

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

**Thursday, 28 November 2024**

**6.30pm to 8.41pm**

**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, Jones, Kemp, McDonald, Pearce and Mark Prenter
- Substitutes:** Councillor Spring (Substitute for Hackwell)
- In Attendance:** Paul Boyd, Chief Information Officer  
Councillor Simon Curry, Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Strategic Regeneration  
Steve Dickens, Democratic Services Officer  
Katey Durkin, Chief Finance Officer  
Wayne Hemingway, Head of Democratic Services  
David Reynolds, Head of Revenue Accounts

**458 Apologies for absence**

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Hackwell.

**459 Record of meeting**

The record of the meeting held on 24 October 2024 was agreed and signed by the Chairperson as correct.

**460 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances**

There were none.

**461 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.

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

**Discussion:**

The following issues were discussed:

**Transition to Electric Vehicles** – a Member commented that planning regulations in conservation areas were slowing the installation of electric charging points. He asked the Portfolio Holder what action the Council was taking to improve this. The Portfolio Holder explained that the Council had a strategy for installation of electric vehicle charging points, however it was reliant upon grants, so funding was limited. Historic England were considering how charging points could be incorporated into conservation areas and this had caused delay. The Council was in favour of innovative design options to solve these challenges such as charging points contained in bollards or Council car parks and officers were working to find solutions.

A Member commented that it was important that conservation areas and building issues should not prevent the Council's Climate Change objectives such as the installation of more efficient windows for buildings and solar panels. The Portfolio Holder agreed and noted it was important to work with partners not to destroy historic sites and to take a bespoke approach for buildings and streets as required.

**Trees** – in response to a question asking for his thoughts on tree planting schemes, the Portfolio Holder explained that there was a tree planting scheme in place, but it was on a smaller scale than previous schemes and the Council was reliant on grant funding. 3,500 trees were scheduled to be planted in February and the tree policy was being reviewed. The Council continued to look for opportunities for further funding and did not underestimate the importance the role of planting trees in tackling climate change, flood prevention and town centre cooling.

A Member commented that many of the trees planted previously by the Council had died and had asked if they could be replaced. The Portfolio Holder explained that 80% of trees which were not adequately cared for would die, so it was vital that the aftercare was effective, there was, however, no funding available to replace trees that had died.

**Active Travel** - The Portfolio Holder was asked for his views on active travel, in particular on bus travel as a sustainable option. The Portfolio Holder agreed that promoting additional bus use would reduce congestion in Medway. The Council had created an active travel working group, and he was pleased that

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Arriva had recently announced the addition of new more environmentally friendly buses for the area.

He added that the Council was interested in bus franchising opportunities which would give the Council additional powers regarding routes, timetabling and ticketing, however, it was unclear how this would work in practice at the current time so the Council would wait for further information from government.

The Portfolio Holder added that the Council would consider a bus station in the Strood railway station area to improve connections to the peninsula, a Member commented that it may be helpful to discuss proposals with colleagues in other areas which have had similar experience. The Portfolio Holder agreed and added that he also wanted to improve links with Maidstone as many staff at Maidstone Hospital lived in Medway.

In relation to rail, the Council had also held meetings with Network Rail and Southeastern rail to consider how customers could use multiple forms of transport with one ticket to encourage greater use of public transport.

A Member asked the Portfolio Holder to outline their thoughts on active travel as a way to ease congestion and reduce emissions. The Portfolio Holder agreed that sustainable travel was a significant factor in lowering emissions and improving air quality in the area. The numbers of children using inhalers had risen significantly and this was an issue of concern. The Portfolio Holder agreed that Members may benefit from more information regarding climate change, including information regarding key performance indicators.

A Member commented that the Council could be a leader in reducing car usage and asked how many staff used the car share service. The Portfolio Holder did not have the current figures for staff who utilised care share schemes but agreed those schemes were helpful for the Council to meet its emission goals.

**Flooding** – in response to a question regarding funds to solve flooding in Cherry Tree Road, Rainham, the Portfolio Holder stated that Environment Agency figures highlighted a significant increase in properties at risk from flooding in medway and a grant application was being made. He undertook to update ward Councillors on the progress of this application.

A Member commented that the River Strategy would be an important part of flood defences and asked the Portfolio Holder what progress had been made in its development. The Portfolio Holder stated the river strategy was scheduled for completion in the spring on 2025 and the Council continued to work with partners on flood defences through a number of schemes such as tree planting.

**Air Quality** – in response to a question what the benchmark for success of the red routes scheme was in relation to air quality, the Portfolio Holder stated the red routes scheme had been designed to tackle congestion issues rather than air quality. He added that bus services in Rainham had shown an improvement following the implementation of the scheme.

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**Cycle Route** – in response to a question when the results of the cycle route consultation would be reported, the Portfolio Holder stated that the consultation had been completed and the local cycling infrastructure plan would be considered by Cabinet in the near future.

**Recycling** – a Member welcomed the positive work undertaken on small appliance repairs and asked the Portfolio Holder if the impact of this on waste recycling was known, the Portfolio Holder stated that the impact could not be quantified, although unfortunately the grant funding had run out it was a really positive scheme and the scheme would be continued with support of our Norse partners.

**Safer Streets** – a Member commented that improvements in air quality was a goal for the programme, he asked the Portfolio Holder if air quality levels had been benchmarked and how he had been improved and what would represent success for the scheme. The Portfolio Holder stated that the scheme would reduce the number of cars on the road so would improve air quality, he undertook to provide more information about current levels of air quality and measurements for success following of the meeting.

During the item Members discussed a number of other issues including potholes in the area, the regularity of waste collection and rail works taking place during festival events which affected traffic and local businesses. It was agreed these issues did not fall within the remit of the Committee and could be more appropriately considered by another Committee.

### **Decision:**

The Committee noted the report.

### **463 Council Plan Performance Monitoring Report and Strategic Risk Summary - Quarters 1 and 2 2024/25**

#### **Discussion:**

The Chief Finance Officer introduced the report which presented the key performance indicators within the remit of the Committee from One Medway Council Plan, and the latest strategic risk register.

The following issues were discussed:

**Recruitment and Retention** – a Member welcomed that Medway salaries were closer to the market comparison following last year's pay rise and noted that the draft budget proposed a further 5% rise for the coming year. He asked how much further Medway had to do to match market comparisons. The Chief Finance Officer explained that the Medium Term Financial Outlook projected a 5% pay rise for April 2025 and a 3% pay rise in April 2026 which would be at or above inflation in the medium term, in addition the Council continued to fund the Medpay scheme which would provide staff with a career progression framework and succession planning for the Council.

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A Member asked if there any correlation between the proposed pay rise which would cost the Council £10m and the £26m identified gap in the draft budget for next year which would need to be funded through the EFS. The Chief Finance Officer explained that the pay rise was considered necessary because the Council had previously struggled to recruit and retain staff and have consequently had to employ temporary staff at a higher cost to the Council. In her opinion, permanent staff reflected the Council's core values and were an asset to the Council. In addition the Medpay scheme would assist the Council in creating a career progression framework. Whilst the £10m cost of the proposed pay rise seemed significant, it was relatively small in the context of a £470m budget.

**Agency Staff** – a Member asked if temporary staff levels had reduced, the Chief Finance Officer stated that the Medpay programme was underway but had not been completed so comparative data would be difficult to provide, she undertook to provide further information on temporary staff to the Committee following the meeting.

### **Decision:**

- a) The Committee considered the Q1 and Q2 2024/25 progress of the performance indicators used to monitor progress of the Council's priorities, as set out in Appendix 1 to the report.
- b) The Committee noted the Strategic Risk Summary as set out in Appendix 2 to the report.

## **464 Revenue Budget Monitoring - Round 2 2024/25**

### **Discussion:**

The Head of Revenue Accounts introduced the report, he highlighted that the projected overspend in round two showed an improved position, however the situation remained challenging.

### **Decision:**

- a) The Committee noted the results of the second round of revenue budget monitoring for 2024/25.
- b) The Committee noted that Cabinet instructed the Corporate Management Team to implement urgent actions to bring expenditure back within the budget agreed by the Full Council.

#### **465 Capital Budget Monitoring - Round 2 2024/25**

##### **Discussion:**

The Head of Revenue Accounts introduced the report. He informed the Committee that the Capital Programme for the Business Support Department remained within budget. The Capital Programme as a whole was underspent by £7.554m in round two.

The following issues were discussed:

**Underspend** –in response to a question requesting further information regarding the reported underspend, the Chief Finance Officer explained there had been a £5m underspend on the purchase of the new waste fleet. In addition, there had also been an underspend of £1.6m in relation to the development of Cozenten Sports Centre, however, a new programme had recently been announced which would use that £1.6m and this would be reflected in round three monitoring.

##### **Decision:**

The Committee noted the results of the second round of capital budget monitoring for 2024/25.

#### **466 Draft Capital and Revenue Budget 2025/26**

##### **Discussion:**

The Chief Finance Officer introduced the draft budget report which set out the budget projections for 2025-26, she highlighted the budget provided for a net growth of £26m in the next financial year.

The Chief Finance Officer added that section 13 of the report outlined key announcements in the recent budget, detailed grant allocations were expected to be announced in the week commencing 16 December, but the overall effect was expected to be broadly positive for the Council.

Section 14 of the report noted the Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) which would be required to meet the budget gap. This was projected to be £26m, officers and Portfolio Holders continued to work to close that gap.

The following issues were discussed:

**Cuts to Services** – a Member noted that following the request for EFS last year, cuts to services were announced, he asked whether there were proposed cuts in services or rises in fees associated with the 2025-26 draft budget. The Chief Finance Officer explained that the proposals include the full year impact of some reductions agreed last year, but primarily the proposals relate to projected additional income, including from leisure services following a review

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of fees and charges to meet the additional costs of running those services, and from events at the Corn Exchange following its successful refurbishment.

Children's Services were reviewing costs principally through managing demand and effective use of services keeping costs low.

The Business Support and centralised proposals relate to the department focusing on rightsizing back office functions and investing to save in transformation.

**Medpay** – A Member asked if the Council would need to borrow to fund Medpay, the Chief Finance Officer explained that EFS would be required to fund the budget gap, however it was not allocated to particular services and not directly related to Medpay.

A Member commented that in his view the proposed pay rise and costs of Medpay were not prudent at the current time. The Chief Finance Officer stated that the Council wanted to retain experienced staff and had to correct where pay rises were below that of its peers for a number of years which had affected recruitment and retention issue for the Council.

A Member commented that the budget was developed to provide statutory services and included rightsizing those services which had struggled to recruit and retain staff.

### **Decision:**

- a) The Committee noted that Cabinet had instructed officers to continue to work with Portfolio Holders in formulating robust proposals to reduce the budget deficit for 2025/26 and to continue to liaise with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to secure support through the Exceptional Financial Support scheme.
- b) The Committee commented on the proposals outlined in the Draft Capital and Revenue Budgets 2025/26 as set out in the minutes and forwarded the proposals on to the individual overview and scrutiny committees.

## **467 Work Programme**

### **Discussion:**

The Democratic Services Officer introduced the report and highlighted one addition to the work programme for January 2025 when a report relating to a recent Local Government Ombudsman decision would be considered.

The Democratic Services Officer also highlighted the proposed Task Group Protocol at appendix three to the report. The Protocol would codify existing practice in relation to undertaking task group work including composition and the role of substitute members. It had been considered by an informal cross-party group of Overview and Scrutiny Members and the Committee was asked

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to submit comments to Council and recommend approval for inclusion in the Council's Constitution.

### **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.
- c) The Committee considered the Task Group Protocol at Appendix 3 to the report and recommended approval by Full Council for inclusion in the Council's constitution.

### **Chairperson**

**Date:**

**Steve Dickens, Democratic Services Officer**

Telephone: 01634 332051

Email: [steve.dickens@medway.gov.uk](mailto:steve.dickens@medway.gov.uk)