

Regeneration, Culture and Environment

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

15 November 2023

Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Heritage, Culture and Leisure

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Mahil, Portfolio Holder for Heritage, Culture and Leisure

Summary

This annual report provides an account of the role of the Portfolio Holder for Heritage, Culture & Leisure. It details their ambitions for their areas of responsibility, how they have and will undertake political challenge and leadership and what their priorities and ambitions are for the year ahead.

1. Recommendations

1.1. The Committee is asked to note the report.

2. Budget and policy framework

2.1. The areas within the terms of reference of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and covered by the Portfolio Holder for Heritage, Culture & Leisure, as set out in the Council's constitution are:

- Events and Festivals
- Heritage
- Leisure and Sport Services
- Libraries and Community Hubs
- Theatres and Arts (Culture development)
- Tourism
- Community Centres
- Archives

3. Background

3.1 I am delighted to have taken on Portfolio Holder responsibility for Heritage, Culture and Leisure and would like to start by expressing my thanks to staff for their enthusiasm, dedication and commitment to delivering exceptional service to the residents of Medway.

- 3.2 It is clear staff recognise the difficult financial situation the Council currently faces, and I have been both heartened and grateful to see the proactive way in which issues are being addressed.
- 3.3 The heritage service has responsibility for a number of ancient monuments and listed buildings including Rochester Castle, Guildhall Museum, Upnor Castle, Temple Manor, Eastgate House and Dickens Chalet. As well as being historically important they are an essential part of Medway's economy, both generating income directly and also providing essential reasons why visitors choose to come to Medway.
- 3.4 This is recognised in our current tourism strategy, which aims to transform Medway into a must-see thriving short break destination.
- 3.5 In 2023 the culture service has delivered 18 festivals and events over 44 days, reaching more than 250,000 people. These have included Medway Light Nights, Rochester Sweeps Festival, Medway Gaming Festival, Chatham Carnival, Medway Pride, Medway River Lit and the Coronation live site.
- 3.6 Our libraries and community hubs continue to perform well, with satisfaction ratings currently at 99% and borrowing and visits returning to pre-Covid levels. This summer's Reading Challenge which encouraged children and young people to continue reading during the summer holidays, reached more than 2,700 visitors.
- 3.7 The transformation of Lordswood library into a community hub was completed in June.
- 3.8 The theatres team continues to work with and build relationships with national promoters, resulting in recent bookings including Noel Fitzpatrick – Super Vet, and comedian Rhod Gilbert. This year's pantomime Aladdin is selling well and for the first time will include a "relaxed" performance adapted to suit people who may require a more relaxed environment when going to the theatre. Usually these are adults and children with learning difficulties, autism, or sensory communication disorders.
- 3.9 The Culture development team continues to lead and partner on a range of community projects and activities including exhibitions at Rochester Art Gallery, the Heritage High Street Action Zone cultural consortium, the new arts and homelessness forum, Medway Change Makers volunteering programme, Make Waves young producers programme, Create Growth business development programmes, and the continued support of Creative Medway in the delivery of the cultural strategy.
- 3.10 Public art is an emerging theme with new works due on the waterfront pumping station and Mountbatten House in Chatham as part of the town centre regeneration, and new work on Pier Road and in Strood as part of Refresh Medway. All are due to be installed next year.

3.11 I oversee the operation of five sports centres – Medway Park, Strood Sports Centre, Hoo Sports Centre, The Strand and Watling Park football centre – with a budgeted annual income target of more than £3.4m. All centres are projecting to meet or exceed their budgeted income targets in the current financial year.

4. Providing political leadership and challenge

- 4.1 The importance of Medway as a burgeoning home of creative engagement and development is recognised at national level, with both Arts Council England and recently the National Lottery Heritage Fund designating Medway as a Priority Place. This represents a key strategic opportunity, with support and advice from these national organisations, to deliver meaningful, long-lasting benefits to Medway and I will be working with relevant officers and partners to ensure we maximise this opportunity.
- 4.2 One of the key projects already being developed is Chatham Creative Quarters which aims to put Medway at the heart of the Thames Estuary Production Corridor, a programme that unites east London, the North Kent Coast and South Essex to create a world-class centre for creative and cultural production.
- 4.3 When taking up my Portfolio I inherited a number of existing capital projects including the new sports centre at Rainham. I recognise the financial impact – both capital and revenue – this project has on Council finances and have set clear challenges to officers to work within the budget, to maximise opportunities for energy efficiency, and to minimise the ongoing revenue impact on the budget. Working with officers and the appointed professional team and developers we have been able to evolve the project to deliver a huge increase in the use of photovoltaics to provide energy for the centre, delivering significant annual energy savings which will improve the efficiency of the centre and reduce the financial pressure for the Council.
- 4.4 I am also overseeing a major refurbishment of the Brook Theatre, with capital funding agreed by Council in July. Costed plans and the programme of works are now being developed to enable this project to move forward.
- 4.5 In having Portfolio Holder responsibility for a number of non-statutory services I have asked officers to prioritise relevant commercial activity which deliver both beneficial services for residents and visitors while reducing the financial demands facing the Council. This has resulted in a number of steps being instigated, from the implementation of a new outdoor event policy to standardise the hire and use of festivals and events spaces, to development of a multi-year plan to make key aspects of my Portfolio operationally self-sufficient.
- 4.6 I have regular meetings with senior officers and have also met a number of external partners, including Visit Kent and the Medway Tourism Association, as well as visiting a number of events and centres. Earlier this month I was at the International Dance Championships held at Medway Park where I was

able to see the economic benefits of staging such events, not only to the sports centre but to the wider economy, be that Gillingham High Street or the fully booked hotels.

5. Championing the Interests of people

- 5.1 In delivering a range of commercially based Council services I am conscious there will always be a variety of opinions on how such facilities should evolve, and I receive a range of correspondence on numerous aspects. I am keen to encourage officers to engage fully with correspondents to ensure their views are heard, even if it is not always possible to accede to specific requests.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 The services within my Portfolio play an integral part in making Medway a vibrant, exciting and enjoyable place to live and to visit. While recognising and seeking to address the current financial challenges, there are huge opportunities to provide long-term benefits for Medway and I look forward to working with colleagues and partners to bring these to fruition.

Lead officer contact

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