

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

Thursday, 20 June 2024
6.00pm to 7.46pm

Record of the meeting

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

- Present:** Councillors: Tejan (Chairperson), Hamilton (Vice-Chairperson), Bowen, Brake, Browne, Clarke, Hackwell, Jones, McDonald, Pearce, Louwella Prenter and Mark Prenter
- Substitutes:** Councillors:
Lawrence (Substitute for Williams)
- In Attendance:** Paul Boyd, Chief Information Officer
Steve Dickens, Democratic Services Officer
Katey Durkin, Chief Finance Officer
Wayne Hemingway, Head of Democratic Services
Angela Taylor, Community Partnership and Engagement Officer,
Child Friendly Medway
Nicola Trainor, Head of Council Planning and Programmes

93 Apologies for absence

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Williams.

94 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting held on 4 April 2024 was agreed and signed by the Chairperson as correct.

95 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

96 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.

97 Medway 2.0 Roadmap

Discussion:

The Chief Information Officer introduced the report, he explained that Medway 2.0 represented a new way of approaching transformation for the Council where Medway 2.0 would be focused on a review of services and processes. From the results the Council would identify potential savings and design and implement new ways of working and new technologies. The process was focused on ensuring a consistent and positive experience for residents rather than new technology or a particular savings target.

Appendix 1 to the report showed the initial processes and services which would be reviewed. The review would find common processes and service patterns which would enable development of a common external process for reporting. As a result, the experience and design of the new processes would be established on the basis of the needs of the resident.

The Chief Information Officer also explained that Medway 2.0 would work alongside change projects already underway such as the Adult Social Care Programme, work with Revenues and benefits, and establishing a corporate data platform.

The following issues were discussed:

Pace of delivery – Members welcomed the report and the approach of Medway 2.0 but some expressed concern at the speed of progress. The Chief Information Officer explained that the review was led by residents and services so that the process worked for users. Residents viewed the Council as a whole so the experience they received needed to be consistent and this process would take time. As new systems were built and implemented, the Council would save resources in future reviews as common design methods could be implemented for other processes.

Review principles – A Member stated he wanted to see core principles outlined within the review, for example, residents should receive a reference number when they made a request which they could then follow through the system and residents should only be required to input data once rather than having to repeatedly put in the same information. The Chief Information Officer said this would be considered for inclusion.

Member User Testing Group – Members welcomed the introduction of the Member User Testing Group.

Current year savings – it was commented that £2m had been identified in savings for the current financial year from the programme and it was asked whether this was achievable in the required timescale, The Chief Finance Officer noted the £2m in savings in the current financial year was a relatively small amount in the context of the Council's total expected spend, and given the level of senior management engagement and oversight, it was in her view achievable.

Discovery Process – further information was requested how long the discovery process would take, the Chief Information Officer explained that the review was designed to be agile to meet residents and services' needs, investment had been made in additional business analysts to undertake the necessary work, however it was a crucial part of the process.

Targets – a Member expressed the view that deadlines and targets for completion of work were required so Members and officers could be held to account. The Chief Information Officer acknowledged the current saving target and stressed that work had already begun with some potential solutions already under consideration.

Data sharing – in response to a question about effective data sharing to reduce duplication the Chief Information Officer informed the committee there was a separate data sharing project in place and this would make significant difference. He added the Council had recently held meetings with Microsoft regarding cloud storage and a business case was being prepared for this.

Digitisation – a Member expressed the view that digitisation programmes in other authorities had not been as successful as hoped and asked whether the Council had consulted with other local authorities about their experience. The Chief Information Officer agreed other authorities had found this difficult and discussions with Microsoft who had oversight of the sector confirmed this. One difficulty had been the use of a single website to manage a number of very different systems. One option would be to have a website for services, and then, a more commercially focused website, for this.

Opportunities for the Council – in response to a question whether there would be opportunities for the learning from this work to be commercialised for other councils, the Chief Information Officer replied that it was an aim of the project to commercialise solutions for the public and private sector.

Residents' working groups – it was asked if residents' working groups would include people all ages and abilities in relation to use of technology. The Chief Information Officer agreed that this was vital to provide a service which worked for Medway residents and all abilities would be included as would citizen panels.

Silo working – a Member commented that it was important for the Council to provide a consistent experience for residents and move away from silo working so that residents would be confident they could report something once and the issue would be dealt with. The Chief Information Officer agreed, and data handling effectively was central to this, so that data could be reported once then shared within the Council to ensure the correct actions took place.

Non digital services – in response to a question whether non digital solutions would still be available for residents who needed them, the Chief Information Officer agreed that telephone and in person support was key for residents who wanted it and this would remain in place.

Decision:

1. The Committee noted the rationale, the approach, timeline, and the resource needed to undertake the work outlined in the roadmap including the formation of a crossparty “Member User Testing Group” to allow Councillors to experience and beta-test new services that have been developed.
2. The Committee submitted comments to Cabinet on the external and internal services and processes prioritised for discovery at Appendix 1 as discussed, at the meeting.

98 Council Plan Performance Monitoring Report and Strategic Risk Summary - Quarter 4 2023/24

Discussion:

The Head of Council Planning and Programmes introduced the report which summarised the performance of the Council Plan programmes and values that fall under the remit of the committee for Q4 2023/24.

The report also presented the Q4 2023/24 review of strategic risks at Appendix 2. There were no changes to strategic risk scores in the quarter.

The following issues were discussed:

Tree planting - a Member expressed disappointment that performance measures in relation to climate change did not include a target for planting trees. Tree planting was important to supporting the climate and he felt this should be considered by Cabinet.

Hoo Sports Centre – a Member welcomed the investment in replacing outdated gas boiler and solar panels at Hoo Sports centre, he commented that further investment in the centre would be helpful.

CO2 emissions- it was commented that the data for CO2 reduction dated back to 2021-2022 and more recent data was requested. The Head of Council Planning and Programmes undertook to request the information from the relevant service and provide it to the Committee in writing.

Child Friendly Medway – in response to a request to provide additional information about the work of Child Friendly Medway and its benefits to residents, the Community and Engagement Officer, explained the service currently led a wide range of projects and events the majority of which were funded through external grants.

The Community and Engagement Officer added the service prioritised listening to children and young people's voices. They provided free activities such as reading projects to support the Council's literacy strategy, ran a wide range of free events for young people including the Mini Youth Games and soft play to promote early years development.

One example of the positive work undertaken by the service was free events at the Strood Sport Centre which were undertaken following instances of anti-social behaviour at the centre. This had reduced reports of anti-social behaviour in the area.

Voice of Young People – it was asked how the team ascertained the views of young people, the Community Engagement Officer informed the Committee that at each Child Friendly Medway event the team provided an opportunity for young people to anonymously provide their views to the Council on a range of issues. This was popular with thousands of views being received in 2022-23 from a wide demographic of young people. In addition, the team sometimes focused on particular topics such as violence against women and young people and had supported events for the Leader of the Council and the Council Chief Executive to hear directly from young people. Responses had revealed common themes, and they were passed on to the relevant teams for review and action.

Members welcomed the work of Child Friendly Medway. It was suggested the Council may wish to consider opportunities to work with partners such as Medway Norse to promote access to local events through sharing resources.

Decision:

1. The Committee considered the Q4 2023/24 performance against the measures used to monitor progress against the Council's priorities (Appendix 1).
2. The Committee noted the Q4 2023/24 Strategic Risk Summary (Appendix 2).
3. The Committee requested Cabinet consider setting targets for tree planting be added to performance monitoring in relation to climate change.

99 Capital and Revenue Outturn and Annual Debt Write Off Report 2023/24

Discussion:

The Chief Finance Officer introduced the report, she informed the Committee the end of year financial position which represented an overspend of £6.7m following declassification of £6.8m in earmarked reserves. General reserves stood at £10.65m at the end of the financial year, just above the minimum level of £10m set by the Chief Operating Officer.

The Chief Finance Officer stated that whilst just over £3m had been written off, this represented less than 1% of the amount of debt raised during the year and related to debts which had been accrued over a number of years.

The following issues were discussed:

Final budget position – Members welcomed the lower than expected overspend. The Chief Finance Officer commented that whilst positive, total spend in the last financial year was £11m above income and as a consequence the budget build for the current year had been very difficult. Medway was in a similar position to other small upper tier authorities, and there may be a structural issue with the distribution of funding. Despite this, the Council had a rigorous One Medway Financial Improvement and Transformation Plan and was investing in services including rightsizing adult social care and strategic support service teams.

Use of earmarked reserves – Further information was requested why £2.5m in earmarked reserves had been used for Housing when the final budget position had been underspent by £1.5m in total. The Chief Finance Officer explained that monies used by the Council included ring fenced grants which had to be used for specific purposes, but the budget was reported by department in totality. Consequently, the department could show an underspend in one area due to the use of ring-fenced grant, which enabled the Council to use un-ring fenced income i.e council tax to fund pressures on other services. In Public Health earmarked reserves had also been used as ring fenced funds were used over a number of years to provide ongoing budgetary income for specific projects and the Council had to ensure that those funds were spent in Public Health.

Further information on ring fenced reserves, including a list of reserves was requested. The Chief Finance Officer informed the Committee that further information on ring fenced grants was provided in the Council's accounts, however, she undertook to provide additional information to the Committee outside of the meeting.

Potholes - a Member asked why there was a reported £2m underspend in relation to potholes out of total budget of £13m when many roads in Medway were in need of repair. The Chief Finance Officer explained that the budget was underspent in some areas of Front Line Services, such as staff vacancies and reduced spending on energy costs, however, monies spent on actual road repairs were from the capital spending budget, so the budget for repairs was fully spent.

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A Member expressed the view that the underspend of £39,000 should have been spent on repairing potholes, the Chief Finance Officer explained that the Housing Infrastructure Fund was an external grant and the monies unspent had to be returned.

New Homes Bonus – Information was requested as to what the monies received from the New Homes Bonus had been spent on. The Chief Finance Officer explained that the New Homes Bonus had been a national scheme to encourage development in an area but had been wound down since 2016. Income from the scheme in 2023-24 had been just under £1m and was unrestricted funding and had been spent by the Council effectively funding all services that are not funded by ringfenced grants.

Debt write off – Members welcomed the low level of debt write off. In response to a question for more detail regarding the criteria for writing off debt, the Chief Finance Officer explained that the criteria for writing off debt was dependent on the type of debt. Some debt which was unenforceable was written off quite quickly, whilst other debt had specific legal criteria which were followed. For all debt written off Council policy and legal processes were followed.

A Member commented that bad HRA debt had increased nationally and asked whether this had been the experience in Medway. The Chief Finance Officer did not have this information available but undertook to provide it outside of the meeting. She commented that debt was more difficult to collect with a greater number of residents being unable, rather than unwilling, to pay due to the rising cost of living in recent years. Collection rates were high, debt write off was less than 1% of Council budget and assumptions for collection of debt were built into the budget.

Decision:

1. The Committee noted the 2023/24 revenue and capital outturn position as summarised in Section 5 of the report, and the Council's reserves position as summarised in Section 13 of the report.
2. The Committee noted that Cabinet recommended that Council agree to the following additions as set out in Section 12 of the report:
 - £430,000 to the capital programme to fund the overspend reported on the Operational Depot scheme, to be funded by Prudential Borrowing, and
 - £4,655 to the capital programme to fund the overspend on the Mountbatten House Purchase scheme, to be funded from borrowing in advance of the capital receipts expected from the sale of the building to Medway Development Company.
3. The Committee requested the Chief Finance Officer provide the Committee with briefing notes related to earmarked reserves and HRA debt.

100 Annual Review of the Council's Petitions Scheme

Discussion:

The Head of Democratic Services introduced the report which outlined the petitions received in the period January 23 – April 24.

The following issues were discussed:

Medway Council e-petition service – it was commented that the Council's e-petition service did not always work and the system itself was cumbersome to use. The Head of Democratic Services acknowledged that there were sometimes issues with the system, however, many thousands had used the system successfully and where problems were found officers liaised with ICT and the software provider to ensure minimal disruption. He added that officers would liaise with colleagues to consider opportunities for alternative provision of the Council petition e-scheme.

Third party websites – in response to a question whether the Council would consider a change in the requirements for signatories to the petition scheme to enable petitions from third party websites to be accepted, the Head of Democratic Services explained the scheme was part of the Council's constitution, so it was a matter for Council to amend the scheme.

Whilst it was discussed whether the Council should be asked to consider amending the petition scheme on this matter, there was no support to make a recommendation to full Council at this time.

Decision:

The Committee noted the annual review of the Council's Petitions Scheme.

101 Work Programme

Discussion:

The Democratic Services Officer introduced the report, he highlighted the changes to the Work Programme as set out in appendix 1 to the report.

The Democratic Services Officer informed the Committee that new statutory guidance on overview and scrutiny for councils and combined authorities had recently been published. The guidance was focused on combined authorities so did not directly affect the Council.

The Active Travel and Air Quality task group had met on a number of occasions and the proposed scope of the group was attached at appendix 3 for approval.

The following issues were discussed:

Work Programme – a Member requested that the Committee review the progress made in relation to the reduction of non-permanent staff which had

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been considered by the Committee last year, particularly those departments which were not covered by the report last year.

A Member asked for clarification regarding whether all the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's would consider the Local Plan. The Head of Democratic Services explained the work programme was a matter for each Committee, however, all of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees planned to consider the Local Plan during the regulation 18 consultation in August 2024.

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 to the report.
3. The Committee agreed the scope of the Active Travel and Air Quality Task Group as set out in Appendix 3 to the report.
4. The Committee agreed that the Chairperson, Vice Chairperson and officers to consider adding a review on the progress of reduction in the use of non-permanent staff to the work programme on a date to be determined.

Chairperson

Date:

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