

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

Thursday, 30 January 2025

6.30pm to 8.30pm

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

Substitutes: Councillors:
Howcroft-Scott (Substitute for Cook)

In Attendance: Samantha Beck-Farley, Chief Organisational Culture Officer
Steve Dickens, Democratic Services Officer
Paul Boyd, Chief Information Officer
Katey Durkin, Chief Finance Officer
Dave Harris, Chief Planning Officer
Phil Watts, Chief Operating Officer
Councillor Zoë Van Dyke, Portfolio Holder for Business Management

668 Apologies for absence

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Cook.

669 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting held on 28 November 2024 was agreed and signed by the Chairperson as correct.

670 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

671 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.

672 Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman decision

Discussion:

The Chief Planning Officer introduced the report which concerned a recent complaint where the Ombudsman found the Council Planning Enforcement Service to be at fault in delaying taking enforcement action. The Ombudsman also found there was service failure with regard to access to enforcement records.

The Ombudsman made a number of recommendations, which were; the council, to apologise to the individual concerned, to ensure the service was adequately resourced, and to improve record keeping.

The Chief Planning Officer confirmed that the Council had apologised to the complainant. With regard to resourcing, the Chief Planning Officer stated that the Ombudsman had not fully appreciated the resource issues in the Council, with two of the three posts in the service vacant at the time the fault occurred. Recruitment had now taken place, and the service had developed digital systems in reporting potential planning breaches which had significantly reduced officers' workload by reducing the number of complaints received which were not breaches of planning permission, ensuring the service was adequately resourced.

In terms of record keeping, paper records were kept, unfortunately they were misfiled, and the electronic record was not up to date. The partial closure of Gun Wharf due to RAAC meant that officers had limited ability to search for misfiled records which caused some delay. Officers have been reminded of their responsibilities in terms of paper and electronic record keeping.

The following issues were discussed:

Delay – in response to a question how long the delay was in completing the case against the council's targets, the Chief Planning Officer explained that the case was originally identified as low priority, the planning officer, then the enforcement officer responsible for the case both left the council so given the resource issues, other cases were prioritised. In total it took around 18 months to 2 years to complete the case which included attempts by the team to find a negotiated solution between the two parties. A low priority case would expect to receive a site visit within three weeks; however, the completion of the case was dependent upon the parties involved and this had been a difficult case to resolve.

A Member commented that there had been two phases of the case, negotiation between the parties and then formal processes once negotiation failed. This caused some delay in the case and asked whether it was possible to reduce this delay. The Chief Planning Officer stated that the case had been unusual, and the missing files had created further difficulties, as a result officers have been reminded of the importance of record keeping.

Decision:

The Committee noted the outcome of the reviews into Planning Enforcement resource (Appendix A) and access of information during the partial building closure due to RACC (Appendix B), in response to the Ombudsman's recommendations.

673 Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Business Management

Discussion:

The Portfolio Holder for Business Management introduced her report and commended staff for the work they have undertaken, she also welcomed the proposed 5% increase for staff.

The following issues were discussed:

Pay increase – Members discussed the proposed increase in staff pay, it was commented that the pay award would support improved recruitment and retention meaning the Council would be less reliant on locums and benefit from improved services. The Portfolio Holder stated that the pay award would bring Medway staff towards some equity with other authorities within the region.

It was asked what the cost of the pay award was and whether there was any expected improvement in staff productivity as a result. The Chief Finance Officer stated that the draft budget report included provision of an additional c£5.9m for the staff pay award. The Portfolio Holder added that there was in her view, no evidence to suggest that staff were not working to full capacity.

Customer and Business Support (CABS) – Members discussed the drop in call volumes to the Council and it was asked if there were particular departments where this had occurred and what the reasons for this may be. The Portfolio Holder stated that it was difficult to pinpoint the reasons for a drop in call volume as residents were not contacting the Council and calls to departments would fluctuate during the year. The Chief Operating Officer undertook to provide a briefing paper on call volumes received per service over the last few years.

Community Interpreting Service (CIS) – a Member commented that smart technology had improved translation services in real time and asked whether there were any plans for the service to respond to a fall in demand. The Portfolio Holder stated that there had been a reduction in some types of cases,

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however there had been an improved service developed for deaf users and Ukrainian. A Member commented that it was a legal duty for the Council to provide interpretation and translation services.

Blue Badges – it was asked how many applications for blue badges were rejected; The Portfolio Holder did not have the information available but undertook to provide an answer in writing following the meeting, the Chief Information Officer added the vast majority of applications were accepted.

Temporary staff – in response to a question regarding how many Children's staff were temporary, the Chief Organisational Culture Officer stated that there were currently 56 locums covering 50 vacancies which were due to difficulties in recruitment caused by a national skills shortage, three officers on maternity leave, one sickness cover and one additional recruitment.

She added that since last April the numbers of locum staff in Children Social Care had fallen from 86 to 56, in legal services locum posts had reduced by eight, temporary staff had risen in Adult Social Care by 13 due to right sizing the service and had risen by 29 in SEND to reduce the backlog of ECP assessments. This meant that the overall number of locums had risen from 207 to 221 to reflect the rightsizing and backlogs in workload.

Medpay – it was asked what percentage of staff which have completed the Medpay process had seen an increase in pay. The Chief Organisational Culture Officer stated that in phase one, 64% of staff received a pay increase, which was mostly within the same pay band and 7% of posts were regraded. Phase two would be completed in May, however 37% of officers would receive a pay increase, with 13% of posts being regraded.

Pay and Review – an update of the progress of the pay and performance review was requested, the Chief Organisational Culture Officer stated that that performance objectives were now more effective, with short, medium and long-term goals linked to Council KPIs replacing annual objectives. There was also a career progression framework which helped the Council to identify and plan for succession and was supported by a workforce strategy for each department and leadership training and manager competency framework.

In Children's services career points had been put into place in preparation for Ofsted inspection rather than the Medpay project, as a result turnover had reduced, and the staff survey showed more officers willing to recommend Medway as an employer.

Complaints Service – a Member welcomed the performance of staff in dealing with stage one complaints and asked for further information regarding stage two complaints. The Chief Information Officer explained that a review of the service following Ombudsman guidance was underway. It was expected that performance would improve with opportunities for automation of the system.

Local Government Reorganisation – a Member asked if the proposals for Local Government reorganisation had affected recruitment, the Portfolio Holder

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stated that it was too early to tell if there had been any affect. The Chief Organisational Culture Officer added in the last quarter 143 roles had been advertised, and 122 contracts offered which represented a positive performance.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

674 Draft Capital and Revenue Budget 2025/2026

Discussion:

The Chief Finance Officer introduced the report which had previously been considered by the committee in November and included comments of the other Overview and Scrutiny Committees at Appendix A. Since the last meeting the provisional Local Government Finance Settlement had been announced which proposed an estimated additional £11m in resources for the Council compared to 2024-25, the final settlement for Medway would be announced shortly and included in the final budget reported to Cabinet and Council.

The following issues were discussed:

Council Tax income – further detail was requested regarding proposed council tax revenues, the Chief Finance Officer explained that the budget assumed a baseline of 92,100 homes in Medway, then added how many new homes were expected to be built, factored in the proposed band d council tax increase of just under 5% and the impact of collection rates to determine an expected total income.

Interest and Financing - in response to a question why the costs associated with interest and financing had gone from a projected £4m rise in the Medium Term Financial Outlook (MTFO) to a small decrease in the budget, the Chief Finance Officer explained that the MTFO included assumptions regarding interest rates, borrowing costs and the projected growth in the capital programme. As the year progressed the Council was able to make more accurate predictions which was reflected in the improved budgetary position.

Public Health budget – further information was requested regarding the rise in the public health budget, the Chief Finance Officer explained that the figure reflected the additional pressures of delivering services through contracts including inflation, national changes relating to National Insurance contributions and the National Living Wage. She added that the government had not yet announced the Public Health grant allocation for 2025/26 but this would also be included in the final budget report when confirmed.

Temporary Housing – A Member requested further information regarding progress of the temporary housing scheme which the Council had approved in January 2024, the Chief Finance Officer stated that a full update would be

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provided in the budget report to Cabinet and Council, the monitoring showed an improved position, however the situation remained challenging.

Capital Programme – it was asked whether the planned development of a council chamber in Gun Wharf had been reconsidered following the announcement of the local government reorganisation. The Chief Operating Officer stated there had been no decision to stop the programme, however the works included repairs to deal with the current safety issues in the building which were still required and would take place.

Medway 2.0 – it was asked how savings associated with Medway 2.0 would be monitored and the Council ensured it did not impact on local services. The Chief Finance Officer stated the budget aimed to sustain the investment in statutory services which had resulted in recent positive inspection results. The Chief Operating Officer added that the services where savings would be made by Medway 2.0 had now been identified and the savings were included in those sections of the budget. Consequently the explicit savings target for Medway 2.0 had been removed from the budget.

The Chief Information Officer stated that Corporate Management Team had reviewed the Medway 2.0 report which had previously been considered by this committee and new services were now being designed, which included greater use of AI and automation

Local Government Reorganisation – in response to a question whether the council had a budgetary provision to undertake the work required by the local government reorganisation the Chief Operating Officer stated that the Government had indicated it would provide funding to undertake the work required to deliver reorganisation, and in January, Council agreed to the creation of a new policy resource that would be reflected in the final budget for Cabinet and Council.

Decision:

The Committee commented on the proposals outlined in the Draft Capital and Revenue Budgets in so far as they relate to the services within the remit of this committee and considered the comments from the individual Overview and Scrutiny Committees, as set out in Appendix 1, and forwarded those to Cabinet.

675 Risk Strategy Annual Review

Discussion:

The Chief Organisational Culture Officer introduced the report. She highlighted that the report proposed only minor changes to clarify roles. The report had been considered by the Audit Committee on 28 January and no significant changes had been requested.

Decision:

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The Committee considered the 2025/26 Risk Strategy as set out in Appendix 1 to the report and did not have any comments for Cabinet.

676 One Medway Council Plan 2024-2028 Key Performance Indicator refresh 2025/2026

Discussion:

The Chief Organisational Culture Officer introduced the report. The report presents refresh of key performance indicators (KPI's) for the forthcoming year with no change in the Council's priorities. Nine KPIs have been amended with the reasons for this provided in the report, with three indicators removed and a further three indicators would be reviewed subject to updated data.

The following issues were discussed:

Presentation – a Member commented that they found it difficult to follow where targets had not been met, the Chief Organisational Culture Officer acknowledged this difficulty. She explained that mitigations and proactive work to meet targets were contained within the monitoring report which would be reported to the Committee at the next meeting and undertook to review how this refresh was presented in future years.

Decision:

- a) The Committee considered the proposed changes to the key performance indicators that will be used to track performance of the One Medway Council Plan in 2025-26 as set out in appendix 1 and section 4.7 and submitted comments as set out in the minutes to Cabinet.
- b) The Committee noted that Council will be requested to delegate authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, to agree new key performance indicators and interim targets where applicable as set out in paragraph 4.8 of the report.

677 Work Programme

Discussion:

The Democratic Services Officer introduced the report, he highlighted the additional items to the agenda for March, the Procurement Strategy Update which had been deferred from the current meeting, a Taxi Tariff review which was due to be considered by the Licensing and Safety Committee in February and a Members item regarding the rise in the levels of sick pay and what the action the Council intended to take to support the welfare of employees.

The following issues were discussed:

Members discussed whether the Members item may be considered at a later date as there was a proposed sickness policy currently in consultation. The

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Member and Democratic Services Officer agreed to consider this and following the meeting.

A Member asked that the committee receive a report updating it on the work of the Complaints Service. The Chief Information Officer undertook to do this and agreed to consider with the Chairperson and Democratic Services Officer a suitable date for the report to be provided to the committee.

A Member requested that the Local Plan be considered by the committee, the Democratic Services Officer undertook to discuss this with the Chief Planning Officer and provide an update following the meeting.

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:

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