCTV.
- On the implications of the transfer of the sign shop services, the Portfolio Holder said that this was to realise the commercial potential of the service which had previously operated on a cost/break even basis.
- Concern was expressed that requests for signage were not being processed quickly enough. The Portfolio Holder agreed to make enquiries about the specific issues raised. He would also raise it at the next Medway Norse Liaison Board meeting.
- Asked if the Love Medway app would be reinstated, the Portfolio Holder agreed that this would be beneficial.
- With reference to the review of new legislation to enforce moving traffic offences, such as yellow box junctions, concern was expressed that

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drivers were sometimes caught in box junctions due to the inconsiderate driving of drivers in front of them. It was hoped that wider video evidence would be available to demonstrate this. The Portfolio Holder said that the details had yet to be finalised but agreed that it needed to be fair.

- Whilst welcoming the support for Ukrainian refugees within Medway, concern was expressed that there had not previously been the same level of support for refugees from other countries. The Portfolio Holder agreed that helping people in distress was a good thing. The Chairman stated that, as he sat as an asylum appeal judge, he had not taken part in this discussion.

### **Council Plan and service improvement:**

- Asked to comment on the Council value, financial resilience, given the current economic climate, the Portfolio Holder said that cuts to the Local Authority grant had been out of proportion. He believed that local government remained the most cost-effective way of providing services, citing Track and Trace as a good example.
- Noting that tackling climate change was another of the Council's values, the Portfolio Holder was asked if it was a good idea to install solar panels on the Gun Wharf building. He responded that he was in favour and had been disappointed that this had not been recommended by Planning Services. The Chairman noted that the three members of the Committee who also sat on the Planning Committee had not taken part in this discussion.

### **Customer and Business Support**

- With reference to the number of applications for blue badges during 2021/22, which was in excess of 6,000, and the lack of additional disabled spaces to accommodate the increase, the Portfolio Holder advised that many of these would be renewals rather than additional badges and that an Occupational Health Assessor reviewed applications to ensure that they met the criteria. Asked if there could be one pro-forma for applying, rather than the current two, and whether reminder emails were sent out in good time, the Portfolio Holder advised that officers were looking at this. He paid tribute to the CABs team, saying that it worked extremely well without always getting the recognition it deserved.

### **Human Resources**

- The Portfolio Holder was asked whether exit interviews were highlighting a trend that officers were leaving for higher salaries in locations that were only a short distance away. It was suggested that more meaningful pay negotiations should be conducted to find innovative solutions. The Portfolio Holder acknowledged the difficulties in recruitment and retention in certain areas, such as legal and social services, and that

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more flexibility in the Medpay scheme would be beneficial. Regular staff surveys were conducted to understand the views of the workforce. It was also confirmed that some services conducted stay interviews to help understand staff retention.

- On the need to ensure employees with hybrid working patterns had effective technology, the Portfolio Holder said that hybrid working was working well, and further improvements were being made, such as installing drop down areas.
- In response to a question on the Council's Apprenticeship Academy target beyond 2022-23, the Portfolio Holder said that the scheme was continuing to help with the retention of staff by enabling them to gain further qualifications. For example, legal apprentices were gaining qualifications to become a para legal, and then a fully qualified lawyer.
- On the issue of term-time working, the view was expressed that Medway had acted poorly towards Teaching Assistants given that other authorities had agreed more generous pay settlements. The Portfolio Holder responded that those authorities might be in a position to be more generous and that, if Medway's settlement had been higher, it would have had to come out of another part of the budget.
- It was suggested that a briefing be provided for Members on the outcome of staff surveys.

### **ICT**

- Reassurance was sought that funding was in place for the timely replacement of IT equipment that had been given to staff to enable them to work remotely during the pandemic, particularly as hybrid working would continue. It was confirmed that there was a specific budget for this.

### **Legal**

- With reference to the Council's Judicial Review challenge of the Secretary of State's decision to require Medway to accept referrals for unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors, a Member expressed the view that the Council should be doing more to take its fair share of these vulnerable young people.
- On recruitment and retention, concern was expressed about the use of expensive locum staff. The Portfolio Holder agreed that this was less efficient and assured the Committee that the AD Legal and Governance was focused on the service meeting its targets.
- The Portfolio Holder was asked if the staff shortages in Legal Services were related to the missed target for childcare court proceedings. He responded that most authorities missed this national target and some of



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the cases in Medway were very complicated, requiring translation services. He stressed that Legal Services were very good at improving the capabilities of staff through training.

### **Travellers**

- Reference was made to the commissioning of a Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment, referred to in the report, and clarification was sought on why this had not been referred to in the report to Cabinet on 5 July on the Housing Delivery Test Action Plan. The Portfolio Holder responded that he was not responsible for the Local Plan and that all documents would be put before the Planning Inspectorate at the appropriate time.

### **Decision:**

The Committee thanked the Portfolio Holder for his attendance and for his detailed responses.

## **106 Work programme**

### **Discussion:**

The Committee received a report on its current work programme and discussed the issue of document retention, particularly emails, once an employee had left the Council. This issue had arisen at the meeting of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 8 June on the Gillingham Football Club School.

It was requested that this Committee be informed of the processes and practices relating to the retention of records used to inform decisions taken under the Employee Delegation Scheme. This would be discussed at the next agenda planning meeting.

A Member recalled a discussion at the last meeting that the Chairman, Vice-Chairman and Opposition Spokesperson would have early sight of the Cabinet report responding to the Committee's recommendations on the call-in of decisions relating to a proposed development of Queen Street.

### **Decision:**

The Committee:

- a) agreed the Committee's work programme at Appendix 1; and
- b) noted the work programmes of the other overview and Scrutiny committees at Appendix 2.

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**Chairman**

**Date:**

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