

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

Thursday, 24 October 2024

6.30pm to 9.10pm

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, Cook, Hackwell, Jones, Kemp, McDonald, Pearce and Mark Prenter

In Attendance: Councillor Kwashie Anang
Paul Boyd, Chief Information Officer
Steve Dickens, Democratic Services Officer
Gemma Gilley, Head of Benefits and Financial Welfare
Councillor Alex Paterson, Portfolio Holder for Community Safety, Highways and Enforcement
Nicola Trainor, Head of Council Planning and Programmes
Phil Watts, Chief Operating Officer
Rebecca Wilcox, Chief Housing Officer

385 Apologies for absence

There were none.

386 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting held on 21 August 2024 was agreed and signed by the Chairperson as correct.

387 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

388 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests or Other Significant Interests and Whipping

Disclosable pecuniary interests (DPI)

There were none.

Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 24 October 2024

Other significant Interests (OSI)

Councillors Browne, Bowen Brake, Clarke, Cook Jones, Hackwell, Kemp and Pearce declared an other significant interest in the Member's item relating to the winter fuel payment (Agenda item 7), they relied upon a dispensation from the Monitoring Officer to speak and vote in the agenda item.

Other Interests

There were none.

389 Petitions Report

Discussion:

The Democratic Services Officer explained to the Committee that the lead petitioner was unable to attend the meeting but had provided a written statement which was read out to the Committee.

The following issues were discussed:

The Chief Housing Officer reported that a feasibility study had been undertaken which included engagement with residents and the Council had offered a number of solutions to residents. Unfortunately, there was no provision in the Council budget to undertake the changes to the garages which had been requested, this option had been considered in the feasibility study and was not a viable option.

Parking spaces – a Member commented that many residents in Medway also had difficulty in the availability of adequate on street parking. The residents of Baron Close had other options for parking not open to all residents such as overnight parking in the nearby Strand Car Park for less than £1 a week. In his view the Council had responded positively in the offer to develop a local lettings plan for the garages which prioritised local residents.

Double yellow lines - it was commented that it appeared the double yellow lines in the Baron Close were a recent addition. It was proposed that the implementation of the double yellow lines be reviewed to provide additional space for parking.

Decision:

- a) The Committee noted the report.
- b) The Committee requested officers review the implementation of double yellow lines in Baron Close.

390 Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Community Safety, Highways and Enforcement

Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 24 October 2024

Discussion:

The Portfolio Holder for Community Safety, Highways and Enforcement introduced his report and highlighted the increased pace of activity in relation to Medway 2.0. The first redesign of processes had been completed and was in use through a soft launch. The next processes to be redesigned were scheduled to be completed in December. The Portfolio Holder added that he was pleased to have built on the work of his predecessor and the support of officers.

The following issues were discussed:

Nuisance Vehicles – Members welcomed the redesigned process for reporting nuisance vehicles which was much improved, it was asked what savings would be attributed to the Council's budget following this change. The Portfolio Holder explained there had been a soft launch of the process, users would have found no change in using the system, but there were significant improvements in functionality for officers. It would be difficult to ascribe a monetary value to savings, however, the team were pleased with the results and associated time savings which made for a more efficient service for residents.

The Chief Information Officer added that the processes developed for the new reporting system would be repeated for other areas, thus reducing software and licensing costs for the Council.

It was asked whether the nuisance vehicle processes could include signposting to other relevant services for vehicles being driven which were causing nuisance. The Portfolio Holder agreed to review how this might be implemented through Medway 2.0 with partner organisations.

Fly tipping – Members commented that fly tipping remained an issue in the area and the process to report this was cumbersome. The Portfolio Holder agreed and said it was an area the Council were reviewing. In response to a question when the redesign for fly tipping would be completed, the Portfolio Holder stated that seven further processes were scheduled to be completed in December. He added that once a suite of processes had been completed a 'report it' section of the website would be created incorporating those new processes.

Staff engagement – in response to a question about staff and union engagement in the development process, the Portfolio Holder confirmed staff and unions had been involved in the redesign, their experience was helpful, particularly where there were known blockages in current processes.

It was asked what the impact on staff would be of Medway 2.0. The Portfolio Holder stated that he wanted staff to be engaged in the transformation and the opportunities in new processes to provide an improved service.

Accessibility – in response to a question about whether the Council had considered different language requirements and speech to text options, the

Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 24 October 2024

Portfolio Holder stated that the google translation service had meant translation largely automated into the user's preferred language. In relation to speech to text software some consideration would need to be given on integrating Microsoft into the system to enable that.

Member User Group – a Member commented that he had used the new nuisance vehicle reporting system and found some areas where he would like to suggest minor improvements such as taking photographs directly from a smartphone, he asked when a Member User Group would be in place to facilitate further testing. The Chief Operating Officer confirmed that the group was being set up and Group Whips had been asked for nominations for membership.

It was asked whether motion detection cameras could be used to monitor fly tipping hotspots. The Portfolio Holder commented that this could be considered however, the Council had to focus on particular areas and had published a wall of shame for people for fly tipping culprits to highlight the problem of fly tipping.

ANPR Cameras – a Member expressed disappointment that refuse lorries had not been fitted with cameras as this would aid the Council identifying nuisance vehicles, the Portfolio Holder commented that the Chief Information Officer would be able to take this away to review and that completing the transformation work in-house was positive in ensuring development met the Council's need rather than working through third parties. He added that the License taxis trade may also be able to be used to identify nuisance vehicles through dashcams.

Recruitment - in response to a Member's question whether staff recruitment to support system redesign had been completed the Chief Information Officer stated that the posts had been filled and staff would be in place by early November.

Resident feedback - it was commented that resident feedback was vital in improving the systems in place to promote use. Some apps have systems where people can sign up for alerts, and it was asked whether the Council could consider a similar facility. The Chief Information Officer stated the ability to create a dashboard to receive feedback and provide live reporting by ward for Members was planned for next year.

It was asked whether resident user testing could be considered for future redesigned processes. It was agreed this could be considered.

Licensing and Net Zero – it was commented that the licensing objectives could be reviewed to encourage support for the Council's net zero targets. The Portfolio Holder agreed and stated that licensing public events could also be requested to take account of net zero targets. He added that there were significant opportunities to use licensing objectives to nudge behaviours and support mitigation.

Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 24 October 2024

CCTV – Members commented that the use of rapid deployment cameras had been a significant factor in reducing anti-social behaviour in some areas and it was asked whether their use would be extended. The Portfolio Holder stated that he was pleased that the cameras had a positive impact, however there were, at this time, not enough cameras.

Decision:

- a) The Committee noted the report.
- b) The Committee recommended officers explore the possibility of user testing groups at community hubs.

391 Member's Item: Winter Fuel Payment

Discussion:

Councillor Anang was invited to introduce the Member's item. He stated that under government plans a significant number of pensioners were due to lose the winter fuel payment whilst the price cap for energy prices was scheduled to rise in October by 10%. Consequently, pensioners were losing support at a time when prices were rising. That would have a significant negative impact on many pensioners in Medway and he asked the Council to outline what action it intended to take to ameliorate this.

The following issues were discussed:

The Head of Benefits and Financial Welfare provided information on the work the Council had undertaken to support pensioners. The Council had identified 440 pensioners affected by the change through the low-income family tracker. Those pensioners had been contacted to invite them to Council events to ensure they had claimed their entitlements.

The Council held a number of events at libraries or elderly persons lunch clubs to offer advice to those who may be affected, including a recent event at the Pentagon Centre where 130 people were assisted. These events were also attended by partner organisations such as foodbanks and Public Health to provide further advice and support. The aim was to ensure that those in need claimed all the support they were entitled to.

The Head of Benefits and Financial Welfare added that the Household Support Fund remained in place until the end of the financial year and was available for those struggling with energy bills. Council staff were able to refer service users to the fund.

Twydall event – a Member welcomed the events as a positive example of proactive work by the Council and informed the Committee an event was scheduled to take place at Twydall Hub on 6 November 2024.

Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 24 October 2024

Hard to reach groups - Members welcomed the positive working with partners to ensure that people in need claimed their full entitlements and provided details of groups who may be able to assist. The Head of Benefits and Financial Welfare undertook to contact groups provided by Members.

The Head of Benefits and Financial Welfare added that the Council were not only working on direct financial support, it aimed to ensure that those in need received all the benefits they were entitled to such as attendance allowance and blue badges.

The Chief Operating Officer stated that there was a proposal in the draft budget for a modest provision in relation to the Housing Support Fund, however it would be dependent upon decisions made by central government in the national budget.

Decision:

The Committee noted the comments from the Chief Operating Officer in response to the Member's item.

392 Universal Credit and Welfare Reforms Annual Progress Report

Discussion:

The Head of Benefits and Financial Welfare introduced the report. She highlighted the work of the services which included the continued administration of the Household Support Fund and the development of welfare functions within the Council.

The following issues were discussed:

Performance – Members welcomed the news that 25% of all compliments received by the Council had been in relation to the work of the Benefits and Financial Welfare Service, and this reflected positively on the enhanced service the Council had developed over the last year.

Free School Meals – in response to a Member question whether free school meals could be extended to those children that were home schooled, the Head of Benefits and Financial Welfare stated that the legislation had previously not allowed Councils to do this, however, there had been some recent changes in guidance and she would review the issue with colleagues and respond to the Committee following the meeting.

Food and Hygiene Banks - in response to a question whether food and hygiene banks had also been introduced to the satellite hubs, the Head of Benefits and Financial Welfare stated that the Council had become partners with the food and Hygiene banks and had completed deliveries to residents in need. She also undertook to consider providing packs directly to the contact centres.

Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 24 October 2024

Department for Work and Pension (DWP) – a Member expressed disappointment that a representative from the DWP wasn't available to attend the meeting tonight. It was agreed their attendance would be beneficial to the Committee and that the Chairperson would contact the DWP to request this for future reports.

Decision:

- a) The Committee noted the work referenced in this report.
- b) The Committee requested the Chairperson, Vice Chairperson and relevant officers seek a meeting with the DWP to promote attendance at future Committee meetings.
- c) Officers to review whether free school meals could be extended to children who are home schooled and are in need.

393 Employee Engagement Survey 2024 Results

Discussion:

The Head of Council Planning and Programmes introduced the report. The Employee Survey had been the first under a new administration and new Chief Executive. It was held during a period where part of the Council's headquarters Gun Wharf was closed for safety reasons due to the discovery of RAAC in the building.

58% of staff had completed the survey. The Regeneration Culture and Environment Department had the lowest response rate and work was underway to consider the reasons for this and ways to promote more responses in the future.

A number of staff briefings had taken place to explain the survey results and the Medway Makers employee group was scheduled to consider the survey and provide feedback to management. The Corporate Management Team (CMT) had reviewed the survey, and a proposed action plan was outlined in the report.

The following issues were discussed:

Members welcomed the improved timeliness of receiving the report.

Trade Union engagement – in response to a question regarding the extent of trade union involvement in the survey, the Head of Council Planning and Programmes stated the unions had been engaged in reviewing survey results, however, she was not aware of the extent of union involvement in the design and promotion of the survey itself and undertook to provide more detail following the meeting. Members commented that consideration should be given to union involvement in future staff surveys.

Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 24 October 2024

Partial closure of Gun Wharf – a Member commented that the partial closure of Gun Wharf had a significant impact on ways of working for staff. It was asked whether the effects of this change in ways of working had been included as part of the survey. The Head of Council Planning and Programmes stated that the survey had highlighted the issues related to the partial closure of Gun Wharf such as loneliness and staff ways of working was under review as part of the Gun Wharf project.

The Chief Operating Officer added that the Council wanted to keep the survey consistent so it would provide comparable data year on year and another survey had taken place specifically on the subject of the partial closure of Gun Wharf.

Members commented that the covid pandemic and partial closure of Gun Wharf had significantly changed how staff work and further consideration of how staff had coped working at home would be helpful. The Chief Operating Officer agreed to consider how this might be achieved.

Bullying and harassment – a Member commented that the survey identified concerns regarding bullying and harassment, however no instances had been investigated in the last year under the Speak Up Policy. It was asked whether the survey could be used to raise awareness of the Speak Up Policy. The Head of Council Planning and Programmes stated that the sexual harassment policy would be updated next year following changes to national legislation and this would be one way awareness of these issues could be raised.

In response to a question regarding what action the Council was taking in relation to bullying and harassment, the Chief Operating Officer stated that the issue had been considered by the Corporate Management Team and plans were being developed to address the issue.

Staff workload – the significant increase of staff who reported feeling valued was welcomed, however, it was noted that 41% of staff felt they did not have time to do their job within their contracted hours and it was asked what the causes of this were. The Chief Operating Officer explained the Council was a lean authority with a growing level of demand for services and financing was a significant issue. The Corporate Management Team were undertaking a rightsizing project to respond to this, to ensure resources were in the right place. In addition the Council's transformation programme would provide new ways of working and cost savings.

Succession Planning - in response to a question what the Council was doing to address older staff retiring, the Head of Council Planning and Programmes stated that the Medpay project included a career progression pathway to improve the Council's succession planning. The Council had also recently approved a new recruitment strategy to attract younger people into the workforce and an updated flexible retirement policy was under development to improve the retention of knowledge and experience in the workforce.

Decision:

**Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 24 October
2024**

- a) The Committee noted the report.
- b) Officers to consider options to include further consultation with unions in future staff surveys.

394 Work Programme

Discussion:

The Democratic Services Officer introduced the report and noted there were no changes to the Work Programme.

Decision:

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

Chairperson

Date:

Steve Dickens, Democratic Services Officer

Telephone: 01634 332051

Email: steve.dickens@medway.gov.uk