

Medway Council
Meeting of Business Support Overview and Scrutiny
Committee

Thursday, 20 October 2022

6.00pm to 8.52pm

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, Curry, Johnson, Khan, Maple, Murray, Opara, Rupert Turpin, Wildey and Williams

Substitutes: Councillors:
Purdy (Substitute for Etheridge)

In Attendance: Phil Watts, Chief Operating Officer
Councillor Gary Hackwell, Portfolio Holder for Business Management
Councillor Alan Jarrett, Leader of the Council
Stephanie Davis, Democratic Services Officer

328 Apologies for absence

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Etheridge.

329 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting of the Committee held on 25 August 2022 was agreed and signed by the Chairman as correct.

330 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

331 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests or Other Significant Interests and Whipping

Disclosable pecuniary interests

There were none.

Other significant interests (OSIs)

There were none.

Other interests

Councillor Tejan declared an interest in the work programme item as a board member of Kyndi.

332 Attendance of the Leader of the Council

Discussion:

Members considered a report which set out activities and progress on work areas within the terms of reference of this Committee covered by Councillor Alan Jarrett, Leader of the Council, these being strategic leadership of the Council, communications and marketing, and finance.

The Leader responded to Members' questions and comments as follows:

- **City Status and City of Culture bids** – In response to questions on the unsuccessful bids and whether the concept of Medway was misunderstood, the Leader said that whilst the decisions had been disappointing, the bids had provided the Council with a cost-effective opportunity to promote Medway as a place. He did not rule out future bids, saying that the Council had learnt something from each unsuccessful bid. For example, in comparing Medway with Chelmsford, it had been clear that Medway needed to develop a coherent city centre. The significant redevelopment works currently being undertaken in Chatham would create a city centre to be proud of.
- **Councillors serving as members of Boards of Local Authority Trading Companies (LATcos)** – The Leader did not agree that the advice of external auditors had been ignored. He took the view that it was best for Medway to make use of the talents and relevant expertise of Portfolio Holders as these meant they were well qualified to serve on the boards of LATcos.
- **Future of Chatham Docks** – The Leader advised that it was a matter for the owner whether they wanted the docks to remain as solely employment use or continue with their aspirations for mixed use. He said that Members had rejected regulation 19 and planning applications which had been refused by the Planning Committee might be allowed on appeal as the Council did not have a five-year land supply.
- **Innovation Park Medway (IPM)** – Asked for an update on interest from businesses, the Leader advised that the groundworks for the southern site had been completed, and heads of terms had been reached with the anchor tenant. Regarding the northern site, the groundworks were well under way and heads of terms had not quite been reached with the first tenant. There had been a large number of enquiries from potential tenants for the site but a firm line was being taken to ensure the occupiers met the Council's aspirations and criteria for IPM.

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- **Medway Development Company (MDC) seeking to reduce the level of Section 106 agreements** – The Leader took the view that developers that signed up to Section 106 agreements should deliver them. It would be very important for the Hoo development because the housing infrastructure project funding of £170 million was for roads rail and strategic environmental management schemes. Therefore, the additional infrastructure requirements would need to be funded by Section 106 funding. The Leader said that the Planning Committee had very firm views on Section 106 agreements which he agreed with.
- **Impact on the Council's regeneration programme of the increased cost of building materials** - The Leader expressed the view that the selling point of units should be maximised as far as the market would allow, to take into account any increases in building costs.
- **Chatham Waterfront site**– Asked for an update on the challenges being faced, the Leader said that the Council had purchased a large amount of materials in advance and these were still being used. He acknowledged that the supply of materials and labour was reducing and said that time would tell if there would be viability issues.
- **Homes for Ukraine** – Concern was expressed that, as the Homes for Ukraine scheme was coming to an end, there may be households who were unable to continue to support refugees. Asked what provision was being made, the Leader said that he had regular meetings with officers about this issue. He said that budgets were very stretched, and a decision would be taken on how to respond to the funding gap in a cost-effective way when funding from Government ended. There would however be continued lobbying of Government for provision of more funding.
- **Continuing response to the Pandemic** – Concern was expressed that the response to pandemics had been removed from the strategic risk register. The Leader said that whether the risk was on the register or not would not alter how the Council responded to a future pandemic. During the Covid 19 pandemic, Medway led the way within Kent on how initiatives were brought forward and how Public Health responded.
- **Residential development of apartments in the context of child friendly Medway** – Asked how the level of residential development involving apartment blocks fitted in with Medway's child friendly initiative, the Leader said that he was very proud of this initiative and the lead officer's enthusiasm. He added that many children lived happily in apartments and that every effort was made to design out anti-social behaviour so that they provided suitable accommodation for both adults and children. He therefore saw no link between the development of sites incorporating apartments and poor life chances for children.

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- **Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) delay** – The Leader said that he had worked hard to urge the Hoo consortium to be patient but as they could see that regulation 19 was around 2 years away, this patience was wearing thin. There was a danger that, irrespective of the road infrastructure, developers would bring forward plans for thousands of houses over time in the vacuum created by the lack of a local plan. Asked about the evidence base, he advised that he had referred to it being eroded as it had become dated over time and would therefore be refreshed and repopulated.
- **The need for strong social media messages due to the potential for increased domestic violence during the football World Cup** – The Leader advised that there was recognition of this potential, and the Council would continue to do all it could to prevent domestic violence, and to support victims should it occur.
- **Update on practical actions arising out of the child friendly Medway initiative** – The Leader disagreed with the suggestion that this was simply an information gathering exercise. This was an important part of the early stages of the initiative, but it had now reached the delivery stage as evidenced by the number of events for young people that were being held.
- **Response to letters from residents** – The Leader confirmed that he always asked for a holding response to be sent to anyone who had written to him, before asking officers to provide a detailed response.
- **Protecting and supporting vulnerable people** – Asked about the decision of the Council not to fund free school meal vouchers over the summer holidays, when only 700 families had accessed the household support fund instead, the Leader said that the Council had not got this right and had made changes.
- **Children's Services improvements** – Asked what was being done to safeguard the hard work and improvements that had been achieved in Children's Services, the Leader agreed that there had been sustained progress and said that the Council was very focused on maintaining this. He agreed that there were difficulties with the provider market.
- **Difficulties in recruiting social workers** – The Leader said that, as a result of a national shortage of social workers, the Council had reverted back to employing more agency workers. Increased funding had recently been agreed to maintain the provision of social workers.
- **Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children** – Asked about his decision to seek a judicial review of the national transfer scheme, the Leader said that there had been no capacity for the Council to participate in the scheme as it was already having to place Medway children in expensive out of the area placements. When the Government had consulted on a possible direction to take unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, the

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Council had responded to clearly set out the capacity issues, but the Government had still issued a directive. The judicial review was likely to be in early 2023. The Leader concluded by saying that, as out of area placements cost in the region of £11, 000 a week, the cost of an increased number of such placements was likely to exceed the cost of a judicial review.

- **Medway Pride Festival** – Responding to a question on the level of support provided by the Council, the Leader said that funding for events and festivals in general would become more challenging and so self-funding would become more important. For example, the Food and Drink Festival in February 2023 would not only be at no cost to the Council, but the Council would derive income from it.
- **Household support fund** - Asked to comment on the view that the high number of people responding to the promotion of this fund reflected the high number of people experiencing financial difficulties, the Leader said that the cost-of-living crisis was a national issue, and the Council would help where it could although it only received a very limited Government grant.
- **The “No Use Empty” marketing campaign** - The Leader explained that this was a Kent County Council slogan, and Medway was seeking to bring empty properties back into beneficial use, sometimes in complex circumstances. Recent examples included a property in Gillingham High Street and one option was for the Council to take ownership of properties.
- **Officers working from home** – The Leader said that some officers preferred this method of working more than others. He agreed with the Chief Executive that it must meet the needs of the service. However, people facing roles such as social work could not be carried out effectively by working from home every day.
- **Cycle lanes** – The Leader said that he would look into whether there was enough communications activity to promote cycling and cycle lanes.
- **Equality and diversity** – Concern was expressed about out-of-date information on the Council’s web pages for equality and diversity. For example, the most recent figures on the gender pay gap were for 2020 and the equality statement was dated 2018. The Leader said that he would ask for the website to be updated.
- **Financing of adult social care** – The Leader was asked if consideration had been given to the Council building its own residential facilities to earn an income and help maintain quality services. The Leader responded that this could be given consideration. The Council had not returned to the adult social care market as the associated costs had been too high. However, the NHS had paid private providers inflated rates during the pandemic in order to free up hospital beds and those

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providers were now expecting the Council to pay the same rate. Discussions between the Council, the NHS and care providers was continuing.

- **The status of Medpay** - The Leader disagreed that Medpay had been a failed project and said that it had been a very good way of incentivising staff over a number of years. However, it was now time for a change and officers were developing budget proposals for that.
- **Funding for the Splashes Redevelopment Scheme**– The Leader advised that there had been a 38% increase in costs. Cabinet had therefore considered the matter and had recommended to Full Council that the extra funding be allocated to the scheme.
- **Financial pressures on Unitary authorities** – The Leader gave the view that unitary was the most efficient model of local government but suggested that most unitary authorities were too small. He questioned whether Medway, as a medium sized unitary, had the resource base to continue is it was.
- **Returning Government funding** – The Leader agreed that this had been disappointing, and that all funding received from the Government should be spent.
- **Children’s Services** - With reference to the improvements following the inspection of the service, the Leader was asked about the resilience of Eden House. He said that the current model had run into difficulties as a result of the withdrawal of the contractor who had been due to run the service. The Cabinet would be receiving a report in November about Eden House and out of area placements.
- **Staff recruitment and retention** – The Leader said that the review of Medpay would seek to address concerns about recruitment and retention.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to thank the Leader for his attendance and for his detailed responses.

333 Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Business Management

Discussion:

Members received an overview of activities and progress made on work areas within the terms of reference of this Committee covered by Councillor Gary Hackwell, Portfolio Holder for Business Management, which were:

- Customer Contact;
- Democracy and Governance;

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- Audit and Counter Fraud;
- Revenue and Benefits;
- Risk Management;
- Performance Monitoring; and
- Commissioning.

Councillor Hackwell responded to Members' questions and comments as follows:

- **Review of Gun Wharf to expand the level of customer focus and reduce the need to additional buildings** – Councillor Hackwell advised that there was a review of all Council buildings and their use. One idea under consideration was the use of community centres and hubs to provide the ability for residents to meet with Council officers via MS Teams. This would avoid the need for customers to travel to Chatham to meet with Council officers whilst enhancing the customer experience.
- **Telephony service** – In response to the confusion some customers had experienced regarding the Council's phone numbers, Councillor Hackwell explained that this had been addressed by offering the same options for customers, irrespective of whether they dialled 336000 or 333333.

Asked how robust the quality assurance system was regarding missed and dropped calls, Councillor Hackwell said that the new Mitel system provided much more data. Around 30,000 calls were received each month and the one area where demand significantly outstripped available resources was Revenue and Benefits. Following analysis of the data, which shows that many calls related to residents' Council Tax account, work was in hand to provide a digital version of the account which residents could access online. This would be further developed to enable residents to make changes online, for example to their direct debit. The next initiative would be e-billing for Council Tax.

- **Staff retention** – Asked how high staff turnover was managed within the service, Councillor Hackwell said that many recruits saw Customer Contact as a good entry route into the Council, from where they could progress onto higher graded positions within the Council.
- **The condition of the Gun Wharf building** – Asked if there was a strategy for improving the environment within Gun Wharf, Councillor Hackwell said that property fell within Councillor Gulvin's Portfolio but agreed that there were areas of the building that could be tidied up. However, this would require funding to be available for this purpose.
- **Communication of proposed Ward boundary changes** – Councillor Hackwell said that this information was already available online through Medway Mapping. He added that he would also investigate whether

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Ward boundary changes could be added to the web page where residents could find out who their local Councillors were.

- **Robustness of Overview and Scrutiny Committees** – With reference to the improvements that had been made in relation to the Children and Young Peoples Overview and Scrutiny Committee as part of the response to the inspection of Children’s Services in 2019, such as training, data workshops, and the provision of information outside of Committee meetings, Councillor Hackwell was asked if this model could be rolled out to the other Overview and Scrutiny Committees. He agreed that these improvements had been useful and that rolling them out should be explored.
- **Suitability of St George’s Centre for future meetings** – Councillor Hackwell agreed with the concerns expressed about the St George’s Centre as a venue for committee meetings, although it had been suitable during the Covid pandemic to enable social distancing to be achieved. He advised that the provision of a larger meeting room with dedicated equipment at Gun Wharf was under consideration. The Chairman added that this meeting would have been at Gun Wharf had Room 9 not been needed for another purpose. It was anticipated that future meetings would be at Gun Wharf. A Member suggested that meeting space within the former Debenhams building be explored.
- **Parish Community Governance review** – Further information was sought on the questionnaire that had been sent out to electors in Parished areas and other interested parties. The Chairman, who had chaired the cross-party working group, said that this public consultation on very minor changes had been required under the rules. The expected rise in population in certain Parished areas had been built into the review in terms of increased numbers of elected Parish Councillors.
- **Elections and Member and Mayoralty Services** – There was recognition and thanks of the work of these teams in difficult circumstances over the past year.
- **Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) consultation on remote meetings** – Councillor Hackwell said that he would liaise with Democratic Services on the outcome of previous consultations where there was a strong consensus that the decision to hold in person or hybrid meetings should be made by the individual local authority.
- **Election Act 2022** – Concerns were expressed about the practical changes required at short notice, under the Elections Act 2022, for the May 2023 elections, and the delay in the provision of guidance which would not be received until January 2023. Councillor Hackwell said that he shared these concerns but had not yet lobbied the Government. It was suggested that a letter be sent, possibly signed by the Portfolio

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Holder, the Committee Chair, Vice-Chair and Opposition Spokes, supporting the concerns of the Association of Election Administrators.

- **Underspend of the exceptional hardship payments under the Council Tax Reduction Scheme** – Asked why more exceptional hardship payments were not being made, Councillor Hackwell said if people met the criteria, it would be paid. He stressed the importance of promoting the scheme so that more eligible people applied and welcomed suggestions for how this could be achieved.
- **Risk Management** – Asked how easy it was for members of the public to access public facing risk management documents from the Council's website, Councillor Hackwell said that although he had not tried, he had found the website to be user friendly and usually found what he was looking for.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to thank Councillor Hackwell for his attendance and for his detailed responses.

334 Work programme

Decision:

The Committee agreed to note the report in the basis that the Chairman, Vice Chairman and Opposition Spokesperson would soon meet with officers to discuss the work programme at the next agenda planning meeting.

Chairman

Date:

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