

Medway Council
Meeting of Regeneration, Culture and Environment
Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday, 21 January 2025

6.30pm to 9.51pm

Record of the meeting

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

Present: Councillors: Field (Chairperson), Cook (Vice-Chairperson), Animashaun, Campbell, Doe, Fearn, Filmer, Jackson, Lawrence, Myton, Peake and Williams

Substitutes: Councillor Gulvin

In Attendance: Councillor Louwella Prenter, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Homelessness
Alex Constantinides, Strategic Lead Front Line Services
Nicola Couchman, Democratic Services Officer
Michael Edwards, Head of Transport and Parking
Sunny Ee, Assistant Director Regeneration
Dave Harris, Chief Planning Officer
Jerry Pert, Operations Director, Volker Highways
Kerrie Richardson, Senior Engineer (Highway Operations)
James Sutton, Sustainable Transport Manager
Karen Tamsett, Highway Management Engineer
Rebecca Wilcox, Chief Housing Officer

610 Apologies for absence

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Etheridge.

611 Record of Meeting

The record of the meetings held on 12 December and 19 December 2024 were agreed and signed by the Chairperson as a correct record.

612 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

613 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests or Other Significant Interests and Whipping

Disclosable pecuniary interests

There were none.

Other significant interests (OSIs)

There were none.

Other interests

There were none.

614 Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Homelessness

Discussion:

The Committee received an overview of progress made on the areas within the scope of the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Homelessness, Councillor Louwella Prenter, which fell within the remit of this Committee.

The Portfolio Holder responded to Members' questions and comments as follows:

The impact of the Renters Rights Bill – The Committee were informed by the Portfolio Holder that she felt the Renters Rights Bill would have a positive impact and that reform was long overdue for the sector. Officers reported that the three main causes for homelessness approaches were the threat of family eviction, Section 21 notices and domestic abuse and whilst there may be a small spike in evictions due to the Bill but the Housing Team have measures in place to address this.

Rough Sleepers Funding – Members queried the level of funding going forward and were informed that the level of funding remains the same and in addition winter burden funding of over £100,000 had been awarded on 17 January 2025.

The acquisition of Temporary Accommodation (TA) properties – Members queried how many property purchases had been completed and how many were occupied. The Portfolio Holder informed the Committee that the current pipeline is 147 properties, and all 12 completed properties are now occupied and had an impact on reducing the cost of nightly paid TA.

Travellers at Wigmore Park – Members queried what had been learnt from Wigmore Park and how much it had cost so far. The Portfolio Holder explained that whilst it was disappointing that this issue had take so long to resolve the Councils position was to continue with the legal process which would come to trial in February 2025. The total costs so far would be provided outside of the

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meeting as the Portfolio Holder did not have this information available. The potential for any sites for travellers would be dependent on the Local Plan.

Foyer for Young People – The Portfolio Holder informed the Committee that the Foyer was an excellent, fully equipped facility which would enable young people to live independently and turn their lives around. The Committee were informed that there were currently 9 residents and that it would be fully occupied by the end of February. Members queried whether the accessible flats were occupied and whether a record was being kept of care leavers benefiting from the Foyer and officers were asked to provide this information after the meeting.

The Portfolio Holder took the opportunity to thank Luton Primary School pupils who had named the facility and to thank the Chief Executive of MHS who had worked closely with Medway for the last 20 years and wished him a happy and healthy retirement.

Social Housing – The Committee were informed that there was a pipeline of social housing properties and officers were keen for growth and that 44 properties are due to come online in Spring 2025. Properties in the pipeline also include properties in Strood. Officers reported that the Upper Mount scheme would also be reported to Planning Committee in the near future.

Satisfaction Surveys – Members queried the low levels of satisfaction for complaints and anti-social behaviour and were advised that this had been identified in the recent inspection. Officers were aware these areas needed further work, they were a main focus for improvement and improvement plans were in place to address both areas.

Further information requested - The Portfolio Holder and officers agreed to provide information on the number of new builds added to the HRA (broken down by year), on the cost of remuneration for Medway Development Company's Directors and on the number of rough sleepers involved in the legislative theatre and their contribution.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report and requested further information be provided as discussed.

615 Housing Revenue Account Capital and Revenue Budgets 2025/26

Discussion:

Officers summarised the report and the requirement for a 30 year balanced business plan and annual review. Members were informed that current reserves had been reduced which also reduced borrowing.

Members queried the level of voids and associated loss of rent. Officers explained that there was a similar picture across the South East, and that Covid

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still had an impact on contractors and equipment however the contract had been reproced and a task force had been used to target works and lower the level of voids. Members were informed that contracts now had index financial penalties if they failed to meet targets and the expectations on contractors were now much higher.

Members requested clarity regarding the level of debt and were informed that the current rent arrears for tenants in situ was £288,000 and this had been classed as recoverable. Officers explained that section 7.3.3 of the report stated the debt relating to both current and former tenants rent arrears and section 7.3.4 stated the estimated position at the end of 2024/25. The bad debt provision as of 31 March 2025 was set out in section 7.3.5 of the report and was £399,000.

Members queried the impact of National Insurance increases on the contract and officers agreed to provide information on this outside the meeting but reassured Members that there would be no risk to tenants.

Members identified an error in point 1 of page 68 of the Savills report and officers said they will ensure that this is amended.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to recommend the following to Cabinet:

- a) A proposed social rent increase of 2.7% (CPI of 1.7 plus 1%) for the social rent housing stock as set out in Appendix A (based on 52 collection weeks) with effect from 01 April 2025. All new tenancies issued during 2025/26, to be set at either the formula rent or rent cap for social rent dwellings, whichever is lower.
- b) A proposed affordable rent increase of the lower of Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rate or 2.7% (CPI of 1.7 plus 1%) for the affordable rent properties as set out in Appendix B (based on 52 collection weeks) with effect from 01 April 2025. All new tenancies during 2025/26 to be set at either 80% of market rent or the LHA rate for affordable rent dwellings, whichever is lower.
- c) A proposed rent increase of 2.7% to be applied to all garage tenure types with effect from 01 April 2025 as stated in section 5.
- d) That the service charges increases/decreases as set out in Appendix C of the report for 2025/26 be approved.
- e) That the revenue budget for the HRA service for 2025/26 as per Appendix D be approved.
- f) That the provision for the estimated repayment of debt, based on annuity-based payment as set out in section 7.3, on the HRA's outstanding debt for 2025/26 be approved.

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- g) To delegate authority to the Assistant Director, Culture and Community to agree weekly rental values presented by the Head of Tenant Services for any in-year completed HRA acquisitions and/or new builds during 2025/26.
- h) That Members approve the 30-year HRA Business Plan model as attached at Appendix E.

616 The Regulator of Social Housing - Inspection Outcome

Discussion:

Members congratulated officers on the outcome of the Inspection.

In response to a query about how progress against areas for improvement would be reported, officers explained that progress would be reported to the regulator, to monthly meetings, the HRA Governance Group and CMT. Members suggested that progress updates for the Committee would also be helpful and this would be discussed outside the meeting by Members.

Decision:

- a) The Committee noted the Regulatory Judgement issued by the Regulator of Social Housing following a proactive inspection of Medway Council.
- b) The Committee noted that Cabinet was recommended to support the continuous improvement plan which includes the actions required to address the improvement areas confirmed as part of the inspection process.
- c) The Committee noted that Cabinet was recommended to agree that the Tenants Panel and HRA Governance Group will monitor the progress against the continuous improvement plan, including being able to comment on progress updates in line with the plan, at each of its future meetings.

617 Highway Infrastructure Contract - Annual Review

Discussion:

Officers summarised the contents of the report, explained that the contract had been extended to 2027 and highlighted an additional £1.28m funding for potholes.

The Committee discussed the use of warm mix asphalt rather than hot rolled asphalt and were informed that Volker Highways have been using warm mix asphalt for the last decade but have used it exclusively in Medway for the last 2 years.

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In response to a query regarding plans for EV chargers on streets the Committee were informed that a bid had been submitted for £2.1m of capital funding and the result was due by early March with implementation planned from September if the bid was successful. Members said that any plans need to include maintenance as some EV chargers in car parks are not working. Officers informed the Committee that if they were informed of the locations of non-working EV chargers it would be followed up with the parking team.

Members queried the savings that had been generated by the use of temperature sensors and the installation of LED lanterns. Officers agreed to provide information on the savings for LED lanterns outside the meeting. With regards to temperature sensors officers explained that 10 had been installed but this had not provided sufficient data so another set of 34 sensors had been installed and the data will be reviewed when it becomes available.

In response to queries regarding apprenticeships and the impact of National Insurance increases, Members were informed that Volker Highways employ 2 apprentices and that the National Insurance increase had not yet been calculated for Medway.

Members expressed concerns about the lack of street lighting in Chatham and Brompton and flooding in some areas and were informed that if specific locations were shared with officers the issues would be investigated.

The impact that paved over gardens had on flooding was discussed by the Committee. Officers explained that under permitted development rights, residents were required to install drainage, and this condition would also be applied if planning permission was granted. If officers are made aware of hard paving that did not have adequate drainage they would investigate enforcement action.

Members requested further information on the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) outlined on pages 126 to 129 of the report and officers agreed to share data for the KPIs with the Committee.

Decision:

The Committee noted the contents of this report and the Annual Review for Year 7 of the Highway Infrastructure Contract as set out in Appendix 1 and requested that the KPI's were circulated to the Committee after the meeting.

618 Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP)

Discussion:

Officers presented the report to the Committee and explained that the plan demonstrates a commitment to cycling and walking routes and provides a framework for the delivery of a new network which allows Medway to attract funding.

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Officers informed the Committee that most interventions were supported during the consultation process except for the cycle route in Rainham and it was acknowledged that the designs were high level and subject to further work.

Members expressed concerns regarding the safety of the Rainham cycling route and officers explained that this route had generated a number of comments which were welcomed as part of the early stages as this was a concept design identified as a priority using the Department for Transport propensity to cycle tool and would develop over time.

Members queried how the Plan would be funded, and officers explained that implementation of the Plan would require external funding, grants and active travel funding and in order to attract external funding the Plan is required.

Members requested that schemes are not introduced at the cost of slowing down the movement of traffic across Medway and that the correct balance of safety for pedestrians, cyclists and road users was paramount. Members encouraged officers to be innovative and consider recreational routes for cycling such as the old Dockyard railway scheme as well as a pedestrian and cycle river crossing from Medway City Estate to Chatham.

Decision:

- a) The Committee commented on the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) and supporting documentation, and note that the Cabinet will be asked to agree the Plan in the Spring of 2025.
- b) The Committee noted the results of the consultation as set out in the report and Appendix F.

619 Infrastructure Funding Statement

Discussion:

The report was presented to the Committee for noting and had been considered by Cabinet in December 2024.

Members expressed a preference for S106 funding to benefit the local communities that would most feel the impact of development under the Local Plan. Officers explained that S106 funding was preferred as opposed to Community Infrastructure Levy's as S106 funding should address the impact of development in the local area.

Members queried progress with S106 funding for Cliffe bus services and were informed that following liaison with the interested parties, it had been decided to fund an extension to the existing bus service.

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Decision:

The Committee noted the contents of the report.

620 Petitions Report

Discussion:

The Committee considered a report which advised on the number of petitions received by the Council which fell within the remit of the Committee, including a summary of the responses sent to the petition organisers by officers.

Decision:

The Committee noted the petition responses and appropriate officer actions in paragraph 4.1 of the report.

621 Work programme

Discussion:

The Committee considered the work programme.

Decision:

- a) The Committee noted the report and agreed the work programme as set out at Appendix A to the report.
- b) The Committee noted the action log as set out at Appendix B to the report.

Chairperson

Date:

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