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## **Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**4 April 2024**

### **Attendance of the Leader of the Council**

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Vince Maple, Leader of the Council

#### Summary

This annual report provides an account of the role of the Leader of the Council. 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 Leader of the Council, as set out in the Council's constitution are:

- Strategic overview of Medway including Council Plan, risk management and performance monitoring,
- Armed Forces Covenant (in conjunction with Armed Forces Champion)
- Communications and marketing,
- Democracy and Governance, and
- Finance.

#### 3. Background

3.1. When I presented the first budget of the Labour administration to Full Council in February, I explained that serving as the Leader of Medway Council is the greatest honour of my life and thanked the staff, our partners and our residents for enabling and supporting me to do so. Though the first year of this administration has brought extraordinary challenges, I am enormously proud of what we have achieved across the organisation so far. I want to reiterate here my thanks to all the staff of Medway Council and our partner organisations who work tirelessly to deliver services for all of Medway's residents, businesses and visitors.

#### 4. Providing political leadership and challenge

- 4.1. I am lucky to be a part of a team of skilled and dedicated Cabinet Members, many of whom bring a wealth of experience from their time in opposition while others bring insight from careers outside of the Council. We are supported by the Council's exceptional cohort of staff and by our excellent partners and in my role as Leader I have the privilege of overseeing how we work together to deliver all of Medway's services. Even so, I am actively involved in all of my portfolio areas and strive to champion these services as they underpin and enable so much of what the Council as a whole delivers.
- 4.2. I meet regularly with the Chief Executive, Chief Operating Officer and Assistant Director, Legal and Governance to discuss not only the services in my portfolio but also the activities of the wider Council. These are genuinely two-way conversations and are the key mechanism through which I work with officers to direct the operations of the organisation alongside the formal Cabinet decision making framework, while allowing officers to keep me up to date on service developments, challenges and successes. As well as the formal quarterly budget, performance and risk reporting published through Cabinet meetings, we track a much broader set of measures of activity and performance on a more regular basis so we can ensure we respond quickly to any risks or opportunities that arise.
- 4.3. More broadly I've worked hard to ensure my Cabinet and I are accessible to Medway's staff, residents and our partners. The introduction of our 'One Minute Medway' is just one example; these weekly videos allow our Portfolio Holders to highlight topical matters and communicate directly with anyone who is interested in hearing from us. So far these videos have collectively been watched more than 280,000 times.
- 4.4. I recognise we can't deliver for Medway alone, and so I take every opportunity to work with our partners where this benefits our residents and represent the Council on a number of strategic boards, including:
- Court of the University of Kent at Canterbury
  - Greater North Kent Leaders Meetings
  - Informal Working Party on Polling Districts and Polling Places
  - Kent and Medway Civilian Military Partnership Board
  - Kent and Medway Fire and Rescue Authority
  - Kent and Medway Integrated Care Partnership Joint Committee
  - Kent Leaders Meetings
  - Key Cities Group
  - Key Cities Group - Executive Committee
  - Local Government Association - General Assembly
  - Medway for Business - Economic Partnership
  - South East 7 - Sub National Transport Partnership Board
  - South East 7 Leaders Meeting
  - South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP) Accountability Board (Substitute)
  - Thames Estuary Growth Board

- Thames Gateway Strategic Group
- Town Centres Board

4.5. Balancing the budget for 2024/25 has been one of the most significant challenges that my administration and our staff have risen to in the last year. This year saw the Council adopt an entirely new, collaborative approach to setting the budget and along with the support of the government through the Exceptional Financial Support scheme, set out our intention to engage and consult on the budget proposals in future years. The budget for 2024/25 crucially enables us to invest in improvement and transformation of our services that will help us balance the budget without government support within the medium term.

## 5. Championing the Interests of service users and Medway residents

5.1. When I became Leader of the Council last May I asked for proposals to be taken to Full Council to change the arrangements for public questions at our Full Council meetings, primarily the return of supplementary questions, the provision for which was removed by the previous administration back in 2015. These changes were agreed at Full Council in October 2023 and put back into practice for the first time at the Full Council meeting in January 2024. Allowing members of the public to ask supplementary questions leads to more meaningful engagement with Cabinet Members and I am pleased to have led the successful reintroduction of this.

5.2. Beyond Medway's boundaries, I continue to use my connections including with partners such as the Local Government Association to lobby the government for a fairer funding deal for Medway Council.

## 6. Support for key service areas

### 6.1. **Strategic overview of Medway including Council Plan, risk management and performance monitoring**

6.1.1. Risk

6.1.2. Risk management is an integral part of good governance. It is a process which aims to help the Council understand, evaluate and take action on all its risks. It supports effective decision making, identification of priorities and objectives and increases the probability of success by making the most of opportunities and reducing the likelihood of failure. This enables the effective use of resources, helps secure the assets of the organisation and continued financial and organisational well-being. The Council recognises that it has a responsibility to identify and manage the barriers to achieve its strategic objectives and enhance the value of services it provides to the community.

6.1.3. The Council's Risk Strategy:

- promotes a common understanding of risk;
- outlines roles and responsibilities across the Council; and

- proposes a methodology that identifies and manages risk in accordance with best practice.
- 6.1.4. The Strategy sets out an objective method for analysing risks taking into consideration the likelihood of the risk occurring and the impact should the risk manifest. The Strategy also states the Council's agreed tolerance level for risks. The Strategy is reviewed annually to ensure that it remains up to date and continues to reflect the Council's approach to risk management. The Strategy is reviewed by Corporate Management Team, Audit Committee, Business Support & Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet. The last review was considered by the Audit Committee on 10 January 2024 and Cabinet on 13 February 2024.
- 6.1.5. Council Plan and Performance
- 6.1.6. The current Council Plan 2023/24 had a light touch refresh and was agreed at Full Council in February 2023. It sets out the Council's three priorities and three ways of working which aim to deliver these priorities. It includes the measures that have been identified as supporting the delivery of the Council's priorities. Monitoring of the Council Plan Performance continues to take place on a quarterly basis, through Cabinet and Scrutiny, evidencing the Council's commitment to be accountable. Monitoring focusses on the key measures of success and the key programmes which have been identified as supporting the delivery of the Council's priorities.
- 6.1.7. This year has been focused on the development of a new One Medway Council plan 2024-2028, working with service managers, corporate management team and Lead Members to identify 5 key priorities and underpinned by sub-priorities with KPIs alongside the development of the new Our Council Values and Behaviours. We have adopted the logical framework model to help identify the big strategic goals, and for the first time have completed public consultation. The plan is currently being presented at committee tonight with Full Council in May 2024 for the final decision and immediate launch.

## **6.2. Armed Forces Covenant (in conjunction with Armed Forces Champion)**

- 6.2.1. Both Councillor Paterson and I have visited some of the Armed Forces Veterans Breakfast Club sessions which happen in Medway. At both Hoo and Fort Amherst there is a regular session which has a range of advice and guidance available as well as a good amount of social interaction. We are likely to be highlighting the work of these clubs in the upcoming edition of Medway Matters which goes to around 120,000 households across Medway.
- 6.2.2. This year is the 40th anniversary of the closure of Chatham Dockyard and the Dockyard 40 programme will be wide ranging and including many references to the Royal Navy. The balance of recognition of the impact of 40 years ago but also the positive journey that has happened subsequently is

being met. This will also include the much loved Armed Forces Day event taking place at the Historic Dockyard (which was the home of the first National Armed Forces Day in 2009)

- 6.2.3. As a council we continue our ongoing support for Gold Employer status. There have been a number of individual pieces of casework particularly around housing have been taken forward.

### **6.3. Communications and marketing**

- 6.3.1. A new strategic approach to communications – One of the priorities for the new administration has been to improve visibility and transparency for the council with local people around issues being debated and decisions taken. This is being achieved in several different ways the new One Minute Medway weekly video updates from members of Cabinet which are published across the Council's corporate social media accounts: and until mid-February have had more than 280,000 impressions across social media with more than 2,300 click throughs to the information provided. Our new Medway Matters Live events aim to give residents the opportunity to hear direct from council leaders on our corporate priorities and key issues and to put questions to us directly. Our first event held at the Howard School, Rainham in November was a great success attended by more than 100 people and two further events are now scheduled in 2024 on the Hoo peninsula and in Chatham.
- 6.3.2. Greater transparency – I have been keen to ensure that we keep local people updated on key issues since taking office and the more transparent approach we have taken, in particular in relation to our financial position, has led to a better understanding locally on the challenges we face. The council has been praised within local government for championing the critical situation facing all local authorities and we have secured strong local and national media and social media coverage of our situation. Likewise we have focussed on securing strong coverage for major projects such as outcome of our Children's Services Ofsted report and the consultation on the Local Plan Regulation 18. Media enquiries to our small Press Office have continued to grow rising to 802 from April 2023 to February 2024 compared with 785 and 632 for the previous two years. The Press Office facilitated 20 media interviews in 2024 (Jan and Feb) and 66 interviews between April and December 2023. The Press Office issued 222 press releases from April 2023 to February 2024 on a variety of topics to support a wide range of services.
- 6.3.3. Marketing campaigns – The Council's Marketing and Graphic Design teams work with services to create engaging campaigns and at any one time, we can have up to 20 campaigns underway. Campaigns focus primarily on supporting income generation, behaviour change (particularly health related) and information campaigns related to statutory services or events and festivals. Key campaigns run last year included: Cost of Living support, It's Time Sport Centre campaigns, Adult Education courses, summer and Christmas tourism campaigns, Central Theatre, recycling waste electricals, key consultations, Stop to Swap, Healthy Way,

Oral Health, Measure Your Pressure, My Council Tax Online, National Apprentice Week, Drink and Drive awareness, Active Travel, Moving Traffic Offences, School Streets, the upcoming Business Skills Showcase and the Shared Prosperity Fund Round 2.

- 6.3.4. Communications channels – The Communications and Marketing Team continues to develop the range of channels used to reach and engage with local people. Due significant cost increases in print and distribution, the number of published editions of Medway Matters is being reduced from four to three editions each year but further information will be published through digital channels through the year. The Council’s digital channels have continued to grow.
- 6.3.5. Internal communications – Effective internal communications are an important part of ensuring a well-motivated corporate team and this has become even more important with the move to hybrid working in the past few years, and more recently the closing down of large parts of Gun Wharf with the discovery of RAAC in the roof spaces. As I took up the role of Council leader and Richard Hicks taking up the reins as the council’s Chief Executive, we have been keen to ensure our council team hears from us both on a regular basis and is kept informed on our priorities and the key issues we have faced since taking office last May and we are also working to ensure that staff are all fully involved and engaged in major corporate projects. Activities include regular joint email messages and videos, weekly staff newsletters, regular visits from the Chief Executive to team meetings and videos to all, quarterly round ups and a regular appearance in the weekly staff newsletter, a new online staff roadshow and in person quarterly Service Manager meetings. We will be rolling out the Council’s new values and behaviours from April and new all staff conferences, Our Medway Live will take place in May and June. We will also be running a major awareness campaign for our new One Medway Council Plan as well as our new Financial Improvement and Transformation Plan.
- 6.3.6. Partnership working - I was honoured last July to sign, alongside seven other Medway organisations, the One Medway Charter that will help drive social and economic change in the area.
- 6.3.7. The One Medway Charter commits all eight organisations to work together to exploit opportunities and address challenges in priority areas including business and the economy, education and skills, health and wellbeing, sustainability and the environment, and arts and culture. It is the first time all these organisations have come together with a shared vision and objective and we will be extending this group to include other Medway organisations. We will ensure these are reflected in the Council’s new One Medway Council Plan.

## **6.4. Democracy and Governance**

### 6.5. Democratic Services

- 6.5.1. One of the first things I did as Leader of the Council was to honour the Labour and Co-operative Group's commitment to offer the chairpersonship of one of our overview and scrutiny committees to the opposition. I am incredibly pleased that the Conservative Group accepted this offer and Councillor Tejan was elected as Chairperson of the Business Support and Digital Committee at Annual Council last May. It is important for overview and scrutiny to carry out their functions effectively and by enabling the opposition to chair one of those committees, it shows a commitment on my part to support this.
- 6.5.2. Renaming the Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee as the Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee reflects the importance I place on improving the Council's digital channels and implementing Medway 2.0, which is a concept to free ourselves from the constraints of our existing Council structures, silos, and ICT systems. I will be ensuring that we join up our data to better understand our residents and allow us to wrap our services around them, and that all of our services are designed from the resident's point of view, using technology to simplify processes. A Transformation Roadmap will be presented to the Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee later in the year, which will underpin much of the work within the new One Medway Financial Improvement and Transformation Plan. I will ensure that this committee receives regular updates on the Transformation Roadmap and provide the necessary scrutiny for such an important piece of work.
- 6.5.3. Task Group activity is an important part of overview and scrutiny and the Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee have agreed a schedule of activity for the next four years, and the first review has recently started – a combined review of Air Quality and Public Transport & Active Travel.
- 6.5.4. It has been a longstanding commitment of the Labour and Co-operative Group to bring back the Mayoral points system and I am proud that Full Council agreed to this back in October. The Mayoral points system enables all political groups to have an opportunity over time to nominate a Mayor and Deputy Mayor and ensures that the Mayoralty is representative of all of Medway.
- 6.5.5. With reference to our Full Council meetings, I met with other Group Leaders, Deputy Leaders and Group Whips at the end of last year to look at how we could better structure our Full Council meetings, including debating motions earlier in the meeting. We trialled these changes at our Full Council meeting in January and I felt that the meeting flowed much better both for local residents watching the meeting and for Members taking part. I am proposing that we make these changes permanent subject to further discussion with leading Members.

6.5.6. I consider it is important that meetings take place at a time of day which are convenient for local residents – whether they are coming along to meetings in person or watching online. Whilst most of our meetings are held in the evening, up until last May Cabinet meetings were held in the afternoon, a time at where may of our local residents would have been at work or, for example, doing the school run. As part of our commitment to opening up democracy, Cabinet meetings now take place at 7pm, which is a much better timeslot for local residents.

## 6.6. Electoral and Member Services

6.6.1. As a member of the Informal Working Party on Polling Districts and Polling Places I considered the implications of the new Parliamentary Constituency boundaries that come into place for the next General Election as well feedback from Councillors from the Local elections last year. The Working Party recommended several changes to the polling district scheme to Full Council, and recommended several changes to polling stations to the Returning Officer. The revised scheme was approved by Full Council in January 2024 and I am confident that we have struck a good balance between making use of the diminishing number of suitable polling station buildings and improving the accessibility to voters. We will undertake another review after the PCC elections in May 2024.

6.6.2. As part of my regular meetings with the Assistant Director, I have been maintaining an overview of the implementation of the second tranche of the wide-ranging changes in legislation arising from the Elections Act 2022 and their impact on the planning and delivery of the PCC elections on 2 May 2024. All Councillors have been briefed on these which include the introduction of a Government-hosted online portal for the submission of postal vote applications and identity checks of applicants, limits to the number of completed postal vote packs that can be handed in and a requirement to complete a form, as well as the change to the franchise of EU citizens and qualification to stand as candidates and the extension of the franchise to all overseas electors.

6.6.3. I have also been appraised of the arrangements being put in place for the planning and conduct of the PCC elections on 2 May as well as the contingency plans in case the General Election is called for the same date or soon thereafter.

6.6.4. Of course the period after the Local elections last year saw the delivery of the extensive induction programme for Members which the team planned. Feedback from experienced and new Councillors has been extremely positive and the Member Development Advisory Group are currently considering, along with their political groups, what briefings and training should be delivered in phase 2.



6.6.5. The annual canvass was undertaken between July and November 2023 and the revised register published on 1 December as required with an increase in the local government electorate to 205,476 and a response rate on a par with the response received prior to the introduction of the changes to how the canvass is undertaken. The Member Services team have successfully arranged and delivered an event in September for the formal presentation of the Freedom scrolls to the Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust and the Royal Naval Association and are arranging a similar event for the formal presentation of the Freedom scroll to Medway Maritime Hospital Foundation Trust in April.

## **6.7. Finance**

- 6.7.1. The Council's financial position has been well documented since the beginning of our term, and the budget has never had a higher profile. In summary though, the 2022/23 final outturn required the Council to use almost £11million of its general reserves, leaving them at just above £10million at the start of the current financial year. The first round of the revenue budget monitoring for this year projected an overspend in excess of £17million. In February 2024 the Cabinet and Council agreed to declassify almost £6million set aside in earmarked reserves to increase the general fund balance, while work to control spend and increase income saw the projected overspend reduce to just over £11million meaning the outturn position can be funded from the available reserves.
- 6.7.2. Over the summer we began the work to develop the budget for 2024/25 with the Financial Outlook published in September 2023 projecting a budget gap of almost £39million; this pressure was caused by a number of factors including inflation and increased demand on services such as social care and temporary accommodation, alongside a disappointing finance settlement from the Government. My administration has consistently committed to taking all steps necessary to address the budget pressures and to avoid the need for a Section 114 notice, including commissioning independent financial specialists, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), to carry out a review of the our financial position. Their report set stated that 'Medway is in a grave situation in relation to its financial sustainability', however, it did not identify any governance or financial failures and recommended we seek government intervention/support. In February 2024 the government agreed in principal to allow us to borrow up to £14.742million to spread revenue costs over more than one year through the Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) Scheme. This flexibility will enable us to ease mounting budget pressures, put investment in place to return to greater financial stability and avoid the need for a S114 notice. Work is underway to finalise our plans to use this opportunity to map our journey to greater long term financial sustainability for the Council, and detailed plans will be brought before the Cabinet in the Spring of 2024.
- 6.7.3. The local government sector as a whole is working to deal with significant delays in the Statement of Accounts and audit process, and Audit Committee

has been briefed on the government's plans to address the backlogs of audit work across the country. Despite the audit of the core statements starting in March 2022, we did not receive our 2020/21 audit certificate in October 2023. The Audit concluded with an unmodified (positive) opinion with the auditor concluding that the Statements represented a true and fair view of Medway Council's financial position. This delay meant we did not publish our Draft 2021/22 accounts until February 2024 and officers are now working to publish the Draft 2022/23 accounts imminently. As the Audit Committee noted at their meeting in November 2023, the Council's Chief Operating Officer and Medway's Lead Audit Partner at Grant Thornton have agreed that it will not be possible to deliver the audit of these two sets of accounts by the backlog clearance deadlines currently being proposed by the government within the existing resources and fee structures. Instead the teams are working to ensure the Council and its auditors can return to the normal statutory timetable for the 2023/24 accounts. Though the core statements audit work has been delayed, the Auditor has continued to deliver the Value for Money elements of their work, reporting to the Audit Committee most recently in November 2023. While the report noted the significant improvement in the Ofsted rating of our Children's Services to Good, it also reflected the significant risk to the Council's financial sustainability identified in our budget monitoring and Financial Outlook from 2023 which our 2024/25 budget and EFS agreement are the first steps towards us addressing for the medium term.

6.7.4. In July 2023 we published our Cost of Living plan, which brings together all of the support that is available for residents from Medway Council, and partners, into one place to make it easier to access. Together with our partners, we continue to provide a range of support for residents through this plan, and so far we have:

- distributed over £11million from the Household Support Fund to those most in need;
- provided free MedwayGo holiday activity club sessions to more than 5,000 eligible children, funded by the government's Holiday Activities and Food programme (HAF);
- worked with the Medway Food Partnership to ensure residents are able to access sustainable and healthy food;
- spent £2.5million providing more than 800,000 free school meal vouchers for eligible children during the school holidays in 2023/24, and
- reduced the council tax bills of more than 16,200 residents through the council tax reduction scheme.

In January we wrote to the government asking them to continue the Household Support Fund into 2024/25, and I'm delighted that they have listened and this vital support has been confirmed for the first six months of the new financial year. We will be refreshing our Cost of Living plan early in the new municipal year. Through the Cost of Living Plan we have also invested in technology to help identify and encourage residents who may be eligible for support at both a national and local level to apply. We introduced the Low Income Family Tracker (LIFT) to help ensure Medway's residents access all government and additional support to which they are eligible. So far we have already used the LIFT to proactively target residents for the

household support fund and identify where Medway residents could be entitled to benefits they have not yet claimed. The Cost of Living Plan also introduced our use of the ReferKent system, and through this we are now able to signpost residents to additional support from a range of organisations including Breakeven (gambling support), Vulnerability Registration Service and Stop Loan Sharks.

## 7. Conclusion

- 7.1. I'm immensely proud of what has been delivered through the services in my Portfolio in the last year, and of the tough decisions taken by my administration to secure the investment in transformation and improvement we need to secure the financial sustainability of the Council for the next financial year and beyond.

### Lead officer contact

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### Appendices

None

### Background papers

None