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## **Regeneration, Culture and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**10 October 2024**

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

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Simon Curry, Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Strategic Regeneration

#### Summary

This annual report provides an account of the role of the Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Strategic Regeneration. 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 are 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 Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Strategic Regeneration, as set out in the Council's constitution are:

- Climate change
- Community centres
- Emergency planning
- Flooding
- Greenspaces
- Local Plan and planning policy
- Medway Norse
- Public rights of way
- Public transport
- River strategy
- South Thames Gateway Building Control Partnership
- Strategic regeneration
- Street cleaning, recycling, waste collection, and waste disposal

### 3. Background

As the Portfolio Holder responsible for Climate Change and Strategic Regeneration I would like to start by expressing my thanks to staff, partners and contractors from all sections of my wide portfolio for their continued dedication and commitment and in working collaboratively across the various services to deliver on so many subject areas.

The four key areas of my portfolio that I am devoting most of my time being:

- Front line services delivery
- Local Plan
- Climate Action
- Public transport

Other areas take up varying amounts of time, depending on particular issues.

### 4. The Local Plan and Planning Services

- 4.1 I chair a fortnightly meeting with key Planning and related portfolio members, with the Assistant Director Community and Culture, Chief Planning Officer and key planning staff, to monitor the progress on the new Local Plan and wider Planning matters. This is used to direct work on the new plan. I have set up and chaired a cross party working group on the Local Plan.
- 4.2 I am proactively steering the delivery of the new Local Plan. I am committed to getting our plan in place for Medway's communities, so we can manage growth, secure investment and address issues. I have worked with officers and external advisers through the Planning Advisory Service to review the local plan programme in the Local Development Scheme, and respond to the former Secretary of State, and government officials at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to provide confidence in our plan making ambitions.
- 4.3 We have made meaningful steps in progressing our new Local Plan. We published a second, more detailed, Regulation 18 document for consultation in summer 2024. This detailed document set out the direction of policies for managing Medway's development, and options for planning growth across Medway. We delivered a comprehensive consultation programme to engage people in planning for Medway's future. We held 10 public exhibitions in community venues across rural and urban Medway, where we spoke to over 600 people. We also organised additional specific stakeholder meetings, including with young people, voluntary and community organisations and developers.
- 4.4 Our programme included a wide range of resources on our website and use of social media to directly contact thousands of people across Medway. There were over 20,000 visits to the local plan pages on our website during the consultation. My podcast with the Chief Planning Officer explaining the Local Plan consultation had 11,000 views. I set out our vision for new Local Plan in

the short films produced for the consultation. This was supported by representatives from Medway's businesses, education, community, housing and cultural sectors, who endorse our vision for Medway. These two short videos attracted over 50,000 views. Our Communications team issued weekly e-bulletins to over 3500 subscribers and over 50 social media posts during the consultation.

- 4.5 Our consultation programme has been well received and there has been much constructive discussion at the numerous events, where residents have been able to have their say and to discuss in detail and at length with officers and in some cases with myself and other Cabinet members, including the Leader. 38 individual officers from Planning, Communications and Public Health worked in staffing the consultation events, which represented 45 working days of direct engagement time with the public and stakeholders.
- 4.6 We have published a number of technical reports as part of the consultation, to update the evidence base on the local plan. These include work on transport, landscape, open spaces needs, and waste. This evidence is critical to developing a sound plan, and informing decision making on the proposals in the new plan.
- 4.7 Over 500 people responded to the consultation, representing a range of interests, including local residents, voluntary groups, developers and statutory organisations. I am now overseeing the work to finalise the content of the draft plan for publication next year.
- 4.8 I have supported local communities in the development of Neighbourhood Plans across Medway. In May we adopted the Arches Chatham Neighbourhood Plan and in August approved that the Hoo St Werburgh and Chattenden Neighbourhood Plan be sent to referendum. This is organised for 7 November. We continue to support groups in High Halstow, Frindsbury Extra and Stoke in developing plans for their local parishes.
- 4.9 We continue to work with partner councils and MHCLG to design a new back-office planning system, known as BOPS, and are preparing to test the service end to end.
- 4.10 Medway is at the forefront of digital planning in the Country as part of the Government's Open Digital Planning Project and we are one of a number of Council's piloting work on Plan X, which was recently described by Ewan Mills (urban designer and digital specialist as "the most exciting thing to come out of the digital planning world". We are one of only 8 Councils to go live with Plan X guidance on "do I need planning permission" and we are one of four Authorities working together to create a digital flow to assist residents to report a breach of planning control. Following a year of designing and testing, Medway went live with this service on 1 July 2024. The first month of being live showed a 23% reduction in invalid reports of alleged breaches of planning control. This will be the future of planning moving forward and looks to free up planning officer time to focus on the actual assessment of planning applications and investigating acknowledged breaches.

- 4.11 The Development Management team has received 438 applications in the first 6 months of this financial year (April – September)
- 4.12 The Development management team continue to perform exceptionally well, determining (within the 6 month period) over 94% of major applications, over 97% of minor applications and over 96% of other applications within target period against national targets of 60%, 70% and 70% respectively or within the agreed timescales.
- 4.13 The quality of decisions is reviewed by Government and the threshold for designation on applications for both major and non-major development is 10% of an authority's total number of decisions being allowed on appeal. The most up-to-date Government data, which is for the 24 months to the end of June 2023, shows the number of decisions overturned at appeal for major applications is 2.9% and 0.9% for non-major applications.
- 4.14 A well attended and very positive annual forum with Major Developers took place in July and covered issues such as the Regulation 18 consultation on the Local Plan, Biodiversity Net Gain update and Climate Change and Chatham Design Code.
- 4.15 The Local Flood Risk Management Strategy concluded its consultation with a number of relevant responses, which resulted in a number of updates to the strategy. This has now been adopted by the Council and will be refreshed within 5 years.
- 4.16 Meetings have been held with the Environment Agency on the Medway Estuary and Swale Strategy (MEASS) to look at potential funding options and priority areas. This will progress further with the development of the Local Plan.
- 4.17 Property Flood Resilience Survey has been undertaken at Nelson Terrace and the Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA) is now working on a business case to submit to the Regional Flood and Coast Committee for funding on these options. Additional work has been undertaken at Bond Road and Cherry Tree Road to assess suitability of flood works. Southern Water are also investigating solutions for this and are working closely with Highways and the LLFA to develop schemes to alleviate flooding in the area.
- 4.18 The Surface Water Management Plan for Stoke has now been completed and the discussions on the new Local Plan options for the area will determine the most suitable option. Highways and the LLFA are ensuring that preparation works are completed prior to the winter months.
- 4.19 I am liaising with the Senior Tree Officer and stakeholders, such as the Climate Change team, in reviewing Medway's Tree Policy so that it fully addresses important matters such as tree canopy cover, the protection of valued trees and the important role that trees play in biodiversity and our adaption to climate change. Separate to this I have been working with the Senior Tree Officer in establishing trees on the highway in Luton Road.

4.20 Chatham Centre Design Code was adopted on 11 June 2024 and is used in the decision-making process for applications received in and around Chatham Centre.

## 5. Front Line Services

5.1 I oversee the street cleaning, recycling, waste collection, and waste disposal operations with an annual budget of £27m, services used by every Medway household, every week. Medway Council has a core statutory duty to provide these services and as an essential part of their delivery we are now developing a new Waste Strategy looking at can improve the service, increase our recycling rates and decarbonise our waste stream in partnership with our contractors.

- Street cleansing is an integral part of waste management, and the service operates 364 days a year, emptying over 1400 bins and cleaning its 'approximal 3000' streets using manual and mechanical techniques.
- Medway are one of the few local authorities in the UK to retain weekly collections to all 120,584 homes, unlimited black sack waste and free garden waste collections.
- Our three Household Waste Recycling Centres open 362 days/year are available exclusively to Medway residents and the booking systems ensures residents a guaranteed slot to recycle and dispose of their waste in a safe manner with an average of 977 slots available across 3 sites every day.
- Over 100,000 tonnes of waste are transferred and recycled or recovered annually with 0.1% landfill and 37.6% recycled in 2022-23. 65 reproprocessors transform Medway's waste into reusable and recyclable resources, and black sack waste into energy.

## 6. Public Transport and Active Travel

6.1 This year I have worked with Officers to update Medway's Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP), which sets out our vision for a modern, sustainable public transport network that is reliable, accessible, affordable and carbon free. It includes a commitment to work collaboratively with partners to put passengers at the heart of everything we do, supporting equal opportunity of access to employment, education and other key services.

6.2 Following the publication of the updated plan in July, the Department for Transport confirmed a grant of £761k for supporting public transport in Medway, meaning residents and visitors continued to benefit from additional evening and Sunday services on key routes, alongside a new summer holiday service to our leisure facilities and country parks in July and August 2024. We were also able to offer free summer holiday travel for children this year, on all buses in Medway. Three Medway Free Bus Weekends will take place this year, to coincide with the 'Catch the Bus Month' and 'World Car Free Day' campaigns in September, and during the run-up to Christmas in December.

- 6.3 In addition to our statutory responsibility for providing concessionary travel, we continue to support the wider bus network by subsidising socially necessary journeys that give residents access to health, shopping, education and leisure facilities. An upgrade to CCTV at the Chatham Waterfront Bus Station and a programme of LED lighting improvements at many bus stops across Medway will increase safety and security for passengers.
- 6.4 The Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan is now in the latter stages of development, following a period of public consultation at the beginning of the year, and will provide a ten-year plan for the delivery of cycling and walking interventions. We have also received further government funding for Active Travel initiatives, which we are using to deliver a programme of activities to encourage and promote walking and cycling. These include the promotion of National Walk to School Week, International Walk to School Month, the Get Cycling in Schools programme in collaboration with the Bikeability Trust and the Walk Once a Week initiative. We have also produced new Walking Bus resources for schools across Medway, providing all the tools needed to help initiate and set-up Walking Buses, including site risk assessments and access to fluorescent tabards.
- 6.5 Our Safer, Healthier Streets initiative has progressed this year, including Automatic Number Plate Recognition cameras at several locations to enforce traffic restrictions such as 'no entry' signs, pedestrian only zones and yellow box junctions. Supporting the Police with enforcement will make our roads safer and less congested, in line with our transport and climate change priorities. The implementation of our first seven School Streets across Medway in March, with temporary access restrictions for vehicles at peak times, will have helped to create a safer environment for children and parents to travel to school, reducing parking problems and congestion for residents, improving air quality and promoting sustainable travel. Public consultation will be taking place shortly for a second phase of School Streets.

## 7. Greenspace Development

I have continued to support greenspace development including:

- 7.1 Successfully securing eight Green Flag Awards and a Green Heritage Award with great results. The eight Green Flag sites are Hillyfields, Gillingham Park, Broomhill Park, The Vines, Capstone Farm Country Park, Great Lines Heritage Park, Riverside Country Park and Ranscombe Farm Reserve, which is managed by Plantlife.
- 7.2 The Cozenton Park and Nursery project continues to progress. A consultation took place in early summer with over 330 responses to the initial proposals. External funding has been successfully secured from the Forestry Commission to help set up a community tree nursery on part of the old nursery site. A planning application is underway for the change of use of the old nursery site which will include the community tree nursery, community garden and allotment plots. If permission is granted, works will be underway on the nursery later this winter and further improvements to the wider park will follow

in 2025. Engagement continues with local community groups to help support the long-term establishment of the community tree nursery and garden.

- 7.3 Other Section 106 improvement projects currently underway include a much improved play area at Town Hall Gardens with further works such as footpath, access and planting improvements taking place in 2025.
- 7.4 Section 106 has just been secured for improvements to Esplanade Gardens and Jacksons Field. This is the first trigger payment with more funds due over the next 6-7 years. Plans are underway to prioritise the improvements at both sites, along with heritage aspects and the long-term implementation in consultation with local stakeholders.
- 7.5 Further Section 106 improvements will be underway at Cherry Trees Open Space in Rainham and will include new footpaths and better access points. Access improvements are also planned at Riverside Country Park and Berengrave Local Nature Reserve.
- 7.6 As part of Medway's Playing Pitch Strategy, the team, along with Sport Development, Medway Norse and Kent FA are reviewing pitch improvements to be funded by development contributions and external funding. These improvements will help enhance the football facilities in Medway.
- 7.7 The Open Space Study has now been completed to review the quantity and quality of all of Medway's open spaces and was out to consultation as part of the Local Plan this summer. This study will help ensure high quality open spaces are provided as part of new housing developments coming forward. Also as part of the study, an action plan is underway to increase the number of allotment plots to provide more growing spaces for Medway's residents.
- 7.8 A full-time Partnership Officer has recently been recruited to lead on the council's commitment to support greenspace friends and volunteer groups in delivering tasks such as vegetation clearance, planting, litter picks and holding small community events. MUGS (Medway Urban Greenspace Forum), the umbrella group to all the friends and volunteers, held an evening forum in late September to bring representatives together. Each year we are supported by over 18,000 hours of valuable volunteer time to improve our green spaces. Hours have increased from last year which is a true accolade to all our wonderful volunteers who give up their time. A celebration event was held in June as part of Volunteer Week to thank all the greenspace and public right of way volunteers.
- 7.9 Planning was granted to turn the former golf course at Deangate into a Community Parkland which will provide an exciting opportunity for wildlife and recreation acting as a gateway to explore the Hoo Peninsula. This application covered a total of 43.3 hectares within the former golf course boundary. £1.1m has been secured from s106 contributions to help develop and maintain the site. Following some excellent liaison with the local community by our team a new Friends Group for Deangate has now been established.

7.10 Temple Marsh is an existing open space within Medway that provides poor access and recreation for the new communities living in close proximity. Work continues on assessing this former landfill site and any remediation works required before work on creating the greenspace can begin.

## 8. Rights of Way and Access

8.1 The launch of the Strood Town Centre community trail was held on 8<sup>th</sup> August. This is a relatively small circular walk which showcases the heritage sites of Strood. Directional markers and interpretation boards have been installed around the route and a booklet with activities can be found at the Strood Community hub. This was in collaboration with the Town Centre Manager, Toni Doran.

8.2 Watts Meadow – the resurfacing of Prow RRX15 (Pat Wilson Way). This path forms part of the Rochester Community Trail. The work is due to be completed in October. This is being funded via the Local Transport Plan funding.

8.3 Victory Academy – PROW RC4, initially started as a resurfacing scheme, however following engagement with the school and the local beat officer the scheme now includes resurfacing, installation of kissing gates, additional width restrictors will be located where deemed appropriate, widening of the path to match the desire line, improvement to the lighting levels and a reduction in the tree canopy. Due to the proximity to the school this work has been programmed to be carried out in the October half term.

8.4 PROW media campaign is underway. PROW Officer working with Comms to have a media presence sharing information on PROWs.

8.5 The Local Access Forum has a new chair, new members and is more active. The forum will be submitting a response as part of the Local Plan consultation.

8.6 PROW officer linking in with the active travel steering group and LTP group to ensure visibility of works being carried out and seeking opportunities to collaborate to deliver maximum improvements.

## 9. Bird Wise

9.1 Four A0 interpretation panels have been installed at Cliffe Pools to raise awareness of the sensitive environmental aspects of the site and reduce disturbance to wildlife.

9.2 Bird Wise has held guided walks and activity sessions for families at Cliffe Pools and Riverside Country Park, given talks to local interest groups and attended Child Friendly Medway events and the inaugural Twydall Eco Fayre to engage Medway residents in nature-based activities.



- 9.3 The Great Coastal Birdwatch is returning at the end of October to coincide with half-term and will include guided walks in Medway to showcase the migratory birds arriving back for the winter months.
- 9.4 This year work will begin on creating a dedicated off-lead dog exercise area at Riverside Country Park funded by Strategic Access Management and Monitoring Strategy contributions and locations for additional interpretation signage in Medway will be identified.

## 10. Providing political leadership and challenge

- 10.1 I take a strategic overview of the Council's sustainable transport activities, bringing together Climate Change, Public Health, Transport, Air Quality and other steering groups to facilitate the development, delivery and monitoring of Active Travel schemes and initiatives, including the promotion of behavioural change and the delivery of effective infrastructure. I am also now the Vice-chair of transport for the Southeast. In this capacity I am able to lobby more effectively for infrastructure funding for our road and rail networks.
- 10.2 I continue to oversee the replacement of the current weekly waste collection fleet championing a procurement strategy for 46 new compacting refuse collection vehicles at Cabinet in March and April 2024 which is due to be delivered for £12million, representing a significant saving to £17million added to the Council's capital programme, funded from borrowing. Delivery of the Council-controlled waste fleet is due to begin Q4 2024/25, enabling the earliest possible realisation of the environmental benefits associated with the new vehicles in line with the Climate Change Action Plan, and our emerging Waste Strategy, estimated to save up to 397t of CO<sub>2</sub> per year compared to the current fleet configuration, helping to increase air quality and reduce carbon dioxide emissions.
- 10.3 I will be working closely with Medway Norse to improve the allotment facilities. Allotments are important community growing spaces and enhance health and wellbeing of Medway residents as well as supporting the climate change agenda. This year Medway Norse have begun to evaluate plots which historically have been too large and challenging for residents to maintain, and where appropriate, vacant plots are subdivided into manageable sizes for allotment users.
- 10.4 Climate Change is now a core principle in the new One Medway Council Plan. Our current Climate Change Action Plan (published in 2022) sets out over 250 actions across all of our service delivery areas. I have shown leadership and support in the refresh of the Council's Climate Change Action Plan during 2024, liaising with officers and the Community Climate Working Group to identify 5 new priority areas:
- Knowledge and Empowerment
  - Energy
  - Sustainable Travel and Transport
  - Resource Efficiency

- Green and Resilient Medway

Focusing on these priorities will support, both Medway Council and Medway “The Place”, to achieve the aims of:

- Reduced carbon emissions
- Increased resilience against the impacts of climate change

10.5 The Climate Response Team are currently working with officers across the Council to draft revised actions, with my oversight. The first draft of revised actions will be shared with the Director of Place in October, with opportunities for core working groups, boards and partners to comment further. Following internal governance approvals, the refreshed plan will be submitted to Cabinet in June 2025 for approval.

## 11. Championing the Interests of service users / Medway residents / Children and Young People

11.1 In May, I was delighted to join the Leader at our annual event for School Crossing Patrol officers. The School Crossing Patrol Service makes a vital contribution towards keeping our young people safe on their journey to school and promotes active, sustainable travel for children, parents and carers.

11.2 The Administration support weekly waste collections for Medway residents and I regularly meet with officers from waste services to stay abreast of technical and legislative developments which could improve the Council’s recycling performance. I am heartened to see over 90% of garden waste is correctly recycled but, despite the efforts of the environmental engagement team, a significant quantity of food waste and recycling continues to be disposed of in black sacks, destined for incineration.

11.3 The Council has recently completed a public consultation on the vision for the Climate Change Action Plan refresh. 403 responses have been received, with 80% of respondents in agreement with the draft vision and priority areas. These views are informing the refreshed action plan.

11.4 I oversee the Community Climate Working Group and the Member Climate Change Working Party. The input of both groups, and their wider networks, will be central to achieving our climate ambitions for Medway, “the place”.

11.5 I formed the Community Climate Working Group in August 2023. The group supports messaging and initiatives for carbon reduction and climate resilience and helps shape the Council’s work on climate change by acting as a critical friend on behalf of Medway’s communities. Made up of representatives from key sectors (such as local activists, businesses, and faith groups), the group meets quarterly.

11.6 The Member Climate Change Working Party was formed in November 2023. Members have been assigned the role of ambassadors for the climate agenda, with the aim of supporting and encouraging local climate action within their communities and networks. A Climate Action Ward Improvement Plan

template has been developed to help each member develop an impactful action plan for their ward. The intention is for them to report their progress three times a year. If this approach is successful, I would like to encourage all members to develop Climate Action Ward Improvement Plans for each of the 24 wards throughout Medway.

- 11.7 Our Greenspace Friends Groups are also hugely important to our Medway community. I continue to support these with new groups forming at Deangate, Cozenton Park and two other location over the coming months.

## 12. Support for key service areas

- 12.1 Medway Council has a core statutory duty to collect waste and recycling from domestic properties, keep streets free from litter and refuse and provide recycling centres. It is one of the few universal services provided to all 279,800 Medway residents and makes a tangible difference to the environment in which we live. There are more than 17 million waste collections annually in Medway.

- 12.2 I have instructed officers to keep me abreast of any development in the waste Industry which I will champion at Cabinet and Council to drive the climate agenda forward, including waste strategy development and potential depot locations.

- 12.3 The annual review of waste contracts was presented to the Regeneration, Culture and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 15 November 2023. Members praised the waste services in Medway and asked for their thanks to be passed on to operatives and officers for their professionalism and dedication to the service. The report was for the contract year October 2022 to September 2023:

- Veolia Environmental Services – providing waste disposal services for residual and recycling waste.
- Medway Norse – providing waste collection, street cleaning services and management of Medway’s Household Waste Recycling Centres.

- 12.4 I have supported officers to establish a new Climate Oversight and Implementation Board, chaired by the Director of Place, which will meet quarterly. The Board has responsibility for ensuring accurate reporting, monitoring and risk management of the Climate Change Action Plan. The Board met for the first time on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2024 to agree the Terms of Reference.

## 13. **Scrutiny of LATCO’s - Medway Norse Ltd.**

- 13.1 Governance arrangements are now established for LATCO’s to be scrutinised at Cabinet Sub-Committees and part of my role as Portfolio Holder includes chairing the Cabinet Sub-Committee for Medway Norse Ltd. Initial meetings have allowed Members to establish the Governance arrangements, consider the draft Business Plan for Medway Norse and review the Risk Register.

Performance against key performance indicators and financial performance will also be monitored at future meetings.

13.2 I am also on the Sub-Committees for both MDC and Kyndi, helping to support their work in delivering key developments and services for Medway.

For additional information please see separate appendix for Emergency Planning Information.

## Lead officer contacts

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## Appendices

Appendix 1 – Emergency Planning Information

## Background Papers

Cabinet Sub Committee (Medway Norse Ltd) Shareholder Board Agendas and Records of Decisions

<https://democracy.medway.gov.uk/mgCommitteeDetails.aspx?ID=596>