

Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee

30 January 2025

Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Business Management

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Van Dyke, Portfolio Holder for Business Management

Summary

This annual report provides an account of the role of the Portfolio Holder for Business Management. 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. Recommendation

1.1. The Committee is 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 Business Management, as set out in the Council's constitution are:

- Complaints Policy and Management
- Customer and Business Support (CABS)
- HR
- Internal Audit and Counter Fraud
- Legal

3. Background

3.1. My portfolio covers most of the strategic support services that are so vital to enabling the rest of the Council's services to deliver for our residents. Managing our business well is fundamental to securing financial sustainability for Medway Council and I am very proud and grateful to the staff in my portfolio.

4. Providing political leadership and challenge

4.1. I meet regularly with the officers responsible for managing the services in my portfolio. I am briefed on the day to day activity and performance of each service, am engaged in the development of the services and any transformational change, and discuss risks, issues and opportunities.

4.2. In addition to the work of the services in my portfolio, I am a member of the Kent and Medway Fire and Rescue Authority and also contribute to the following groups:

- Climate Change Working Party
- Ethical Framework Informal Working Party
- Member Development Advisory Group.
- Ward Improvement Fund Review Working Party

5. Championing the Interests of service users and Medway residents

5.1. I'm proud that the HR service supported the Council and the Unions to agree a 5% cost of living increase for Medway Council staff, more than 80% of whom live in Medway. The work of the team to support the MedPay review which will continue into next year, will be instrumental to improving the Council's staff recruitment and retention rates, in turn enabling us to improve the delivery of our services for residents.

5.2. I receive and monitor monthly performance reports in respect of the customer contact channel, complaints and Blue Badges, in particular. Performance across the year has been very good, with customers dealt with promptly and effectively. I am satisfied that the service closely manages performance and addresses any adverse deviation, quickly and thoroughly.

6. Support for key service areas

6.1. **Customer and Business Support (CABS)**

6.1.1. CABS provides the authority's primary customer contact channel and a centralised administration support function, so is an essential part of the delivery supply chain, touching most council services and many customers. CABS operates on a blended role basis, moving resources to where most needed. CABS incorporates the Customer Relations Team (CRT), the Community Interpreting Service (CIS) and delivers the Blue Badge service for Medway residents

6.1.2. **Customer Contact Management:** CABS manages the first point of contact for advice and information, and for service requests, for (including, but not exhaustively) Revenues and Benefits, Social Care, Planning, Housing, Home Choice, Environment, Waste, Highways, Leisure, School Admissions, Free School Meals and School Transport, and Libraries. Service extends to face to face initial support at Kingsley House in Gillingham. Helping residents

to access services and information, includes promoting and supporting self-serve. In the period 1 April – 31 December 2024 CABS dealt with an average of 21,453 phone enquiries per month, achieving around 84% calls answered year to date.

- 6.1.3. **Administration:** Administration tasks include minute taking, assessing and processing bus pass applications, document scanning/indexing, document uploads, land searches and finance support. Administration tasks and responsibilities are currently under review, to streamline processes and most effectively use resources.
- 6.1.4. Between April and December 2024, 113 safeguarding meetings were supported and the team made 7,533 social care referrals. Approximately 3,500 integrated discharge and 'Home First' cases were handled by CABS, supporting the council and NHS with hospital discharges into care arrangements.
- 6.1.5. **Compliments, Complaints and Feedback:** The Customer Relations Team (CRT) provides a professional management and reporting service in respect of all customer feedback, i.e. comments, compliments and complaints. It supports complaint handlers across the authority, placing an important focus on learning from complaints to improve service delivery. The CRT acts as the interface with relevant Ombudsman and as guardian of complaint response thoroughness and timeliness. The Customer Relations Manager has continued to deliver regular Customer Complaint training and operates a pan-council Complaint Handlers Group, to better understand complaints performance and promote shared learning.
- 6.1.6. The CRT continues to implement the new Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's and the Housing Ombudsman Service's Complaint Handling Codes.
- 6.1.7. The council continues to receive many encouraging compliments about its corporate service, with more than one compliment received for every three complaints. A total of 1138 stage one complaints were received from 1 April 2024 to 31 December 2024, and 151 stage two complaints for the same period. Year to date performance for stage one corporate complaints reached 89% at the end of Q3, exceeding the council's 10-day response target of 80%. Performance for responding to the more complex stage two corporate complaints reached 84% at the end of Q3, exceeding the council's 15-day response target of 75%. Performance continued to remain strong in Children's and Adult's social care complaints, with Children's Social Care statutory complaints achieving 100%, Adult Social Care statutory complaints achieving 93%, and non-statutory social care complaints achieving 90% by the end of Q3, each far exceeding the Council's target of 75%.
- 6.1.8. **The Community Interpreting Service (CIS):** offers translation and interpretation in over 60 languages to help provide equal access to services to those for whom English is not their first language. This extends beyond the authority, with the NHS, schools and other public services being

prominent clients. During the period 1 April to 31 December 2024, CIS received: 6841 requests for interpreting and translation services, of which:

- Face to Face interpreting appointments numbered: 2440 (36% of total demand)
- Remote (telephone or video) appointments totalled: 3991(58% of total demand)
- Translation assignments amounted to: 411 (6% of total demand). CIS interpreters supported 168 services, including Medway Council, the NHS, and other clients.

6.1.9. This year the service successfully launched *Interpreters Live*, allowing deaf customers to access council services using a British Sign Language interpreter via a video link.

6.1.10. **Blue Badges:** CABS manages the council's Blue Badge service in line with the Department for Transport's legislation, offering an online application process with digital assistance when needed. Against a 12-week processing target, the cumulative year to date performance is 92% (6024) processed within target and 48% (3161) better than target (processed within six weeks).

6.1.11. **Conclusion:** Customer and Business Support (CABS) plays a significant part in facilitating Medway residents and visitors to easily access council services and information. Reporting to the Head of Customer Experience, and working as part of the Information Section, the onus is on continuous improvement and modernisation, promoting customer self-serve, but whilst retaining customer choice of contact methods. The administration element of CABS offers services a resilient, flexible, centralised administration resource, allowing them to focus on core activities.

6.1.12. I am fully supportive of the service and the work which is being undertaken, and I am committed to supporting continued progress towards ease of access to council services, to customer choice and to the efficiencies and reliability that a centralised administration service offers. The team has a significant part to play in the delivery of the authority's Financial Improvement and Transformation Plan, improving service and saving costs.

6.2. Internal Audit and Counter Fraud

6.2.1. The Internal Audit (IA) team provides independent assurance over the council's framework of governance, risk management and internal control, through the delivery of assurance reviews across various council services. These reviews are selected via an independent audit needs analysis to ensure that IA resource is aimed at the areas of highest risk to the council meeting its objectives.

6.2.2. IA assurance activity is driven by workplans that are approved by the Audit Committee on a six-monthly basis and the volume of assurance reviews to be completed is based on resources projected to be available. The plan is amended in year as necessary to reflect any changes in predicted resource, with all revisions to the plan agreed by the Audit Committee.

- 6.2.3. The Audit committee received the annual report and Chief Audit Executives opinion for 2023-24 in September 2024 with final performance against key targets for 2023-24 (as of 31 March 2024) as follows;
- 91% of estimated resources delivered;
 - 85% of the agreed assurance work delivered (target 95%); and
 - 80.8% of management actions implemented by the agreed date.
- 6.2.4. A survey is issued each year to gauge the satisfaction with internal audit services, the most recent of which identified positive satisfaction from 92.3% of people that responded.
- 6.2.5. Moving into 2024-25, the team has been working on the agreed internal audit plans. While there has been significant impacts on resources created by staff absences and periods of vacancy, the Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud is confident that this will not impact on his ability to deliver an annual opinion, although it will likely be based on a limited scope of work.
- 6.2.6. The Counter Fraud (CF) team provides counter fraud and investigation services, which are outlined in an annual plan with four core areas of activity, which includes fraud awareness and prevention, pro-active and reactive activity.
- 6.2.7. The Audit Committee received the 2023-24 annual report in September 2024, which outlined the following results;
- 13 fraud awareness sessions run over a six-month period with 126 employees attending;
 - Detailed awareness sessions undertaken with two services and a Members awareness session.
 - Internal and external communications during international fraud awareness week 2023.
 - 258 investigations concluded in year
 - £190,354 of historic Council tax identified (resulting in additional £94,219pa in future years),
 - £6,612 in Housing Benefit overpayments, and
 - Notional savings of £93,000 linked to the recovery of a council Property.
- 6.2.8. This represents total savings of £384,185 against costs of £229,219 for Medway's share counter fraud team. This represents good value for money.
- 6.2.9. Moving into 2024-25 A process of conducting fraud risk assessments in all key areas of the council has been an ongoing workstream and a fraud risk register will be presented to the Audit Committee in January 2025 outlining the results of the assessments completed to date. This will remain a live piece of work, with risks continually reviewed and assessments completed when new risks are identified. The register will be use
- 6.2.10. Pro-active work has already been undertaken in housing, although this is still in the early stages, so there are no results available at this time. The team

have also undertaken some pro-active work with the Parking Enforcement teams to tackle misuse of blue badges in car parks around Chatham, which proved useful with a number of expired badges seized and PCN's issued to vehicles displaying photocopied badges. There are plans for this activity to be undertaken in other parts of the borough in the future to direct the use of counter fraud resource and future pro-active activity.

6.3. Legal Services and Local Land Charges

- 6.3.1. The Local Land Charges team successfully transferred the LLC1 service to M Land Registry, the team were praised by the Land registry who highlighted their resilience and persistence in undertaking all aspects of the transfer and particularly their dedication to ensure that the data transferred was of the highest quality.
- 6.3.2. The team are now turning their attention to other projects including assisting Planning with Tree Preservation Orders and the Environmental Protection Tema with Smoke Control Orders
- 6.3.3. Legal Services have enjoyed a period of real stability which has followed from the successful restructure that took place last year. This has enabled us to focus on service delivery rather than on a constant stream of recruitment activities.
- 6.3.4. The Place half of the team continue to operate a shared service model delivering a legal service to Gravesham Borough Council (GBC) which covers the whole range of District Council functions. The team have delivered on several large projects for GBC including the purchase of a Farm site, and the transfer of the operation of the market to Medway based company Beer & Feast Limited.
- 6.3.5. The Adults and SEN team are working closely with their respective client teams to deal with large backlogs of Community DOLS Applications and SEN tribunal cases. In both these areas the backlogs are partly as a result of nationwide issues with being able to source appropriate experts such as educational psychologists.
- 6.3.6. The Childcare team have seen an increase in the number of complex cases, especially those where there are either large numbers of children (family sizes in excess of 8 people) or where there are allegations of non-accidental injuries.
- 6.3.7. Overall the case load across the disciplines remains very high with the team carrying circa 1200 cases at any given time. We are also seeing cases both family and civil take significantly longer to resolve. This is again a feature of the national picture with the shortage of available court time having a knock on effect. We are routinely seeing non- urgent cases listed four or five months away and multi-day hearings being even further away.

6.4. HR Services

6.4.1. Supporting Strategies

- **Workforce Strategy 2028**
- **Employee Engagement Strategy**
- **Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategy**
- **Recruitment Strategy**

6.4.2. Employee Engagement

6.4.3. The HR team co-ordinates and supports the Medway Maker engagement champions. They are a selection of motivated individuals who care about people matter across Medway Council. They are a proactive 'sounding board' for prospective change and new initiatives. The group have been active in areas such as the development of our Press Pause Campaign, supporting the children in care Christmas appeal as well as other key initiatives.

6.4.4. Staff feedback matters. With the closure of our Head Quarters a short survey was sent to all staff to gain insight into current working arrangements and the aspirations for future working arrangements. In addition, our annual staff survey was undertaken in May and results shared with employment Matters Committee and this committee. The survey along with a Service manager survey on our ways of working has provided valuable insight of staff opinion across a wide range of employment areas, which will aid our tracking against our Employee Engagement Survey and our re design of our head Quarters.

6.4.5. As part of our ongoing work, we launched a set of new Values for the organisation. To support the launch a Managers 'lets talk' framework has been produced and provides a script and useful tips, tools and suggestions to support our managers engage with their staff as the campaign has continued through the year.

6.4.6. Employee Value Proposition (EVP) – Our People Promise

6.4.7. The council constantly reviews its Employee Value Proposition (EVP) or 'People Promise'. This sets out information about what individuals can expect in terms of the 'deal' or psychological contract between employer and employee when they come to work for the council. In other words, it answers two fundamental questions for individuals: I.e.

(i) 'why should I work for this organisation – what makes it stand out against the rest'? and (ii) 'why should I stay'?

6.4.8. The EVP is a comprehensive collection of benefits an organisation uses to attract and retain talent. It captures the essence of an organisation by focusing on the compensation, benefits, career development, work

environment, and culture the company offers its employees. As part of this year pay proposal and staff feedback we are seeking to enhance our wellness support and reviewing a number of new benefits, not least a salary sacrifice scheme for bicycles to support our climate challenge.

6.4.9. **Employee Relations (ER)**

6.4.10. The HR Consultant team has seen considerable turnover in the last few years, and still has uncovered posts. This team advises, coaches and supports managers on a variety of ER cases which are often complex in nature, this including schools.

6.4.11. The team work closely with Trade Union colleagues and have worked in collaboration with our Fraud team to design and implement HR investigation officers, so these can be done in a timely manner.

6.4.12. Proactive intervention continues to be a priority with our recent deep dive into sickness absence, which means a policy review, procedures made simple, contractual review and training as well as regular Management information being available.

6.4.13. **TRACS Recruitment**

6.4.14. Medway Careers Hub – (Platform is Tribepad)

6.4.15. Medway Careers Hub (Tribepad), our new candidate Applicant Tracking System (ATS), will go live with a soft launch next week (23/01/2025) and full implementation from 29/01. All new roles will be advertised using the new platform from this date, but there will be a period of transition where live roles already advertised on the Jobs Go Public (JGP) site will remain until they close. Anyone visiting the JGP site going forward will automatically be sign posted to the live vacancies on the new 'Medway Careers Hub'.

6.4.16. Our Talent Acquisition Team undertake the recruitment and onboarding of all permanent, casual and fixed term contract employees, for not just our own organisation but Gravesham Borough Council and schools, which purchase our services annually. They also coordinate all work experience placements and administer the DBS checking service for all eligible staff working within Medway Council plus the many umbrella body organisations which purchase this service.

6.4.17. Throughout Q3, the team have worked closely with Tribepad to build the Medway Careers Hub. They have created all of the new templates, contracts, packages and documentation needed within the system to allow effective automation of the system, this has been a huge and successful project. The wider teams (TAT and TRACS) have also now received training on the system and are looking forward to the benefits and changes that it will bring. They have viewed the site from a candidate's perspective, as well as from the talent team and hiring manager's viewpoint and will be on-hand to support the implementation. The system aims to improve the candidate

recruitment journey, providing a smoother, more informative process, helping us to become an Employer of Choice.

6.4.18. **Social Media**

6.4.19. With the implementation of the Children's and Adults team, there has been more capacity to push vacancies via social media and create a bigger online presence. Content has been created/sourced for the Facebook pages, which has encouraged continuous progress with engagement on the platform (up 94%). This month, we have been given access to the Medway Council LinkedIn page, the most recent post had over 20 engagements and 6 reposts, so we are hoping this platform will be better to help support recruitment for Children's Social Care (CSC). We will continue to work closely with the comms and marketing teams to source further content and build on this throughout the year.

6.4.20. Stats Overview

6.4.21. In Q3, the team recruited and onboarded 68 locum staff across the Council (ASC = 9, CSC = 18, CORP = 41, 27 of which were Educational Psychologists). The team processed 1,064 CVs and arranged 127 interviews across all sectors.

6.4.22. **ASC & CSC**

6.4.23. The new Children and Adults team has provided increased capacity and resilience, particularly for permanent recruitment.

6.4.24. Across all CSC qualified and unqualified vacancies, the team advertised 67 roles, processed 933 CVs, arranged 295 interviews, made 70 offers (of which 46 were accepted) and supported the on-boarding of 48 new members of staff into their permanent positions. As a result, it has also been reported that our agency rate has dropped from 23.01% in October 2024 to 19.06% in December 2024, which is really positive news, and we continue to push for conversions from temp to perm and perm placements to reduce this rate even further.

6.4.25. We have now completely transferred the ASC perm recruitment into the specialist team and we hope to be able to replicate the CSC reporting for Adults, in the same level of detail, in Q4. With the changes and movement across ASC, we are working closely with the HRBP to support the ACS recruitment and fill vacancies that have been identified with the restructure, this remains a key priority for Q4.

6.4.26. Our Apprenticeship Academy undertakes the recruitment and onboarding of all apprentices into our organisation plus the registering of existing staff who are upskilling via an apprenticeship programme. They undertake the procurement and commissioning of all training providers and the quality assurance of their programme delivery. All apprentice activities and development opportunities are also undertaken by the Academy.

6.4.27. The Learning & Development team source, create and/or develop effective learning and development resources to support the organisation, our employees and our future leaders, via our Leadership Academy. They effectively administer the corporate training budget ensuring our council staff receive all required statutory, mandatory and legislative training.

6.4.28. Managers training is a key priority for us. The Complete Medway Manager (operational) training is running. To date the Complete Medway Manager (operational) training is:

- My Core Responsibilities Audit, Fraud, Performance and Equality – 51 delegates (this course is newly introduced), My Core Responsibilities Legal and Finance – 203 delegates; Me as a Manager – 189 delegates; Managing My Team – 201 delegates.

6.4.29. A further 167 courses were planned for delivery via teams/face to face with 47 being cancelled (22 cancelled due to corporate trainer leaving in October, the remainder due to PH trainer leaving, insufficient numbers and trainer sickness).

6.4.30. **E-learning**

- October 2024 - 105 course topics completed by 579 people;
 - November 2024 - 84 course topics completed by 341 people;
 - December 2024 - 67 course topics completed by 299 people.
- The most completed course across each month was Diversity and Equality.

6.4.31. ICO Data Security Protection Toolkit – 95% of staff successfully completed the training and policy agreement by the deadline of 31/10/2024. L&D have requested that the ICO dates are aligned to the ICB deadline date of 30 June each year. This has been agreed and a plan is in place for rollout to all staff Q4.

6.4.32. **Equalities**

6.4.33. We have redesigned and relaunched the Equality Board which is a decision making board to help drive forward the Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan. The action plan focuses on four key areas - Leadership, Data led, Empowering and enabling colleagues to thrive and prosper, and Ensuring all colleagues are valued and can contribute to our success. We are working with the board to define next years activity, however work is underway to support existing and help formulate staff reference groups. A mini survey was held to find out who might be interested and what types of groups our colleagues would like to join, this work continues in Quarter four.

6.4.34. We monitor and report on our Gender, disability and ethnicity Pay Gap which has been presented to Employment Matters committee this month.

6.4.35. **Payroll, Pensions and Systems**

- 6.4.36. Payroll have successfully paid and provided a Pensions service for just under 8500 employees across all payrolls, Medway, Gravesham, and schools which will total a gross salary bill 2023/24 in the excess of. £130 million, whilst running recruitment campaigns for numerous vacant posts in various roles.
- 6.4.37. Payroll & Pensions continue to provide a shared service to Gravesham Borough Council, the SLA is still under review with a focus on value for money incorporating all aspects of payroll including the HR and Payroll Integrated system.
- 6.4.38. Work continues with the transformation of the system to provide automation and reduce manual intervention, as well as the enrolment onto iConnect.
- 6.4.39. Other payroll projects include average holiday and a number within the system MyView automation:
- Sickness absence management – using self-serve/mobile functionality to add sickness information, removing the current topdesk process, and also reducing management input and be more timely
 - Annual leave carry forward – moving agreed year end balances into the base A/L entitlement for the following year, currently managed manually and risk of employees not utilising or over utilising
 - Bank holiday auto booking – for full time Mon to Fri staff, will no longer have to manually book bank holidays themselves, this will be done for them and leave balance reduced accordingly, saves time and ensures all public holidays booked out of entitlement
 - Probation process – utilisation of system generated messaging to prompt managers to complete an online form to record probation reviews and outcomes. Currently undertaken manually by HR support and is resource intensive
 - Automation of leaver process – entry of leave date via Myview rather than topdesk, will pay/recover any outstanding annual leave and recover any loan balances

6.4.40. **Medpay Review – Performance Progression Pay**

- 6.4.41. Phases 2-5 of the project have merged into one phase with the core objective of implementing MedPay Performance, Progression & Pay (PPP) for all eligible posts and areas of operations.
- 6.4.42. The MedPay Review Project Team have supported 19 key areas across the organisation the following areas of operations in implementing MedPay PPP to date.
- 6.4.43. 549 people have been assessed against career progression frameworks (CPF's) specific to their roles as part of the review. Discussions with Managers and Corporate Management Team is taking place to ensure

support is in place for the majority of the organisation to have implemented by 1 April 2025.

6.4.44. **Career Progression Framework (CPF) Applications**

6.4.45. MedPay PPP enables employees to take control of their career pathways and opportunity to apply for pay progression through the pay range based on evidence of competency in their role. In July 2024 there were 7 applications whilst in December 2024 there were 16 applications for CPF progression which equated to 3.5% of employees on either A or B of their career progression framework (the figure excludes casuals who are usually on a set spot point within their framework).

6.4.46. **Senior Management Leadership Framework**

6.4.47. The MedPay Review Team supported a strategic working group chaired by Adam Bryan, Director of Place, in designing a management competency framework for Medway Council. Although bespoke to Medway, the draft framework is based on National Chartered Manager Standards and focuses on developing leadership capacity across senior roles at Service Manager and above and has been considered by Employment Matters Committee this month.

7. Conclusion

7.1. I am proud of the diligent work of staff and progress made in the services within my portfolio and continue to be fully supportive of the services and the work which is being undertaken in challenging circumstances, and I am committed to supporting continued progress in the coming year.

Lead officer contact

Phil Watts, Chief Operating Officer phil.watts@medway.gov.uk

Appendices

None

Background papers

None