

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

Thursday, 4 April 2024

6.00pm to 9.00pm

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), Bowen, Browne, Cook, Hackwell, Jones, Joy, Lawrence, McDonald and Louwella Prenter
- Substitutes:** Councillors:
Etheridge (Substitute for Williams)
Mark Prenter (Substitute for Animashaun)
- In Attendance:** Richard Hicks, Chief Executive
Samantha Beck-Farley, Chief Organisational Culture Officer
Paul Boyd, Head of Business Change
Steve Dickens, Democratic Services Officer
Ruth Du-Lieu, Deputy Director of Place
Scott Elliott, Head of Health and Wellbeing Services
Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive
Celia Glynn-Williams, Head of Communications and Marketing
Councillor Vince Maple, Leader of the Council
Councillor Zoë Van Dyke, Portfolio Holder for Business Management
Phil Watts, Chief Operating Officer

724 Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Councillors Animashaun, Pearce and Williams.

725 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting held on 1 February 2024 was agreed and signed by the Chairperson as correct.

A Member commented that requests for further information in relation to Solar Farm and the Low-Income Family Tracker (LIFT) had not been received. The Democratic Services Officer undertook to discuss further with officers and provide the information to the Committee when available.

726 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

727 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.

728 Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Business Management

The following issues were discussed:

Recruitment and retention – in response to a request for further information regarding the impact of the recent pay decision on recruitment and retention the Portfolio Holder stated that there had been recent positive recruitment in the legal department, with the numbers of locums falling from 70% of legal services to around half a dozen.

A Member commented that improved recruitment and retention was welcome, and noted the positive work undertaken by the Medpay project. A Member expressed concern that only 5% of temporary staff had so far been converted to permanent staff which included changes to legal services approved by Full Council.

The Chief Organisational Cultural Officer commented that there had been a positive improvement in recruitment and retention for those services in phase one of Medpay and this was part of the strategy to reduce reliance on temporary staff.

A Member expressed surprise that 673 new contracts had been issued, which equated to nearly a third of the total staff workforce. The Portfolio Holder stated that a number of new staff had been taken on then subsequently left the Council which accounted for some of the higher than expected figure, she undertook to provide further detailed information outside of the meeting.

Productivity – A Member asked whether a rise in productivity was expected in conjunction with the pay rise for staff. The Portfolio Holder informed the Committee that the pay rise was linked to the cost-of-living crisis and did not, in her view, represent a huge pay increase. Recruitment and retention was an

Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 4 April 2024

issue of concern for the Council, and this would be exacerbated without the decision made at Council. In terms of recruiting new staff the Portfolio Holder stated that it would take time for new staff to reach peak productivity.

Performance Data – A Member commented that performance data for Customer Contact, Complaints and Blue Badges was described as good and requested further detail be provided regarding that data. The Portfolio Holder for Business Management undertook to provide that information to the Committee outside of the meeting.

Discretionary Housing Payments – further information was requested in relation to plans for the remaining monies not already allocated in relation to discretionary housing payments, the Portfolio Holder undertook to provide further information outside the meeting.

Household Support Fund – it was commented that the total payments to Medway residents from the Household Support Fund (paragraph 6.1.6 of the report refers) was unclear, the Portfolio Holder acknowledged there was a typo, and she would provide a corrected figure outside of the meeting.

Council Tax – it was noted that 8,000 review letters had been issued following a review of single persons discount resulting in 1,600 discounts being cancelled. A Member queried what progress had been made in relation to the other 6,400 letters sent to residents. The Portfolio Holder replied that she could not provide details at this stage. A Member informed the Committee that this issue had been considered elsewhere and in the other 6,400 other cases, the discounts were found to have been in order.

Liability Orders for Recovery of Council Tax – it was queried what was the impact of increasing the summons cost, the introduction of liability costs in relation to recovery of council tax and whether there were any costs to the Council associated with liability orders. The Portfolio Holder stated she did not have that information and would provide this outside of the meeting.

Education and Training – in response to a query whether adult education services were being accessed by Council staff, the Portfolio Holder explained that plans were in place to encourage more take up of adult education opportunities by staff, however, the Gun Wharf building being partially closed had made this more difficult. More widely, staff retention had improved, sickness levels remained high, though had reduced since last year. A new staff survey was planned for May 2024.

Customer and Business Support (CABS) – Further information was requested in relation to staff retention, call waiting times and causes of the significant fall in numbers of calls being received in the past year, the Portfolio Holder stated that call waiting times were reasonable and staff were dealing with the pressure, she undertook to provide a more detailed response outside of the meeting.

Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 4 April 2024

It was also requested that further information was provided as to the number of abandoned calls, calls relating to the work of different departments and performance of staff who are working from home, the Portfolio Holder agreed this information would also be provided.

Older Person's and Disabled Bus Pass – A Member queried how many bus pass applications had been rejected, the Portfolio Holder undertook to provide that detailed information outside of the meeting.

Community Interpreting Service (CIS) – A Member asked if plans were in place for greater use of technology in translation services. The Portfolio Holder noted that some residents preferred to have the person to person translation service.

The Chief Information Officer informed the Committee that charges were made for translation and interpreting services. Translation services could be digitised however there were subtle cultural differences between translation and interpreting, which was often done face to face.

My Council Tax Online – it was commented that the take up of the Council Tax online portal and paperless billing was a positive development, a Member asked whether the scheme had reduced the number of calls to CABS from residents to find out their Council Tax balance which was previously 7% of all calls to the service. In addition, it was asked what could be done to incentivise further take up of the My Council Tax online scheme by residents. The Portfolio Holder stated she would provide that information outside of the meeting.

Recruitment – in response to a question whether there was any cost to the Council in taking the senior officer recruitment in-house, the Portfolio Holder undertook to confirm this in writing.

Disabled Badges – A Member noted the work completed in relation to disabled badges and thanked the team for their hard work.

Procurement - A Member asked if the slow change in procurement was caused by a lack of recruitment and restricted budgets. The Chief Cultural Organisational Officer agreed that staffing levels were an issue when promoting change, however there was also a cultural issue in a reluctance to change the way work had been undertaken.

Complaints and Compliments – a Member commented that it was welcome the Council received a compliment for every three complaints and that performance in dealing with complaints exceeded targets, she asked for further information on how this performance had been achieved and whether the target be amended given the success.

The Chief Information Officer noted that the complaints team worked directly with services to ensure all areas of a complaint were dealt with in the first instance reducing responses and promoted the positive performance results. Targets were benchmarked against other authorities.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

729 Attendance of the Leader of the Council

Discussion:

The Leader of the Council introduced the report, he commented that he welcomed the opportunity for scrutiny which improved decision making and the role of the Chairperson being undertaken by a Member of the opposition group had been positive in that goal.

The following issues were discussed:

One Medway Plan, Adult Social Care – A Member commented that there was inconsistency in care received by service users and he was concerned how complaints about that care were treated. The Leader of the Council agreed that there were difficulties in the adult care employment market and recruitment remained a challenge in the sector nationally. There had understandably been a focus on children’s services in Medway in recent years, and a parity of focus was required between adult social care and children’s social care going forward. He added the Council benefited from positive relationships with health providers but needed to ensure discharge from services was happening at the right point as an example where outcomes could be improved.

Household Support Fund - A Member commented that the extension of the Household Support Fund for another six months was welcome. The scheme had been used to provide free school meals for children outside of term time and he asked if the Council would give consideration to extending this offer to children who are home schooled. The Leader of the Council undertook to consider this if the Council had the power to do so, in addition families who were in receipt of benefits could access other support such as Medway Go in school holidays.

Medway Matters – A Member commented that it was welcome that Medway Matters had been retained, and that the number of issues had been reduced to save costs. The Leader stated he felt the changes had worked well and the Medway Matters Live events had been positively received, the administration would consider changes to the What’s On guide in the future, though no decisions had been taken.

A Member commented that as a Councillor he would not require a posted copy of Medway Matters and an early electronic copy would be sufficient. The Leader agreed this would be considered.

Council Questions – A Member commented that the addition of supplementary public questions was a positive move and asked if consideration could be given to extending this to Member questions at Full Council meetings

Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 4 April 2024

also. The Leader of the Council thanked the Member for his comments and agreed this was something that could be considered, however, Council meetings were already very long and he would not want them to be even longer. The Leader had meetings with group leaders on a monthly basis so there may be other avenues in which those discussions could take place.

One Minute Medway - The Leader of the Council was asked for his thoughts on One Minute Medway videos, he informed the Committee they had been widely viewed on social media platforms, particularly Facebook. He was pleased that the recently announced 40% discount ticket for the Historic Dockyard for residents had been announced via a One Minute Medway video.

A Member welcomed the One Minute Medway videos, though suggested the production values be improved. The Leader of the Council acknowledged that the videos sometimes had background noise, however he wanted them to be completed out in the community rather than based in an office in Gun Wharf and although the technology could be improved, this would cost additional resources.

One Medway Charter – A Member commented that the One Medway Charter was a positive for the area, the Leader of the Council agreed and the public statement that Medway organisations would work together was welcome. This was a new approach, however, it would take time to push forward change for Medway.

Relationship with local MPs – in response to a question what role had the local MPs taken particularly in the difficult financial circumstances, the Leader replied that he had a cordial relationship with MPs, there had been useful discussion, and at times there had been forthright debate, however they have been able to disagree agreeably.

Medway 2.0 - a Member commented the increased investment in Medway 2.0 was positive, with £2 million budgeted for investment in the forthcoming year, however he requested the plan to be considered by the Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Leader stated the plan was wide ranging and he expected it would be considered and monitored by the Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny at least twice in the next year.

Finance – in response to a question why CIPFA were brought in at a late stage in the budget process, the Leader of the Council replied that the administration was in place in May, then internal processes were followed with a collaborative team approach before bringing CIPFA in. The Council could have taken the decision to hold a referendum on increasing Council Tax more than the capped rate, however this would have incurred significant costs and might not have been agreed.

A Member asked when the Council would be able to set a balance budget following the £15 million borrowing required in this financial year. The Leader of the Council explained that the Council had been given the flexibility to borrow via Exceptional Financial Support Scheme. The Council had, however, been

prevented from raising council tax above the capped rate. This meant it would likely take an additional year to balance the budget and the Council would potentially be in line with the London Borough of Bexley where a balanced budget was expected in three years. The Leader added that if there was a change of government nationally, a more bespoke response would be expected for councils in financial difficulty.

Financial Reserves – a Member commented that the Leader had criticised the previous administration for using reserves, yet the current administration had also done this, the Leader of the Council acknowledged that he made critical comments in the past particularly where a budget was built on using reserves. In 2023-24 the budget was planned by the administration using an amount of reserves which were greater than the reserves remaining, making the budget for 2024-2025 extremely challenging.

University of Kent – A Member asked if the Leader had received any reassurance that the University of Kent remained committed to its presence in Medway. The Leader of the Council acknowledged it was disappointing that some courses by the University of Kent would no longer be offered in Medway, recognising in particular the interaction between Councillors and students of the Centre for Journalism. The University had appointed an officer specifically for the Medway campus and the University was a signatory to the One Medway Charter which was positive.

In relation to schools, the Leader of the Council commented around 25 schools remained under local authority control. The Council was not pushing for them to convert to academies, it was the choice of the school. There may be a level of schools under local authority control below which the Council would not be able to effectively resource schools, but that position had not been reached.

Chatham Docks – in response to a request for an update on his meeting with Peel and Chatham Docks the Leader was pleased to report that the meeting took place and there was now an ongoing dialogue between the parties which had not been in place for a number of years.

Decision:

1. The Committee noted the report.
2. The Committee requested the Communications and Marketing Department provide early electronic copies of Medway Matters to Members in lieu of a posted copy.

730 One Medway Council Plan 2024-2028

Discussion:

The Chief Executive introduced the report, outlining that the One Medway Council Plan set out the vision and direction of the Council for the next four

Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 4 April 2024

years and had been subject to significant consultation internally, with partner agencies and the public. The plan also took account of best practice elsewhere.

The One Medway Council Plan sets out the Council's five priorities: delivering quality social care and community services, benefitting from good education, quality jobs and a growing economy, enjoying clean, green, safe and connected communities, improving health and wellbeing for all and living in good quality and affordable homes.

The Chief Executive added the One Medway Council Plan was underpinned by the Council's new values and behaviours: Proud to be Medway, caring, respectful, trusted, ambitious for Medway and collaborative.

The following issues were discussed:

Transition – it was queried how the Council intended to transition from the current Council Plan to the new One Medway Council Plan given the challenges in recruitment and funding. The Chief Executive informed the Committee the plan was a new approach and with different ways of working, teams across the Council had been extensively engaged in the development of the plan and it was vital there was a clear sense of direction to allow the transition to take place.

Partner agencies – a Member requested further information on how the Council could engage with external partners such as grammar schools to improve attainment. The Chief Executive agreed that working in partnership was key to achieving the Council's goals. The Council had recently signed the One Medway Charter with partner agencies and was committed to working closely with partners.

Performance Data - a Member asked if the Council had baseline data available to measure progress in achieving its objectives. The Chief Executive explained the Council was increasingly data driven. Council teams were working on the data and KPIs within the One Medway Council Plan building on previous work within the Council.

Values – a Member requested further information about the plan to embed the Council's values with staff, the Chief Executive stated the new council values and behaviours were developed in workshops and would be enshrined in staff Performance Development Reviews.

Priorities – a Member commented that they expected more targets to be included in the plan in relation to priority one. The Chief Executive explained there was an ambition to include both universal and statutory services and include reference to inspection reports. The Chief Executive noted the recent SEND report which showed good progress but acknowledged there was still more to do.

Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 4 April 2024

The Deputy Chief Executive and Director of People informed the Committee there would be a detailed service plan with KPIs and in addition a post inspection action plan.

Adult Social Care – A Member asked whether the Council was ready for an adult social care inspection, the Chief Executive informed the Committee that the Council was awaiting the announcement of an assurance review visit by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) which would take place in the coming months. It was his view that the CQC would find that there had been a great deal of positive work undertaken but more still to do. The Chief Executive praised the leadership of officers and the Deputy Leader, noted the agreement to right size adult social care and many positive proposals for further development such as assistive technology to help people live at home and Care for Medway.

Children Leaving Care – A Member commented that the target for the percentage of young people leaving care who were in higher education was set at 50% (key Performance Indication 1.07) however, this figure was currently at 53%, therefore, was the target stretching enough? The Chief Executive agreed there was a balance required between achievable targets and being ambitious, targets would be refreshed each year so that balance could be maintained.

Housing – A Member commented that there were 112,000 homes in Medway and the Council had limited ability to affect house prices to make them affordable. As Medway became a more attractive place to live, house prices would likely increase as a result. The Chief Executive acknowledged that house prices would rise as a natural consequence of improvements in Medway, however he wanted to bring investment and good jobs into Medway so that residents could afford good quality housing. Good housing and employment had a significant impact on residents' health so it was a key priority for the Council.

Tourism – A Member expressed disappointment that whilst Medway sought to attract more tourism into the area Rochester Tourist Information Centre had been closed, the Chief Executive stated it had been a very difficult decision to close the tourist information centre, however the financial situation the Council was in required difficult decisions and research had shown that the pattern of how tourists access information about the area had changed. Medway benefited from £360 million per year from tourism and 7,000 jobs depended on it. The Council remained committed to tourism in Medway.

Celebrate Medway Towns – a Member expressed disappointment that Medway wanted to celebrate its towns, however, the funding for Rainham festival had been ended. The Chief Executive stated that difficult decisions had to be taken but that all Members would champion their local areas and he wanted to celebrate the different Medway towns and villages.

Decision:

Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 4 April 2024

1. The Committee considered the One Medway Council Plan 2024-2028 as set out in Appendix 1, the KPIs detailed in Appendix 3 and submitted comments to Cabinet as detailed above.
2. The Committee noted that Full Council will be asked to delegate authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader, to agree any final details of the One Medway Council Plan, and any final measures/benchmarks in relation to the KPIs.

731 Advertising and Sponsorship Policy

Discussion:

The Head of Communications and Marketing introduced the report, she informed the Committee that the changes to the policy reflected the Council priorities to improve health and wellbeing for residents and to support the Council's Climate Change agenda.

The Head of Communications and Marketing explained that health was a key priority for the Council, the amended policy proposed to restrict advertising and sponsorship for products which were high in salt, fat and sugar. This policy had been implemented by Transport for London (TfL) several years ago with no reduction in income, indeed the experience at TfL had seen an increase in revenue.

The Head of Communications and Marketing added that the policy did not prevent the Council working with a business but would require it to swap out unhealthy products in any advertising or sponsorship for healthier options.

The second area was to restrict advertising and sponsorship in relation to high carbon products, again this would not prevent the Council from working with businesses, but the Council would require companies to highlight products that produced a lower carbon footprint, for example, a car company would be asked to advertise an electric vehicle rather than a diesel or petrol car.

The following issues were discussed:

Other local authority practice - in response to a question whether this policy had been pursued by other authorities besides TfL and what was their experience, Head of Health and Wellbeing Services informed the Committee around 10 other authorities had also made this change such as Brighton and Merton.

Low Carbon Emissions – a Member commented that they were concerned the transition to electric vehicles was a long-term process and a decision to restrict advertising and sponsorship for carbon emissions may adversely affect local car sales.

A Member expressed concern that the local bus companies work with the Council where the stock used was highly polluting. The Head of

Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 4 April 2024

Communications and Marketing stated the emissions levels from bus companies would be a matter for the regeneration department and undertook to raise the issue with officers outside of the meeting.

A Member commented that a restriction on advertising products with high carbon emissions would have no impact in comparison to the emissions levels elsewhere.

High fat, sugar and salt - a Member commented that the proposal was helpful but the Council would need to collaborate with supermarkets to see significant change. Head of Health and Wellbeing Services informed the Committee that Medway had amongst the lowest rate of eating five portions of fruit and vegetables a day in the country at below 25%, the aim was to normalise healthy eating options. Although the impact would be small, it would have a ripple effect in the community and the Council priorities and values would be reflected in its policies.

Electronic advertising boarding – further information was requested regarding the Council's view on the use of electronic advertising boards. The Head of Communications and Marketing informed the Committee that there was a small number of digital advertising boards in Medway, they were effective, but it did contribute to the Council's carbon footprint. The Council had not invested in expanding their use further.

Language - a Member commented that the changes to the policy were positive, however, the language used was negative and it would be helpful to consider the use of more positive language such as the Council had a positive approach to advertising and sponsorship of healthy eating choices and low carbon emitting products. The Head of Communications and Marketing thanked the Member for her comments she agreed that the language used in setting restrictions in the policy was negative but in seeking advertising and sponsorship opportunities the Council would accentuate the positives.

Decision:

The Committee considered the revised Advertising and Sponsorship Policy as set out in Appendix One to the report and submitted comments to Cabinet as detailed above.

Councillor Lawrence requested that his vote against the decision be registered, in accordance with Council Rule 12.6.

732 Council Plan Performance Monitoring Report and Strategic Risk Summary - Quarter 3 2023/24

Discussion:

The Chief Organisational Culture Officer introduced the report, she informed the Committee that there had been no changes to the risk register relevant to the Committee in the quarter.

Decision:

1. The Committee considered the Q3 2023/24 performance against the measures used to monitor progress against the Council's priorities (Appendix 1).
2. The Committee noted the Q3 2023/24 Strategic Risk Summary (Appendix 2).

733 Capital Budget Monitoring - Round 3 2023/24

Discussion:

The Chief Operating Officer introduced the report, he highlighted the underspend in Capital Budget, however that underspend related to projects not within the remit of this Committee.

The following issues were discussed:

Underspend – it was queried whether the Council could spend the £32.5m underspent elsewhere or release it back. The Chief Operating Officer explained the budget represented approved borrowing, but those monies had not been borrowed to date as the Council had decided to pause the scheme the funds had been earmarked for. Although the money had not yet been borrowed, it would at this stage be premature to remove it from the capital programme, so it showed as an underspend.

A Member commented that the Council was at around 80% of its potential borrowing limit. He asked if another opportunity were to be available to the Council would the £32.5m underspend prevent the Council from further borrowing to take advantage of the opportunity. The Chief Operating Officer explained that if there was a further opportunity the Council wished to pursue, any additional spend would also mean the Capital Finance Requirement (CFR) would rise, so the Council was not prevented from pursuing other opportunities should it wish.

In response to a query which programme had been paused, the Chief Operating Officer confirmed it was the Innovation Park Medway programme.

Decision:

The Committee noted the results of the third round of capital budget monitoring for 2023/24.

734 Revenue Budget Monitoring 2023/24 - Round 3

Discussion:

Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 4 April 2024

The Chief Operating Officer introduced the report, he highlighted the Council financial position was a £11.4 million overspend in round three. The Council had £15.8 million in non-earmarked reserves as a result of the decision to release reserves. He informed the Committee that if the finances remained unchanged, reserves would be £4.4 million at the end of the financial year, which was below the minimum level set by the Chief Operating Officer. The Corporate Management Team continued to work to reduce the projected overspend.

The following issues were discussed:

Reserves – it was commented that the level of reserves was a concern. The Chief Operating Officer agreed, the level of reserves had previously risen from below £5 million to £26 million, however, underfunding, demographic pressures and increased demand on services had reduced reserves in recent years. The Chief Operating Officer added that it was important for the Council to set itself a target for reserves as part of the medium-term financial plan, however, recent one-year, rather than multi-year settlements from central government made long term planning difficult.

The Chief Operating explained the budget for 2024/25 set at Council in February was robust, however, this was not sustainable in the long term due to borrowing which had been required to fund the budget.

Legal Services budget - concern was expressed at the increased projected overspend in Legal Services, the Chief Operating Officer explained that measures had been taken to increase the size of Legal Services and the service had been included in phase one of the Medpay project. However, it took time for those changes to be reflected within the budget.

Decision:

1. The Committee noted the results of the third round of revenue budget monitoring for 2023/24.
2. The Committee noted that Cabinet instructed the Corporate Management Team to implement further urgent actions to bring expenditure back within the budget agreed by Full Council.
3. The Committee noted that Cabinet recommended that Council declassifies the following amounts currently held in earmarked reserves and transfer them to general reserves;
 - £4.00million held in the South Medway Development Reserve,
 - £1.00million held in the Transformation Reserve, and
 - £727,000 held in the Mosaic Forms Reserve.

735 Work Programme

Discussion:

Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 4 April 2024

The Democratic Services Officer introduced the report and highlighted that the local plan would be considered at the next meeting of the Committee.

Decision:

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

Chairperson

Date:

Steve Dickens, Democratic Services Officer

Telephone: 01634 332051

Email: steve.dickens@medway.gov.uk