

Regeneration, Culture and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee

26 March 2024

Petitions Report

Report from: Adam Bryan, Director of Place

Author: Steve Dickens, Democratic Services Officer

Summary

This report advises the Committee of petitions received by the Council which fall within the remit of this Committee including a summary of the responses sent to the petition organisers by officers.

1. Recommendations

- 1.1. The Committee is requested to note the petition responses and appropriate officer actions in paragraph 4.1 of the report.
- 1.2. The Committee is requested to consider the petition referral requested at section 5 of the report and the Director of Place's response.

2. Budget and policy framework

- 2.1. In summary, the Council's Petition Scheme requires the relevant Director to respond to the petition organiser, usually within 10 working days of the receipt of the petition by the Council. Overview and Scrutiny Committees are always advised of any petitions falling within their terms of reference together with the officer response. There is a right of referral of a petition for consideration by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee by the petitioners if they consider the Director's response to be inadequate. Should the Committee determine that the petition has not been dealt with adequately it may use any of its powers to deal with the matter. These powers include instigating an investigation, making recommendations to Cabinet and arranging for the matter to be considered at a meeting of the Council.
- 2.2. The petition scheme is set out in full in the Council's Constitution at [Council rules](#).
- 2.3. Any budget or policy framework implications will be set out in the specific petition response.

3. Background

- 3.1. The Council's Constitution provides that petitions received by the Council relating to matters within the remit of an Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be referred immediately to the relevant Director for consideration at officer level.
- 3.2. Where the Director is able to fully meet the request of the petitioners a response is sent setting out the proposed action and timescales for implementation.
- 3.3. For petitions where the petition organiser is not satisfied with the response provided by the Director there is provision for the petition organiser to request that the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee review the steps the Council has taken, or is proposing to take, in response to the petition.

4. Completed Petitions

- 4.1. The response to a petition relevant to this Committee that has been accepted by the petition organiser, with no request for referral to this Committee, are set out below.

Subject of petition	Summary of Medway Council's response
We the undersigned petition the council to build flood lights for the skatepark at Cozenton park in Rainham, Kent. Especially around this time of year where it's getting darker way too early for skatepark riders trying to get better.	Having carefully considered the request, the Council has decided not to install lighting for the following reasons: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The park is currently available dawn until dusk and we do not wish to promote access outside of this period. There have been several reports of antisocial behaviour which have resulted, for example, in the removal of the youth shelter. We believe lighting will draw more users in and increase anti-social behaviour at a time when the park should not be used.• Cozenton Park is surrounded by residential properties, providing lighting would extend the usage noise into the hours of darkness at a time when residents have been used to a quiet period, free from noise from the park.

5. Petition referred to the Committee

- 5.1. The following petition has been referred to this Committee because the petition organiser indicated that they were dissatisfied with the response received from the Director of Place.

- 5.2. Free child swimming in Council pools.
- 5.3. A petition signed by 201 people was received by Democratic Services on 27 February 2024. The petition statement was as follows:
- 5.4. 'We, the undersigned, demand that Medway Council halts its plans to end free child swimming in Council pools.'
- 5.5. On 28 February the Director of Place responded as follows:

"Thank you for your petition and for raising the issue of free child swimming. Before talking specifically about swimming concessions for under-16s, I think it is important to give the context of the financial pressures being faced by Medway and numerous other councils across the country.

The new administration has consistently given its commitment to take all steps necessary to address the budget pressures facing Medway Council and to avoid the need for a S114 notice, resulting in Government intervention. As part of this work, the Council commissioned independent financial specialists, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), to carry out a review of the Council's financial position in a bid to identify opportunities to reduce costs, increase income and improve service delivery.

CIPFA's report concluded that 'Medway is in a grave situation in relation to its financial sustainability', however, it did not identify any governance or financial failures. The report stated that Medway Council's room for manoeuvre is severely limited and it would not be possible to set out a balanced budget next year without some form of government intervention/support.

In announcing the budget proposals for the forthcoming financial year, the Leader of Medway Council, Cllr Vince Maple, said: "We have had to take some incredibly difficult decisions now to ensure we can deliver the services that we know local people need and value, and have tried to minimise the impact where possible - particularly for our most vulnerable residents.

Medway is not alone in its financial position, with the Local Government Association reporting that one in five councils could be in severe financial hardship in two years. It is absolutely critical that we act now to bring the Council back into long-term financial health.

All of the proposed changes have the goal of helping the Council become financially sustainable in the long-term. It is hoped that by making these tough decisions now, Medway Council will become more financially stable and will continue to provide the high-quality services that matter most to our residents."

With regard to concessionary swimming for under-16s, the Council is not required nor funded by Government to provide sports centres and swimming pools. Therefore, there will always be a balancing act between offering opportunities for young people to enjoy swimming and the commercial realities necessary to help meet the costs of supplying such facilities. The Council continues to provide a substantial subsidy for sports centres as it recognises their importance to the community and to encouraging healthy, physical activity.

I appreciate your disappointment that the Council is being recommended to cease free swimming when the budget is set on Thursday, 29 February, but the Council overall has to make some really challenging decisions in relation to the services we provide.

While having to make this decision, the Council is also keen to continue encouraging family swimming; therefore, it will be introducing holiday family swim sessions across its sports centres. These will be designated sessions at which under-16s can swim for £1 when accompanied by a full fee-paying adult and will commence from the forthcoming Easter holidays.

I would also take the opportunity to reference the Medway Go initiative, which offers a range of holiday activities across Medway - any child who currently receives benefits-related free school meals can attend these for free, plus each child receives a free balanced meal as part of their session.

- 5.6. On 11 March the lead petitioner indicated they wished to refer the petition to the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee, this being within the 10 working day time limit to request a referral. The petitioner provided three reasons for requesting a referral as set out below:
 - 5.6.1. “Our petition mentioned that Medway has one of the highest levels of child poverty in Kent. The response doesn’t address how the council will support these specifically children to ensure that continue to get experience to swim. (The mentioned £1 offer, doesn’t say if this would be just for the poorest families).
 - 5.6.2. The petition asked for other options to be considered. The response does not mention what options were considered before the final decision made, such as keeping free swimming just for children on free school meals.
 - 5.6.3. The response also says there is no money due to financial constraints. However, a recent FOI we requested shows that the money set aside for the reopening of Splashes has gone down from £500k to £300k. This now spare £200k is now available to pay for all free swimming. We believe this needs to be discussed.”
- 5.7. In response the Assistant Director, Culture and Community further commented as follows:

Thank you for your further representations in relation to this petition. The £1 Holiday Family Swim sessions have been established to encourage all families to go swimming, recognising that school holidays can place a particular burden on families. Medway Council offers a targeted programme of assistance through the Medway Go holiday activity programme. This offers a wide range of activities for children from reception to Year 11 as well as a balanced meal as part of their session. Any child who currently received benefits-related free school meals can attend for free.

Medway Council has also invested extensively in providing opportunities to encourage children and young people to stay physically active, from the wide number of Green Flag parks, new play equipment, specialist facilities including the cycling Pump Track at Queen Elizabeth Fields and the Parkour facility at The Strand, free access to tennis courts, and ongoing development of multi-use games areas.

Schools provide swimming opportunities for their students during term time. As referenced above, the Medway Go programme offers opportunities for children on free school meals to enjoy free activities as well as a balanced meal during the holiday periods.

There was not money set aside for the opening of the new Cozenton Park Sports Centre. Based on the performance of the previous Splashes centre, it was anticipated at the time of Council approval of the new centre that this would have an additional negative impact on the Council's revenue budget. For medium-term financial planning an initial estimate of £500,000pa revenue impact was budgeted for. Based on performance of the other Medway Council sports centres since Covid, it has been able to revise this figure down to £300,000 for 2024-25. While not as much as initially forecast this still represents a worsening of the budget position for operating sports centres, which in the 2023-24 budget projected an annual revenue pressure in excess of £900,000.

6. Risk management

- 6.1. The Council has a clear scheme for handling petitions set out in its Constitution. This ensures consistency and clarity of process, minimising the risk of complaints about the administration of petitions.

7. Financial implications

- 7.1. Any financial implications arising from the issues raised by the petitions will be taken into account as part of the review of these matters. Actions referred to in the officer responses which are not within existing budgets, and any further activity, would require Cabinet and Council approval for budgetary additions if funding was available.

8. Legal implications

- 8.1. Overview and Scrutiny Rule 21.1 (xiv) in the Council's Constitution provides that the terms of reference of this Committee include the power to deal with

petitions referred to the Committee under and in accordance with the Council's petition scheme.

Lead officer contact

Steve Dickens Democratic Services Officer,
Telephone: 01634 332051 E-mail: steve.dickens@medway.gov.uk

Appendices

None

Background papers

None