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Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee

1 February 2024

Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Strategic Regeneration

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Simon Curry, Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Strategic Regeneration

Summary

This annual report provides an account of the role of the Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Strategic Regeneration. 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 Climate Change and Strategic Regeneration, as set out in the Council's constitution are:

- Climate Change
- Medway Norse (Strategic matters only)

3. Background

3.1. I am delighted to have taken on Portfolio Holder responsibility for Climate Change and Strategic Regeneration and would like to start by expressing my thanks to staff, partners and contractors from all sections of my wide portfolio for their continued dedication and commitment and in working collaboratively across the various services to deliver on so many subject areas.

3.2. In my role as the portfolio holder I, along with the portfolio holder for Housing and Property and the Leader of Council, recently had a very constructive meeting with colleagues from Medway Norse and its parent company NCS regarding alternative governance arrangements and the future strategic direction of the joint venture. We look forward to finalising these discussions and reporting back through Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny.

- 3.3. The three Key areas of my portfolio that I am devoting most of my time being:
- Front line services delivery
 - Local plan
 - Climate Action

3.4. This includes work towards delivering a new Medway Local Plan to meet the development needs of the population of Medway while protecting all that is wonderful and special in Medway such as the natural and historic environment.

- 3.5. The Climate Response Team continues to lead on a range of projects including:
- setting up a new Community Climate Working Group and a new Climate Change Working Party for Members
 - the Solar Together Kent scheme which has seen 42 Medway residents install solar panels since Spring 2023, with further installs due in the new year.
 - three energy efficiency information sessions for homeowners, in partnership with the University of Greenwich.
 - the installation of a green roof bus shelter on Intra to help absorb rainwater, filter air and provide pollinators.
 - regular promotion of climate change campaigns and projects across Medway through dedicated social media accounts and a monthly newsletter.
 - attending events to promote the climate change action plan, including the Medway Creative Schools event, Medway Adult Education Open Day, Medway Pride, Wild About Capstone, Medway Food Partnership annual event, Rochester Eco Hub Fair, Rochester Town Centre Forum and the annual Major Developer's Forum.

3.6. I oversee the greenspaces service, delivered by over 100 Medway Norse employees. This includes management of the 8 green flag sites, 2 flagship country parks, 1900 hectares of green spaces, over 18,000 trees including some veteran historic species like the iconic Catalpa tree outside Rochester Cathedral. Increasing Medway's biodiversity is at the heart of the greenspace contract and Medway Norse have increased natural habitats and formal bulb planting throughout Medway, enhancing the gateway routes into Medway.

4. Providing political leadership and challenge

4.1. It is imperative that the climate emergency is embedded in the vision for sustainable growth and development in Medway and my portfolio title reflects this. Each of my portfolio areas has an important role to play in tackling the climate agenda, and you will see examples of this throughout my report. I have regular meetings with senior officers to ensure the theme is cross cutting. The Climate Response Team have supported my vision for community level input and action on the net zero agenda and climate resilience by establishing two new groups:

- Members of the new Climate Change Working Party have met once and are enthused to be ambassadors for the climate agenda, with the aim of supporting and encouraging local climate action within their communities and networks. A Climate Action Ward Improvement Plan template has been developed to support each member and is being rolled out to the group.
 - The Community Climate Working Group, made up of representatives from key sectors (such as education, business, greenspaces), has also had its first successful meeting. The input of the group, and their wider networks, will be central to achieving our climate ambitions for Medway, “the place”.
- 4.2. Engaging with both groups will be central to achieving our climate ambitions for Medway, “the place” by supporting actions against 5 new themes:
- Knowledge and Empowerment
 - Energy
 - Sustainable Travel and Transport
 - Resource Efficiency
 - Green and Resilient Medway
- 4.3. I meet regularly with our local bus operators to discuss the future of public transport in Medway and how we can work collaboratively to support the Council’s Climate Change agenda. I have encouraged our operators to be proactive in bringing lower emissions vehicles into Medway and will continue to work with officers and key stakeholders to ensure that our Bus Service Improvement Plan provides Medway with a public transport network that is accessible, reliable and sustainable.
- 4.4. I take a strategic overview of the Council’s sustainable transport activities, bringing together Climate Change, Public Health, Transport, Air Quality and other steering groups to facilitate the development, delivery and monitoring of Active Travel schemes and initiatives, including the promotion of behavioural change and the delivery of effective infrastructure.
5. Support for key service areas
- 5.1. I have tasked the Climate Response Team with continuing to progress the two new climate groups, supporting the roll out of ward improvement plans, maintaining oversight of the Climate Change Action Plan and progress against it, and developing a programme to refresh the Climate Change Action Plan in 2024. I would like to take this opportunity to ask members to re-familiarise themselves with the [Climate Change Action Plan](#) and identify how they may support its delivery through their Portfolio. The Climate Response Team will continue to support council officers, members, and the wider community on the agenda.
- 5.2. I am keen to increase the tree canopy and tree stock in Medway. Trees are a valuable amenity and provide shade, oxygen and wildlife habitats. Medway Norse manage over 18,000 trees across Medway which includes regular

inspection and providing emergency response works. The Medway Norse Greenspace contact includes managing the 5 cemeteries and this year have created wildflower meadows to increase biodiversity. Medway Norse work closely with volunteer and friends groups throughout Medway to support the upkeep of greenspaces, this includes weekly volunteer led education sessions led by the park rangers.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1. I will continue to ensure that Frontline Services, Local Plan and Climate Response remain the key areas of priority in my portfolio which will help Medway to be an even greater place to live, work, learn and visit for years to come.
- 6.2. Our Local Plan will help Medway to grow sustainably by protecting the environment; addressing climate change; improving transport choices; growing local businesses and improving our community facilities. That plan will be integral in the processing of all planning applications and securing development in Medway that we can all be proud of.

Lead officer contact

Mark Breathwick, Assistant Director, Culture & Community, Gun Wharf, 01634 333540, mark.breathwick@medway.gov.uk