Medway Council
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Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee

30 November 2023

Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Community Safety and Enforcement

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Osborne, Portfolio Holder for Community Safety and Enforcement

Summary

This annual report provides an account of the role of the Portfolio Holder for Community Safety and Enforcement. 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 Community Safety and Enforcement, as set out in the Council's constitution are:

- Digital Services (including Medway 2.0)
- Licensing (executive functions only)

3.   Background

3.1.   I am extremely honoured and proud to be the Portfolio Holder for Digital Services at Medway Council. My ambition has been to transform the Council's online channels to make them easy and simple to use for the residents of Medway.

3.2.   I would firstly like to highlight the excellent work that my teams carry out "behind the scenes" to keep Medway Council services operational. We have recently improved key parts of our ICT infrastructure with the implementation of a new Storage Area Network, upgrade of 38 servers, enhancement of our network security firewalls, and installing temporary networking for the Rochester Christmas market.

3.3. Major system upgrades have also been carried out on key corporate applications such as IKEN (the legal case management system) and Uniform (the system used by our Planning department).

3.4. Medway 2.0

3.5. Since my appointment to Cabinet, I have championed putting our residents at the heart of what we do. Over the past 20 years, Medway's systems have grown and evolved so that there is now a complex collection of applications that do not necessarily speak to each other, leading to a disjointed experience for our customers.

3.6. We need to untangle our systems to deliver an improved service for our residents. This means reimagining our processes to make them better, cheaper, and faster by engaging in a real cultural shift in our thinking about the delivery of services and the technologies that we use.

3.7. Medway 2.0 is a programme of work which aims to address this situation. It will cover the redesign of services to deliver better, more efficient, and more effective services for residents.

3.8. As part of the programme, we have undertaken a pilot project – "Report It" - which aims to test the capabilities of the new technologies, by developing a solution to cover three processes:

- Unauthorised Encampments
- Illegally Parked Vehicles
- Abandoned Vehicles

3.9. We have mapped out the processes involved and, working with a Microsoft Gold Partner, have designed a new system to make the experience of reporting an issue more seamless. For example, if I am a resident and want to report what I think is an abandoned vehicle, I will be able to complete an easy online form (or speak to a Council officer), upload photos of the vehicle and the system will automatically check the number plate from the photo using Artificial Intelligence and then automatically check if the vehicle is MOT'd and taxed prior to submitting a report.

3.10. If the issue is not one for the Council to deal with, for example – the system will automatically check whether it is within the Medway boundary or not - the resident will immediately receive a notification and information about where it should be reported.

3.11. The pilot has involved developing both online forms and back-office systems. It has been a useful exercise in cross-directorate working, especially within my own Portfolio where Business Change, ICT, Digital, Wardens and Parking teams have been working collaboratively to envision what could be possible if we are genuinely open to rethinking how the Council works.

3.12. The pilot has also demonstrated that Medway Council's thinking is ahead of the curve in terms of service design and the adoption of new technologies.

For example, our partner has invested in improving their own product since we challenged them to redesign it to support and align with Medway's processes.

3.13. The pilot is due to run until end November 2023, after which time a period of testing, review, refinement, and evaluation is planned. Thereafter a business case will propose options for scaling up the use of the technology, either in-house, with a partner, or adopting a hybrid approach.

3.14. Following the implementation of the Report It processes, similar exercises will be undertaken with other core functions (such as Apply for It, Book it, Pay for It), using common building blocks across a range of Council services.

3.15. The benefits of such an approach are clear:

- We will create consistency across different Council services.

- It will allow forms and information to be "joined up" – e.g. if applying for disability benefits, a blue badge application process can be initiated without customers having to complete another form.

- It will rationalise the number of e-forms and application packages.

- It will provide an end-to-end, simplified, and digitalised service design, which will make dealing with requests easier for our residents and our staff.

- It will promote transparency by keeping Council staff and customers updated at each stage of the process.

3.16. Technology is clearly a key enabler for the Medway 2.0 concept, but the real benefits, and potential revenue budget savings, come from the re-design of Council services following the untangling of systems and processes.

3.17. We do not underestimate the cultural change required to achieve the Medway 2.0 vision, underpinned by strong governance, regular communication, and strong engagement with stakeholders, and as Portfolio Holder for Digital Services, I am committed to providing the strong leadership required to implement such a fundamental transformation of the Council.

3.18. This, of course, is just the beginning and only forms one part of the Medway 2.0 programme.

3.19. Other workstreams and projects will also have interdependencies, such as delivering customer-focused services through our hubs (Property Rationalisation) and adopting new technologies in other internal services (such as HR and Payroll systems). I look forward to updating you on future achievements, successes, and learning from these exciting projects in the future.

4.   Providing political leadership and challenge

4.1.   I have provided political leadership and challenge to the wide-ranging areas that fall within my portfolio of Digital Services, such as the Council's websites, our Smart City agenda, ensuring services are accessible to residents and supporting all Council services.

4.2.   Digital

4.3.   The Digital team is responsible for the maintenance, support, and iteration of the content and services offered through the council's main website, medway.gov.uk, as well as specific websites for:

- Medway Tickets Live – for theatre tickets
- Medway Adult Education
- Rochester Corn Exchange
- Medway Safeguarding Children Partnership

4.4.   Digital resolved over 1,000 requests for changes to our websites, support, advice, and new services over the last 12 months.

4.5.   Website usage

4.6.   In the past year, Medway.gov.uk has continued to see high numbers of visitors to the site.

4.7.   Between 6th November 2022 and 5th November 2023, there were 15.9million page views and over 2.8m active users of the site.

4.8.   The top 5 most popular digital services and pages during this period were:

1. Book your vehicle into a Medway household waste and recycling centre
2. Pay your council tax
3. The Strand Lido and Leisure Park (sports centre listings)
4. Waste and recycling (homepage)
5. Apply for a school place (Which year group is my child in?)

4.9.   Digital transformation and new ways of working

4.10.   Medway's Digital team is a key contributor to our Medway 2.0 ambitions, but alongside this, the team has been involved in the delivery of digital transformation projects and products such as:

- the implementation and roll-out of My Council Tax Online and e-billing, which has over 9,000 sign-ups and almost 6,000 registered for electronic billing, which is more convenient for users and will reduce print and post costs for the Council.

- a second phase to the online bulky waste collection service, which added features allowing users to self-serve cancelling or rescheduling their

booking, which will reduce wait time for residents and manual intervention by officers.

- the digitalisation of election count processes and the publication of real-time results, trialled successfully at the local elections in May.

4.11. Support for campaigns and corporate priorities

4.12. As custodians of one of our primary contact channels, medway.gov.uk, the Digital team is involved in supporting many of our successful campaigns and corporate priorities – including in response to emergencies, such as the recent Storm Ciaran – and maintaining a degree of operational agility to be able to respond to changes in priority in real-time.

4.13. In collaboration with the Communications and Marketing teams, Digital have helped to deliver timely and important messages to residents concerning our response to the cost-of-living crisis, and have also worked closely with Comms to deliver the following online campaigns since April:

- It's Time (Medway Sport)
- Fostering
- Beside You (Public Health)

4.14. In support of our corporate priorities, such as Child-friendly Medway and our Local Plan, Digital have delivered new or refreshed online presences to maintain engagement with residents.

4.15. Digital will soon begin work with colleagues in Finance to create an online offer to support our newly created Welfare and Debt Advice team.

4.16. Digital services

4.17. One of the team's priorities this financial year has been to completely overhaul our online content regarding births, ceremonies, and deaths. Working with colleagues in our bereavement and registration teams, and through primary research with residents, the team have been iteratively designing and releasing improvements to this area of medway.gov.uk.

4.18. Consistent throughout their treatment and design of this new content and digital services is the need to update our services to be more inclusive and simpler to understand, for users who will be accessing these services, often during some of the most challenging times of their lives.

4.19. The Digital team have supported many initiatives led by teams in other departments, through the creation or iteration of new digital services.

4.20. These services, such as the Energy Efficiency Grant, which launched in the summer; or the improvements made to the Household Support Fund; are ensuring the council is fulfilling its obligation to award grants to some of the most in need residents within our communities - all in a simple and efficient way, with limited administrative burden.

4.21. Further to these priorities, the Digital team has also been able to support departments and colleagues across the council by delivering on their transformation ambitions by creating:

- a new Medway Lottery grant application
- improvements to our Housing online system
- additional animal licensing online payment types
- online dropped kerb applications
- online street naming and numbering payments
- online charity donations
- child and adult safeguarding online reporting

4.22. The team are currently in the process of delivering digital services as part of our events centralisation programme and, working with the Housing team, contributing to their work as part of the Supported Housing Improvement Programme national pilot, through Local Digital.

4.23. Smart City

4.24. Medway Connectivity Update

4.25. Over the last 12 months, Medway has seen a step change in number of premises connected to full fibre connectivity and with it, access to gigabit internet speeds. As of November 2022, 35% of Medway had full fibre to the premise (FTTP) access. That figure is now close to 65%.
(Source: thinkbroadband.com, data accurate as of 8th November 2023)

4.26. This is in part down to the vast sums of private investment Medway has attracted in local FTTP infrastructure from the likes of CityFibre, Openreach and other smaller internet service providers (ISPs); but also down to the coordination offered by Council officers in ICT and the Integrated Transport Street Works teams to assist in these vast infrastructure programmes.

4.27. As a case in point, the Council facilitated a bi-weekly meeting during the CityFibre FTTP build to serve over 90,000 premises across Medway.

4.28. Project Gigabit

4.29. Project Gigabit is a programme to enable hard-to-reach communities to access gigabit capable broadband; targeting homes and businesses that are not included in broadband supplier's plans.

4.30. Building Digital UK (BDUK) are responsible for the delivery of the Project Gigabit Programme, including leading and procuring the Kent and Medway delivery contracts. Council officers, working alongside the Kent Broadband Team, have partnered with BDUK to ensure that the procurement activity is focused on helping those eligible Medway residents that need this support.

4.31. Internet of Things (IoT) and LPWAN Network

4.32. Our ICT Networks Team have delivered a Low Range Power Network (LPWAN) across Medway, with the installation of 17 LoRaWAN gateways, with more planned. This has enabled the Council to trial and embed IoT sensors, opening up a host of different use cases for the Council and our partners in the future; providing huge potential to optimise services though "real time" data collection.

4.33. Advanced Road Temperature IoT Sensors

4.34. As part of the Highways Act, Medway Council are under a duty to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that safe passage along a highway is not endangered by snow or ice. Maintaining a safe passage under winter weather is critical to the safe and expedient flow of road traffic in Medway. Forecasting and predicting when to treat the network is crucial in ensuring the network remains safe to use and therefore the use of weather stations and sensors are of the upmost importance.

4.35. In February 2021, the Council conducted a trial of road surface temperature sensors on the network. 10 sensors were installed prior to the 2021/22 winter season across two areas, Gillingham and Walderslade / Lordswood. The data was collected on a daily basis throughout the season, which ran from October 2021 to April 2022.

4.36. Analysis of that winter season showed that if the Council had changed their winter season model to use the real time sensor data - out of 32 days' worth of precautionary gritting - 28 days worth could have been saved in Gillingham and an additional 10 days saved in Walderslade / Lordswood. As a result, this pilot highlighted the potential benefit of switching to a route-based forecasting rather than "blanket" precautionary treating of the whole network.

4.37. Over the last few months, ICT, Highways and Volker Highways have increased the total number of sensors to 44 across all eight gritting runs ready for the 2023 winter season. With this wealth of data available to them, Highways will now have the option to optimise gritting deployments and conserve traditional salt and pre-wetted salt levels.

4.38. Four Elms Hill Air Quality IoT Sensor Network

4.39. Earlier this year, working alongside our Environmental Protection Team, we bid for circa £270k worth of DEFRA (UK Government's Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) funding to deliver an air quality IoT sensor network for Four Elms Hill, up to and including the Main Road roundabout in Chattenden. This was a key objective contained within the Four Elms Air Quality Action Plan.

4.40. We are pleased to share that the funding bid was successful; and pending approval of match funding from Front Line Services, the project team can get on and deliver the Council's first air quality sensor network.

4.41. Smarter Parking

4.42. Earlier this year, ICT and Parking Services delivered new ANPR (Automatic Number Plate Recognition) Management Software in Corporation Street and Blue Boar Lane car parks to replace pay and display machines in Rochester.

4.43. With the introduction of this new system, Parking Services now have access to real time parking information including occupancy levels, average length of stay, payment breakdown by type, online permit management, remote barrier control, reporting functionality and more.

4.44. In addition, two wall mounted touchscreen payment units were installed in Rochester Multi Storey Car Park to enable the transition to cashless parking in that location.

4.45. The Customer and Business Support (CABS)

4.46. The Customer and Business Support service falls under my colleague Cllr Van Dyke's Portfolio, so a full update on this service will be provided in the new year.

4.47. However, I did want to highlight some of the digital, data, and technology advances we have achieved within CABS over the last 7 months.

4.48. The Customer and Business Support (CABS) team has worked extensively with Business Intelligence colleagues to create and develop a series of performance dashboards in Power BI, a Microsoft data analytics platform, covering many aspects of CABS' work.

4.49. This has helped immeasurably in moving the onus away from the manual production of statistical reports, liberating resources to interpret and understand what the data is telling the team. Current dashboards cover call handling performance, from a number of perspectives, including increased insight into the time taken to answer and handle calls. Power BI reports, coupled with the further development of call handling account codes, which are used by officers to identify why customers are calling the Council, are facilitating a deeper understanding of call trends, as well customer behaviour, to help with appropriate resource planning and deployment.

4.50. Other Power BI dashboards cover Blue Badge performance, where the team has been consistently beating the expected processing time publicised by the government, as well as different aspects of corporate complaints management. Again, such reports help enhance understanding of performance and the factors that influence it.

4.51. In other technological advances, a "Quick-Response", or QR, code linked to the Council's compliments and complaints webpages is now included in certain council correspondence templates, posters, and literature. This signposts customers to a means of providing feedback by simply pointing a device at the printed QR code to access the appropriate webpages and forms.

4.52. This has achieved a significant channel shift. We saw online complaints reporting increase from 55% in Q1 to 70% in Q2 following the introduction of the QR codes. This reduced email traffic by 6%, telephone contact by 7% - and pretty much eliminated all postal contact.

5. Championing the Interests of Medway residents

5.1. Digital accessibility

5.2. In September 2018, legislation came into force which requires public sector organisations to make sure all new websites, mobile applications, digital documents, and systems they create, or purchase, be accessible for all citizens.

5.3. From September 2020, this requirement also included any older websites created prior to the legislation, which includes Medway.gov.uk.

5.4. This legislation was updated in October 2022 to set the minimum standard for compliance in line with the most recently adopted Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). In preparation for the adoption of WCAG 2.2, the Digital team conducted a thorough audit of the websites that the team directly supports and produced a backlog of issues to address, which the team have been steadfastly working through.

5.5. However, Medway Council has over 60 websites, many of which are managed by colleagues in other departments.

5.6. To widen awareness of accessibility, the changes to the WCAG guidelines and the requirement to meet the new standard, the Digital team have rolled out e-learning training to colleagues across the organisation. They are also busy updating and sharing an accessibility toolkit for colleagues to self-support and have established an accessibility "community of practice" for responsible officers to network, learn, and gain support from the experts in the Digital team.

6. Conclusion

6.1. The Digital services within my Portfolio are not only crucial for all services within Medway Council to operate, and they are playing a vital role in the future transformation of the Council.

The recent work across all of the teams within my Portfolio to provide a seamless continuation of services for residents following the recent discovery of RAAC at Gun Wharf is testament to the expertise and dedication within my teams.

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