

**Medway Council**  
**Meeting of Business Support and Digital Overview and**  
**Scrutiny Committee**

**Thursday, 1 February 2024**

**6.00pm to 8.30pm**

**Record of the meeting**

**Subject to approval as an accurate record at the next meeting of this committee**

**Present:** Councillors: Tejan (Chairperson), Myton (Vice-Chairperson), Animashaun, Bowen, Browne, Crozer, Hackwell, Hubbard, Joy, McDonald, Louwella Prenter and Williams

**Substitutes:** Councillors:  
Anang (Substitute for Lawrence)  
Mark Prenter (Substitute for Jones)

**In Attendance:** Samantha Beck-Farley, Chief Organisational Culture Officer  
Steve Dickens, Democratic Services Officer  
Michael Kelly, Head of Category Management  
David Reynolds, Head of Revenue Accounts  
Phil Watts, Chief Operating Officer

**583 Apologies for absence**

Apologies were received from Councillors Lawrence and Jones.

**584 Record of meeting**

The record of the meeting held on 30 November 2023 was agreed and signed by the Chairperson as correct.

**585 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances**

There were none.

**586 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests or Other Significant Interests and Whipping**

Disclosable pecuniary interests (DPI)

There were none.

Other Significant Interests (OSI)

There were none.

Other Interests

There were none.

**587 Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Strategic Regeneration**

The following issues were discussed:

**Frindsbury Hill road closure** – concern was expressed that the road closure on Frindsbury Hill would cause traffic congestion and increased pollution in the area. The Portfolio Holder agreed it was an issue of concern, there was, however, little the Council could do. The closure was required to facilitate a Department of Education school building initiative and the contractor had made it clear the road would need to be closed. The Highways team had worked with the contractor and the road closure had been reduced from 19 weeks to 15 weeks. The Council had ensured there would be no non-emergency roadworks in the vicinity and had contacted emergency services and Arriva to mitigate any disruption.

Members were disappointed that local Councillors had not been given the opportunity to provide their views and the public had not been made aware of the closure earlier. The disruption would be exacerbated by the proposed cycleway on A289. The Portfolio Holder encouraged members to take part in the consultation on cycling routes which had recently been launched. He acknowledged that communication had been an issue.

**Medway Norse site** – in response to a comment that the Medway Norse site at Gillingham Pier was inadequate, the Portfolio Holder agreed a new depot would be required. He informed the Committee that the Council was developing a waste strategy which would include consideration of a new site with good transport links for staff and the gradual replacement of the fleet which currently cost £30,000 a month to maintain. The Council was considering ways to decarbonise the fleet, but the cost of electric vehicles was prohibitively expensive.

**Norse contracts** – in response to a question whether Norse contracts were effective, the Portfolio acknowledged the joint delivery of services was complex, however, monitoring was an important part of the process, and the Council did not currently have sufficient capacity to ensure effective monitoring took place. The Portfolio Holder told the Committee that the contracts between the Council and Medway Norse were being reviewed, in addition meetings regarding the Council Local Authority Trading Companies governance arrangements were taking place.

**Green Bus Shelter** – in response to a question how many buses shelters Medway had and what was the cost and impact of the green roof on one bus shelter, the Portfolio Holder reported the initiative had been a one-off grant, but

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he was keen to promote this in future in partnership with local firms. Green bus shelters cleaned the air, contributed to biodiversity, and looked attractive.

**Solar Kent** – it was welcome that 42 residents had taken up the Solar Kent initiative in the year, the Portfolio Holder informed the Committee this was lower than in the previous year due to the cost-of-living crisis. There were however, another 70 homes where applications had been received.

It was questioned what contribution the 42 homes taking up the Solar Kent had made in reducing levels of co2 and whether it was a net benefit when the manufacture of the solar panels had been taken into consideration. The Portfolio Holder undertook to provide this information to the Committee outside of the meeting.

The Portfolio Holder added there was an opportunity to ensure the properties Council had recently decided to purchase in relation to temporary accommodation were energy efficient.

**Litter** – in response to questions about litter, the Portfolio Holder informed the Committee that a new cross party working group was in development and this would assist in the development of a ward improvement plan to reduce littering. He acknowledged that littering on the A289 was an issue.

He added the Council had two groups, the Members Working Group and Members Group which may be able to assist in communication between the Council and residents, so that Greenspaces were improved, littering is reduced, and recycling was encouraged.

**Buses** – the Committee noted its disappointment that some of the bus stock was out of date and buses were used in Medway which had been outlawed in London due to emission levels. The Portfolio Holder agreed and outlined his ambition for Medway to have widespread electric bus services with increased provision in the Peninsula via a bus station in Strood. He added that the Council continued to subsidise some services and was working with the companies to review services, including routes. The Council had an ambition to improve services in Medway whilst reducing emissions.

The Portfolio Holder noted that some companies had organised their own bus service for staff which eased congestion and reduced emissions, and this was something he was keen to explore with other local companies.

**Charging Points** - in response to a question how the Council can promote more charging points for electric vehicles, the Portfolio Holder acknowledged it was a challenge, particularly in conservation areas. His view was that the Council needed to consider these issues within the new local plan which was in development. Further charging points in public car parks and workplaces such as Gun Wharf would assist, but in some areas such as where there is Victorian terraced housing this remained a significant challenge.

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**Trees** – Responding to a question about improving air quality, the Portfolio Holder noted that the Council was developing a tree policy which would increase the cover of trees in urban areas and reduce particles, particularly near school where idling engines was an issue.

**Recycling** – Members noted the positive work in recycling small electrical items at community hubs.

**Local Plan** – in response to a member question whether the closure of Chatham docks would lead to an increase in emissions due to cargo being transported by road rather than the river, the Portfolio Holder stated this would be considered in the local plan and a river strategy was in development. The Portfolio Holder added the Council was using drainage and dredging to create a salt marsh in the region.

### **Decision**

The Committee noted the report.

## **588 Procurement Strategy 2021-2025: Update Report 2023**

The Head of Category Management introduced the report which outlined the performance in the past year and objectives for the next financial year.

The following issues were discussed:

**Training** – It was requested that members and managers be provided with a training session on procurement. The Head of Category Management explained that discussions had taken place with the Member Development Advisory Group and a future training session was planned.

**Small and Medium Business** – in response to a question to what extent has the strategy assisted in promoting local small and medium sized businesses the Head of Category Management explained the Council engaged with small and medium businesses at an early stage to provide assurance regarding the procurement process. He added that specific data was available regarding local small and medium size businesses and undertook to provide that to Members outside of the meeting.

### **Decision**

- 1.1. The Committee noted the achievements of the third year of the 2021-2025 Procurement Strategy as outlined in Appendix 1 with updated comments.
- 1.2. The Committee considered the delivery of actions denoted within the '2023 Comments and Action' column, against the various objectives in Appendix 1, with a concerted, wider drive to improvements within the Contract and Relationship Management, as well as embedding change themes.

**589 Draft Capital and Revenue Budgets 2024/25**

The Head of Revenue Accounts introduced the report, he highlighted since the report had previously been considered by the Committee in November and the other Overview and Scrutiny Committee's in December. Following this, the government announced the provisional finance settlement on 19 December 2023 and additional funding in January 2024 including £500m through the local care grant. The additional income from this grant to Medway would be confirmed on 7 February, however the budget includes a provision for £2m.

Work was ongoing to reduce the gap and final budget proposals would be considered by Cabinet in February. Comments by the other Overview and Scrutiny Committees were at appendix one to the report, though no specific recommendations had been made.

The following issues were discussed:

**Children Services budget gap** - concern was expressed at the £22m budget gap in Children Services and the £36m gap for the Council as a whole. The Chief Operating Officer explained that significant work had taken place and final budget proposals would be published on Monday 5th February in advance of the forthcoming Cabinet meeting.

**Social Care** – in response to a question why the Council was considering providing direct care when this had been previously considered and rejected, the Chief Operating Officer advised using the private sector had been a lower cost than employing staff in the past, however, this was no longer the case. One option to reduce cost was to consider in house provision of care, another option was to promote independent living.

**Children Services agency staff** – it was asked whether the work to reduce reliance on agency staff had resulted in any savings to the council. The Chief Operating Officer stated the proposed pay offer was to correct pay which had not kept pace with inflation and pay in the local government sector. This would improve staff retention and reduce reliance on agency staff.

The Chief Organisational Cultural Officer added agency staff in children services were not only locums but also project teams which attracted a higher cost than locums. Children Services was focused on developing its permanent workforce and reducing reliance on those project teams.

**Regeneration, Culture and Environment Department** – it was asked whether the £500,000 budgeted for opening of splashes and £340,000 investment in street wardens was affordable, the Head of Revenue Accounts noted that further work had been undertaken on the budget and final budget proposals would be published on Monday.

**Fees increases** – in response to a question whether there would be an increase in parking and leisure fees, the Head of Revenue Accounts noted that

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parking fees were low compared to the rest of Kent and difficult decisions would need to be made to meet the budget gap.

**Single Person Discount** - in response to a question whether additional staff were required to complete the proactive work related to the single person discount, the Chief Operating Officer explained the Business Support Department had been reduced in recent years and was a lean department, consequently, to complete the additional workload more staff would be required.

**Low Income Family Tracker** – it was asked how many residents the been supported through the low-income family tracker, the Chief Operating Officer undertook to provide the information to the Committee outside of the meeting.

### **Decision**

The Committee commented on the proposals outlined in the Draft Capital and Revenue Budgets in so far as they relate to the services within the remit of this committee, and considered the comments from the individual Overview and Scrutiny Committees, as set out in Appendix 1, and determined which of these are forwarded to Cabinet, contributing to the overall comments that the Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee fed back to Cabinet.

### **590 Risk Strategy Annual Review**

The Chief Organisational Culture Officer introduced the report and outlined the proposed amendments to the Risk Strategy for 2024-25, changes were limited following significant revisions the previous year.

The Audit Committee had previously considered the report and as a result further information had been included regarding the membership of the Security and Information Governance Group. There had been consideration of disaggregating the risk of an event and its discovery, however officers believed this would be reflected under mitigation of risk.

### **Decision**

The Committee considered the 2024/25 Risk Strategy as set out in Appendix 1 to the report and submitted comments to Cabinet.

### **591 Update on Response to the Employee Survey 2022**

The Chief Organisational Culture Officer introduced the report which provided an update on the work undertaken by the Council following the employee survey in 2022. Engagement with staff had continued, following the partial closure of Gun Wharf last year a poll survey was undertaken in December 2023 on the topic of working from home and the future of Gun Wharf. Further communication had taken the form of videos, regular staff newsletters and a

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number of staff events such as cost of living support and council values both in Gun Wharf and at other sites.

The Medpay pilot had been completed and phase two was scheduled to begin. the pay offer included consideration of increased annual leave at lower grades.

The following issues were discussed:

**Communication with Staff** – in response to a request for further information regarding staff engagement, the Chief Organisational Culture Officer explained the council had run face to face and virtual drop in sessions on a number of topics. Virtual drop in sessions was the preferred method of communication for staff. In addition senior staff were more visible and the chief executive ran regular roadshows to which all staff had been invited.

**MedPay** – it was asked whether staff views had been sought on the Medpay review and if scheme had made a difference in staff retention. The Chief Organisational Culture Officer stated the scheme had been piloted to do that. It had been amended and further developed in response to staff feedback.

**Poll Survey** – Members requested further information regarding the poll survey, which the Chief Organisational Culture Officer agreed to provide following Employment Matters Committee.

**Bullying and Harassment** – in response to a question how bullying and harassment was dealt with, the Chief Organisational Culture Officer explained that senior managers review trends and receive feedback from those involved in cases to ensure the Council is fulfilling its obligations.

**Mental Health First Aiders** - it was suggested that consideration be given to providing mental health first aiders an additional payment similar to those received by fire wardens and first aiders. The Chief Organisational Culture Officer agreed to consider this for the future.

### **Decision**

The Committee noted the report.

### **592 Work Programme**

The Democratic Services Officer introduced the report, he explained that the Sponsorship and Advertising Policy would be considered by the Committee in April.

It was proposed that the Annual Petitions report and Medway Norse Strategic Update be considered in the next municipal year. In addition, the Local Plan would be considered by the Committee on a date to be determined.

### **Decision**

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- 1.1 The Committee agreed the work programme at Appendix 1 to the report.
- 1.2 The Committee noted the work programmes of the other Overview and Scrutiny Committees at Appendix 2.

### **Chairperson**

**Date:**

**Steve Dickens, Democratic Services Officer**

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