

Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee

27 March 2025

Attendance of the Leader of the Council

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Vince Maple, Leader of the Council

Summary

This annual report provides an account of the role of the Leader of the Council. 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. Recommendations

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 Leader of the Council, as set out in the Council's constitution are:

- Armed Forces Covenant (in conjunction with Armed Forces Champion)
- Benefits and Financial Welfare Services
- Category Management/Procurement
- Communications and Marketing
- Council Tax and Business Rates Administration and Recovery
- Democracy and Governance
- Finance
- Strategic overview of Medway Council including Council Plan, Risk Management and Performance Management

3. Background

3.1. Following the successful election of three of the Council's former Cabinet members to represent Medway in Parliament, the Cabinet Portfolios have been amended. I am therefore proud to present in this report the work of a broader range of service areas than in my last attendance to this Committee. When I introduced the Budget for 2025/26 to Council in February 2025, I set out serving the residents of Medway as Council Leader is the greatest honour of my life. We have been open about the challenges we inherited,

and the difficult decisions we have had to take to secure the financial sustainability of the Council.

3.2. The Government is clear that it intends to reset the relationship between central and local government; enabling a shift of powers away from Whitehall into local communities, reorganising local government so that all areas are served by unitary authorities like Medway, and to reform local government funding to ensure the sector is sustainable into the future.

3.3. Over the past year we have delivered significant achievements and progress on our key priorities for Medway both within my Portfolio of services and across the Council and I want to reiterate here my thanks to all the staff of Medway Council, and our partner organisations, who work tirelessly to deliver services for all of Medway's residents, businesses and visitors.

4. Providing political leadership and challenge

4.1. In our election literature we made it clear that, given the chance to serve, we would do so with honesty, integrity, accountability and compassion and I am grateful to my Cabinet colleagues for working to meet those values in the way they lead the services in their portfolios of responsibility. We continue to expand our engagement with residents, adding our successful Medway Matters Live events to a programme of direct communication which includes our regular, bite-size One Minute Medway videos and the Medway Matters booklet delivered to every household three times a year.

4.2. In collaboration with the Corporate Management Team and officers we have set out our priorities and how we will deliver them through the One Medway Council Plan, secured the Exceptional Financial Support required to agree a budget for 2025/26 that makes significant investments in improving service delivery, and introduced a new regime to hold ourselves accountable for delivering savings and transformation in the One Medway Financial Improvement and Transformation (FIT) Plan.

4.3. We recognise that devolution and local government could bring significant opportunities to Medway and we are committed to engaging with the government on this journey. To support this, we have agreed to fund a new team, to sit within this Cabinet Portfolio, to provide specialist support and guidance to ensure the benefits for Medway's residents are maximised.

4.4. The new government made its intentions clear around the priority for devolution and Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). As part of that the Government invited regions to be considered for a Devolution Priority Programme (DPP). I was pleased to work collaboratively with 13 other council leaders, in particular the leader of Kent County Council (KCC) as this invitation was made to upper tier authorities. We held a positive cross party briefing with than 40 members in attendance with short notice. I also held with the Chief Executive an online briefing to Medway Council staff which had more than 1,300 people attending virtually. As is documented elsewhere, unfortunately we were not selected as part of the DPP. The

Minister has been clear that this was no due to the merits of the application. The initial proposal for LGR will be submitted on Friday 21st March and I will be happy to give a verbal update at the start of this item. I thank officers across the council for their outstanding work to date, often on very short deadlines.

4.5. I work closely day to day with the Chief Executive, Chief Operating Officer and Assistant Director, Legal and Governance and many of their team members to discuss key projects and activity not only the services in my portfolio but also across the wider Council. I also meet collectively on a quarterly basis with the Team of 25 – the Cabinet and the Corporate Management Team members – to share information, discuss issues and agree proposals for improvements. The arrangements in place between officers and Cabinet Members are genuinely collaborative. As well as the early conversations about the budget, FIT plan and performance and risk monitoring, we track a much broader set of measures of activity and performance on a regular basis, and this enables the Council to adapt and respond quickly to any risks or opportunities that arise.

4.6. We cannot deliver for Medway's residents without our partners across the public and voluntary, community, social enterprise and faith sector. Alongside championing partnership working wherever this benefits our residents, I represent the Council on a number of strategic boards, committees and meetings including:

- Court of the University of Kent at Canterbury
- Informal Working Party on Polling Districts and Polling Places
- Kent and Medway Civilian Military Partnership Board
- Kent and Medway Fire and Rescue Authority
- Kent and Medway Integrated Care Partnership Joint Committee
- Kent and Medway Region Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution Meetings
- Kent Leaders Meetings
- Key Cities Group
- Key Cities Group - Executive Committee
- Local Government Association - General Assembly
- Medway for Business - Economic Partnership
- South East 7 - Sub National Transport Partnership Board
- South East 7 Leaders Meeting
- Thames Estuary Growth Board
- Thames Gateway Strategic Group
- Town Centres Board

5. Championing the Interests of service users and Medway residents

5.1. As I reach the end of my second year as Leader of the Council, I am proud of our efforts to reach out to our local residents including, as set out in section 4 above, the introduction of our popular Medway Matters Live Events where the Chief Executive and I speak about current issues as well as taking

questions from the audience. Our next event will be held on 2 April at the Hundred of Hoo Academy and we will raise the important issues of local government reorganisation and devolution and what this means for Medway.

5.2. Staying on the issue of local government reorganisation and devolution, I am very keen that local residents have the opportunity to provide their views on this significant issue before we make a final submission to Government in November 2025 and we are currently developing a consultation strategy in support of this.

5.3. Beyond Medway's boundaries, I have leveraged the strong relationships that Medway Labour and Co-operative group has with the Labour Party nationally to advocate for Medway at every turn and have continued to use my connections with partners including the Local Government Association to contribute to causes including the continuation of the Household Support Fund and for funding reform.

6. Support for key service areas

6.1. **Armed Forces Covenant (in conjunction with Armed Forces Champion)**

6.1.1. Both Councillor Stamp and I have visited some of the Armed Forces Veterans Breakfast Club sessions which happen in Medway. At both Hoo and Chatham there is a regular session which has a range of advice and guidance available as well as a good amount of social interaction. The hub actively advocates for veterans in a wide range of issues including housing and health.

6.1.2. 2024 saw the 40th anniversary of the closure of Chatham Dockyard and the Dockyard 40 programme which commemorated the closure was wide ranging and included many references to the Royal Navy. The much loved Armed Forces Day event took place at the Historic Dockyard and was a great success.

6.1.3. As a council we continue our ongoing support for Gold Employer status, this is due for renewal in 2025 and we will work to ensure we retain our Gold status. In April 2025 Armed Forces Covenant Training is being delivered to Members and the corporate management team to ensure that as an organisation we understand our covenant responsibilities and support the Armed Forces Community.

6.1.4. We continue to be an active member of the Kent & Medway Civilian Military Partnership Board, taking part in sub groups, such as Skills & Employment and Recognise and Remember. Medway Council has led the way by embedding the Armed Forces Covenant into our procurement processes and continues to encourage businesses around Medway to sign the Covenant

6.2. Benefits and Financial Welfare Services

- 6.2.1. In January 2023 the Cabinet approved the creation of a combined central Benefits and Financial Welfare service to better support vulnerable residents in Medway. This service now delivers Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction Assessment, Discretionary Financial Assistance (including the Household Support Fund), Macmillan Welfare Benefits Service, Housing Related Support and Financial Welfare teams.
- 6.2.2. The Council continues to work closely with the Money and Pensions Service (MAPS) and now has more than 140 registered Money Guiders. We continue to use the Money Advisors Network, and MAPS support wider financial wellbeing initiatives across the council. The work carried out with MAPS by the Head of Income, Payments and Corporate Debt and the Head of Benefits and Financial Welfare has been nationally recognised by MAPS with the award of Money Guiders Partner of the Year in November 2024. The award was given because of the proactive approach to implementing money guidance across the council and for linking the qualifications to career progression frameworks within with the new Progression, Performance and Pay policy.
- 6.2.3. The team continues to administer Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction. Despite the introduction of Universal Credit, the team currently still has a Housing Benefit caseload of 6,404 claims. These claims are made up now of the most complex claims; pensioners, specified accommodation and temporary accommodation. We will see more claims migrate to Universal Credit over the next year, leaving an anticipated caseload for Medway after the transfer of approximately 5,000 claims. The simpler scheme we introduced in 2022 has made it easier for residents to apply, and the number of claims received is increasing as residents contend with the difficult financial environment. A total of 16,009 residents current receive support through this scheme.
- 6.2.4. Alongside administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction, the service also operates schemes which offer discretionary assistance for housing costs (including Universal Credit) and Council Tax. The Discretionary Housing payments scheme is funded by the government, and through this scheme the Council spent £484,023 through 432 awards in 2023/24, Where a claimant was not eligible for a DHP payment yet found to be in need, awards were made from the Household Support Fund to prevent homelessness. The service continues to receive high volumes of applications in 2024/25 and anticipate that the fund will be fully spent by the time it closes on 31 March 2025. The Council Tax Reduction scheme and the council's budget allows for a modest level of Exceptional Hardship Payments to support residents. In 2023/24 £30,244 was awarded in Exceptional Hardship Payments and expenditure in the 2024/25 year to date is £45,446.
- 6.2.5. The Housing Related Support Team work alongside colleagues in Housing to support residents who have been made homeless or who are at risk of

homelessness. Since the team's inception on 1 April 2023, they have received over 1,300 referrals, providing a wide range of support. They have worked with the Rehousing Team to ensure that when people are placed in temporary accommodation, they are supported to claim Housing Benefit and any other benefits they may be entitled to. They provide advice and guidance around finding permanent accommodation, bills and budgeting and wider support to ensure tenancies are maintained. When extra capacity is required to maintain tenancies for Medway Council's Housing Revenue Account tenants, the team can step in to provide tenancy sustainment support.

- 6.2.6. The Financial Welfare Team have been in operation since 1 January 2024. In this time, they have helped over 1,000 Medway residents with direct casework. The team co-locate with each Adult Social Care locality on a rota basis so that officers have access to welfare advice when they need it to assist residents. The team have also been located in Broadside alongside Children's Services as well as operating from each of the four family hubs to support both officers and residents. The team has quickly become the face of the service attending many events to promote the support the team provides, assisting residents and partners. To date, they have attended many events working with key stakeholders across Medway including the Welcome to Medway events, Carers First carer's event, Medway Food Partnership, World Homeless day and Medway Matters Live.
- 6.2.7. In January 2024, Cabinet agreed to an extension of the existing Macmillan Welfare Benefits Service. This added two Full Time Equivalent (FTE) posts to the team and enabled the team to cover North and West Kent in addition to Medway following a request by Macmillan. This provides a more resilient service for Medway residents and is funded in full by Macmillan, addressing a small subsidy the council had previously contributed to the service. The team have soft launched their service into the new areas. In 2024, despite the transition to the larger service, the team supported 888 clients achieving financial gains of £4.6million for the households supported. They exceeded Macmillan's target achieving 117% of their expected cases. The team proactively represent Macmillan and the Council at a wide range of events including raising over £900 with their Macmillan Bake Sale in 2024.
- 6.2.8. It was rewarding to see the service come together alongside our partners at the DWP to organise our event for pensioners. The event was held at the former Wilko's store in the Pentagon Centre to highlight the support available to pensioners. Whilst the primary focus was ensuring Pension Credit take up was maximised, we used this opportunity to invite other council services and partners to show the wide variety of support available to Pensioners. The event was supported by the Department for Work and Pension, Medway Voluntary Action, Age UK, Carers First and Imago alongside the Council's Benefits and Financial Welfare Teams, Housing Services, Public Health, Medway Integrated Community Equipment Services and Medway Adult Education. Over 130 pensioners attended the event and as of January 2025, with an additional 60 pensioners in Medway in receipt of Pension Credit with more to follow as the Pension Service process the high number of claims

received. Alongside Pension Credit uptake, the teams were able to support residents with Attendance Allowance, Council Tax Reduction, Housing Benefit, Blue badges and much more.

6.2.9. A significant area of work across the service has been the delivery of the Household Support Fund. I am pleased to confirm that we continue to spend 100% of the funding allocated to us supporting residents in line with the scheme guidelines. I am committed to stopping holiday hunger; therefore we have committed to supporting recipients of free school meals with at least £15 per week of every holiday. The remaining allocations have been used to fund our successful grant scheme; this can be accessed by residents, referral from a council officer and by our partners. We offer emergency support with food, fuel, water however, we also provide beds, curtains, white goods and much more. Using the Low-Income Family tracker, we have been able to offer targeted support to our low-income carers and most recently have used it to identify nearly 1,588 pensioners who are in receipt of Housing Benefit or Council Tax Reduction and miss out on receiving Pension Credit. I am pleased to confirm that 97% of recipients claimed the money we had allocated to them for support with energy bills. We have been able to support our partners within the Medway Food Partnership to deliver much needed food support by allocating over £200,000 of the grant to them, showing our commitment to working alongside partners and supporting the work they do. This is a great practical example of a One Medway approach

6.2.10. Led by the Head of Benefits and Financial Welfare, the council's refreshed Cost of Living plan was published in July 2024. The plan brings together all of the support that is available for residents from Medway Council, and partners, into one place to make it easier to access. Together with our partners, we continue to provide a range of support for residents through this plan, and so far we have:

- distributed over £15million from the Household Support Fund to those most in need;
- 5,417 eligible children attended the Holiday Activities and Food programme with over 35,510 places booked, funded by the government's Holiday Activities and Food programme (HAF);
- worked with the Medway Food Partnership to ensure residents are able to access sustainable and healthy food;
- spent £2.5million providing more than free school meal vouchers for eligible children during the school holidays in 2024/25, and
- reduced the council tax bills of more than 16,009 residents through the council tax reduction scheme.

Through the refreshed Cost of Living Plan we have also invested in technology to help identify and encourage residents who may be eligible for support at both a national and local level to apply. We introduced the Low Income Family Tracker (LIFT) from Policy in Practice to help ensure Medway's residents access all government and additional support to which they are eligible. So far we have already used the LIFT to proactively target residents for the household support fund and identify where Medway residents could be entitled to benefits they have not yet claimed. Over £1m of the Household Support Fund has been distributed through using the LIFT

tool. The Cost of Living Plan also introduced our use of the ReferKent system, and through this we are now able to signpost residents to additional support from a range of organisations including Breakeven (gambling support), Vulnerability Registration Service and Stop Loan Sharks.

6.3. Category Management and Procurement

- 6.3.1. The Category Management team continues to work with and support all services in achieving value for money and exploring more efficient ways of working. With a small team and high case load per officer, the ability to step back and horizon scan, coupled with apprehension from services to change, does prove challenging. Although mandatory, the continued delivery of the 'Core Responsibility' training has facilitated a greater coverage of the team's purpose and engages services much earlier in the procurement cycle to make engagement more proactive.
- 6.3.2. The team continues to constructively challenge colleagues in a way that generates demonstrable benefits. Our standard application of Social Value meant that over the whole life of the contracts £32.5m worth of social value was committed by bidders winning our contracts in the 23/24 financial year. This year within the social value being sought, we also constructively reinforced the recognition of White Ribbon accreditation in our procurement processes.
- 6.3.3. On 24 February 2025, the Procurement Act 2023 came into effect. To prepare for this the team rolled out a comprehensive training programme and led the change on all tender documents for compliance purposes. The effective date went smoothly, and the team is now supporting services deliver against the new regime.
- 6.3.4. In December 2024, the team proposed that contract managers across the organisation complete training prior to being able to do so. This was in lieu of services assuming officers could capably deliver this activity. This was supported and rolled out across the organisation and has already seen many examples of positive change, ensuring the contracts we award are supported by smart KPI's and teams who are confident in managing and improving them as the contracts evolve.

6.4. Communications and Marketing

- 6.4.1. We have continued to deliver on our commitment to be more transparent in our communications and engagement with Medway residents and communities over the past year. It has been a year that has seen some significant announcements from central government on the future of local government organisation, that has remained challenging financially and has included major inspections but we have prioritised keeping local people informed in an open and honest way through a wide range of channels. We have also prioritised campaigns to drive income generation to a number of our services to support our financial position as well as ensuring we support critical campaigns to drive behaviour change to support our Prevention agenda and keep local people informed on important subjects such as our highways and

waste collections. We have also continued to drive excellent improvements into our internal communications activities with our staff.

Media and corporate communications

- 6.4.2. The new government's plans to extend devolution and reorganise local government in areas with two tier authorities have moved at pace in the past six months and we have ensured that we keep residents involved at key milestones throughout the process through media, social media, video, emails and Medway Matters. In January, the Chief Executive and I undertook an online briefing for staff which was attended by more than 1,300 officers. As we work towards the submission of our final proposals in November, we will be undertaking engagement activities to gauge views on how this could affect Medway and the delivery of our services.
- 6.4.3. Our financial position has remained challenging, but we have been clear with local people at different milestones through the year on our position and our plans to reduce our budget gap. This has included regular media briefings and the production of charts and videos to explain how the council receives and spends its money.
- 6.4.4. In addition, we had two major inspections for Housing and Adult Social Care in the second half of the year and we have ensured that we have clearly communicated the outcome of these encouraging inspections and the action we are taking in response through media briefings, releases, social media, videos and web content.
- 6.4.5. We built on the success of the first Medway Matters Live event in 2023 holding a further event at the Historic Dockyard Chatham in their 40th anniversary year attracting 100 members of the public to hear from the Leader and Chief Executive and ask their questions directly on matters relating to the council. The first event of the year had to be cancelled due to pre-election publicity rules in June, but we are pleased to be able to hold that event in early April at the Hundred of Hoo Academy. We will hold a further event in October in Gillingham.
- 6.4.6. Our busy Press Office dealt with 718 enquiries from the media during the year, many of them quite detailed, covering a balanced range of subjects relating to council services including transport and highways, planning, enforcement, education, council issues, finance, housing, elections and many more. The team issued 181 press releases and facilitated 98 interviews and briefings with the media. The team also create an increasing number of videos and from 1 April to 5 March have created 71 short videos covering election information, news posts and internal messages for staff. We have continued to produce weekly One Minute Medway videos to keep local people in touch on key issues being discussed or events underway and these remain very popular. Our short videos have had a combined reach of 216,335 with nearly 2,000 clicks for more information and more than 700 shares.

Marketing campaigns

6.4.7. The Council's Marketing and Graphic Design teams work with services to create engaging campaigns aimed at driving income generation, behaviour change and information sharing. Over the past year we have run more than 200 campaigns/projects. These are some of the key campaigns:

- Launch of Cozenton Park Sports Centre – A major campaign to raise awareness of the new centre and drive new membership. The target was for 1,000 new members and at the end of February 2,400 people had signed up generating an additional £60,000 income for the council each month.
- Central Theatre show marketing – we run a number of campaigns during the year and income in the calendar year 2024 was around 20% up on ticket sales in 2023. Our January 2025 campaign resulted in income increasing by 69% on the previous year.
- Our festivals prove as popular as ever. We welcomed 132,500 people to our Christmas markets despite the ever popular middle weekend (and Dickensian Christmas Festival) being cancelled. Sweeps attracted 50,000 visitors despite atrocious weather and our inaugural Love Gillingham event saw the high street crowded with local people coming to enjoy a large number of events and stalls for the day. Armed Forces Day proved very successful in its new location at the Historic Dockyard Chatham and plans are underway to expand the numbers we welcome on the day in 2025. 267 people signed up for our inaugural Business and Skills Showcase and we received great publicity for the launch of Ascend.
- We received 501 (400 in 2023) responses to our latest Local Plan consultation and spoke to 623 people visiting our 10 events across Medway as well as a dedicated student event at MidKent College.
- Our Health Check campaigns met 100% of target for the year, saving the NHS £32,268.
- A number of Public Health campaigns ran, including weight management service, healthy cookery programmes, physical activity programmes, Beside You Breastfeeding, Quit Smoking campaigns, Medway Go and Release the Pressure programme.
- Major campaigns to support unpaid carers and replacement ferrules.
- Campaigns to raise awareness about pot hole completions, Safer Streets and Red Routes, free bus weekends and road safety.

Communications channels

6.4.8. The Communications and Marketing Team continues to develop the range of channels used to reach and engage with local people. Due to significant cost increases in print and distribution, the number of published editions of Medway Matters reduced from four to three editions each year but further information has been published through digital channels through the year. The magazine remains one of the most popular ways people receive information about the council. All the council's digital channels have continued to grow, particularly our Facebook and Instagram page and we

have good engagement with users with the exception of X (formerly known as Twitter) which we will be making less use of in coming months due to its decreasing reach and algorithms. Our e-newsletters have all seen steady growth, each with a strong opening rate exceeding 50% with some as high as 70% across the entire year.

Internal communications

- 6.4.9. We have continued to expand and improve our internal communications activities over the last year. Our goal has not just been to provide employees with timely information but also ensure that we are giving them the opportunity to engage with the Leader and Chief Executive and other members of the corporate management team. The impact of our work was seen in the results of our latest the staff survey showing an improvement of 22% in staff feeling well informed about council plans and progress and a 13% improvement in two-way communication with CMT.
- 6.4.10. In May we introduced a new staff conference, Our Medway Live, which was attended by 760 employees over three dates. We received more than 650 questions in an open Q&A session. We also held a live online staff call, to update employees on devolution and local government reorganisation, which was attended by 1,289 staff (and 313 views of the recording).
- 6.4.11. At the beginning of the year we launched the council's new Values and Behaviours, setting out the kind of people we are as an organisation and how we want to work with each other, our residents, and our partners with good awareness registered by staff in surveys. We recently launched Our People Promise setting out the benefits of working for the council aimed at existing and potential employees. Following feedback from staff on what would make them feel valued through events and the staff survey, new benefits are being introduced showing how the council is listening to staff views. A dedicated People Promise newsletter and video from the Chief Executive was sent out to staff, explaining all the elements of Our People Promise and signposting to further information. This reached more than 80% of the workforce in the week of the launch. We also ran talks and events during the week. The launch of both the Values and Behaviours and the People Promise, helps to ensure that we are making staff aware of the support available to them at work and helping them to feel valued for the work they do.
- 6.4.12. We have been working to improve the 'onboarding experience' for new staff by creating a number of videos featuring the Leader and CMT leaders to provide a friendly and informative welcome to new starters and provide more information about Medway the place and more importantly, Medway as a council and how we operate.

6.5. Council Tax and Business Rates Administration and Recovery

- 6.5.1. Council Tax – the collection rate at the end of February 2025 was 91.44% compared to 92.04% at the same time last year. A slight drop against last

year is not unexpected and is a symptom of the cost-of-living crisis that many council tax payers are experiencing. Last year saw the 100% premium for empty (unoccupied and unfurnished) properties being brought forward from two years to one year after a property is vacated. April 2025 will also see the introduction of a 100% premium for properties referred to as second homes (unoccupied and furnished) but a number of exceptions to the premium have also been introduced by the Government. These exceptions include properties that are up for sale or available to let, for a period of up to 12 months.

- 6.5.2. Business Rates – the collection rate at the end of February 2025 was 94.36%, slightly up on 94.06% this time last year. Currently there is a Government funded discount of 75% for ratepayers in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors but this will be reducing to 40% from April 2025 which will no doubt impact the collection rate for next year.
- 6.5.3. Online services – further progress has been made with the introduction of Business Rates Online which went live in December. We currently have 726 ratepayers (11%) signed up and we are hoping to build on this as the annual bills go out. My Council Tax Online has continued to grow and 23,000 Council Taxpayers (19%) are now signed up for the service with more than 17,000 opting for paperless billing (this compares to figures of 13,000 and 8,000 at the same time last year). Additional developments include:
- a form that enables landlords to report multiple moves for tenants,
 - improved security,
 - the ability to set paperless billing as the default option when residents or businesses sign up for an online account,
 - a Jadu form for residents to apply for the new premium exceptions, and
 - a Jadu form for business rates refunds.
- 6.5.4. Corporate Recovery/Debt
- 6.5.5. In 2024/25 the Magistrates Court granted 12,500 Liability Orders for non-payment of Council Tax and residents are now able to self-serve and set up their own payment plans within My Council Tax Online and take up has been steady. It offers Council Tax residents the flexibility to set up their own payment plans which will auto accept or are reviewed by the Corporate Debt Team if outside of system parameters. In recognition that financial circumstances can change from one month to the next this functionality provides residents with the flexibility to increase / decrease payment plans to clear arrears in line with their ability to pay and to have an immediate response. We are promoting this service on letters and electronic communications sent to encourage engagement and take up.
- 6.5.6. Two additional invest to save posts were created to deal with high value arrears cases, they have recovered around £270k in 24 -25 since starting in post in July 2024. They are responsible for engaging and supporting vulnerable residents working together with the Benefits and Financial

Welfare team, as well as progressing high level arrears cases where ability to pay has been identified to improve Council Tax collection.

- 6.5.7. The officers are using the Low-Income Family Tracker (LIFT) to identify residents in crisis, at risk or struggling, and using proactive engagement techniques - bulk messaging awareness campaigns, direct bespoke messaging to invite engagement.
- 6.5.8. We are currently onboarding with a technology and data solution that gives insight into ability to pay that looks at credit reference data, open banking and vulnerability registration data to categorise residents' affordability to pay. Using this insight, we are planning to invite residents to welfare and debt guidance surgeries and face to face support.
- 6.5.9. As explained in 6.2.2 above our partnership with the Money and Pensions Service continues to strengthen and with the support of MAPS we will be extending the Money Guiders training to our partners. The first will be our existing suppliers of Enforcement Agent and Debt Collection Services for all Corporate Debt, this will be a contractual requirement upon renewal to enhance and support the work they do in our community with vulnerable residents.
- 6.5.10. The Council Tax (Administration and Enforcement) Regulations 1992 allows recoupment of reasonable associated costs in taking a case to the Magistrates Court and obtaining a Liability Order. The cost to the Council in issuing a Summons had not been reviewed for approximately 10 years, we also incur costs between Summons and Liability order application stage which to 31 March 2024 which were not recovered and residents not in arrears were picking up this expense. A review of the associated costs that could be passed on to residents receiving a summons increased to a contribution of £95 from the 01 April 2024 and Liability Order costs were successfully introduced at £25.
- 6.5.11. This is estimated to raise between £1.59m and £1.64m (just under the £1.65m target) in costs during this financial year. (Estimated as the final court for this year is still in progress, summonses were issued in February, and the hearing is in April 25).

6.6. Democracy and Governance

6.7. Democratic Services

- 6.7.1. I want to start by thanking Members for the role they play in the democratic process, not only by attending meetings and taking decisions on a range of issues provided by this unitary authority, but also their wider role including representing their local communities in Medway. Beyond this, Members will be aware of the challenge of local government reorganisation and I hope all Members play their part in shaping the future of local government in Kent. We have a deadline of 28 November 2025 to submit a final plan and I have asked for there to be a special Council meeting on Thursday 13 November

2025, ahead of Cabinet on 18 November 2025, to enable Members to have their say on the final proposals.

- 6.7.2. With regards to our Overview and Scrutiny Committees, Members continue to do an excellent job of not only holding Cabinet Members to account but also our partners, with a view to getting the best possible outcomes for our residents. The Health and Adult Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee have worked particularly hard in scrutinising the Integrated Care Board (NHS Kent and Medway) around its re-procurement of Community Services, This has been very challenging at times but the consistent and robust challenge from the Committee has managed to move this project into a place where the Council can work alongside the ICB in a constructive way to move forward with this huge re-procurement and so I thank the Members of the Committee for their time, efforts and focus on this.
- 6.7.3. Furthermore, I am pleased that Overview and Scrutiny continues to play an important role the development of Council policy, through pre-decision scrutiny, recent examples including their consideration of both the Non-Operational and Operational Review of Properties, the Local Cycling and Infrastructure Plan and the development of care as a protected characteristic which we subsequently agreed at full Council in July 2024 as Council policy.
- 6.7.4. Task Group activity continues to play an important part of overview and scrutiny, and Members have been making progress on the Air Quality and Public Transport & Active Travel Task Group. The Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee have also agreed the following task groups to be undertaken in the following priority order once the current task group has been completed: Medway 2.0, Child Mental Health, New Social Housing Regime and Education Inequality.
- 6.7.5. Furthermore, I am grateful for the work and support of the Overview and Scrutiny Chairpersons, Vice-Chairpersons and Opposition Spokespersons in the development of a Task Group Protocol, which was subsequently agreed at full Council in January 2025, and this has been added to the Constitution. The Protocol will provide guidance on the function and operation of scrutiny task groups at Medway Council. It is not intended as an exhaustive list of instructions but offers general principles on how task groups can be most effective.
- 6.7.6. With reference to our Full Council meetings, I have been meeting with other Group Leaders, Deputy Leaders and Group Whips to look at how we can better structure our Full Council meetings, including debating motions earlier in the meeting. We initially trialled these changes at our full Council meeting in January 2024 and we are at the point where we will seek full Council approval to make changes to the full Council agenda timings and running order, the deadlines for the submission of questions and motions and the arrangements for public questions permanent, at the April meeting.

- 6.7.7. Looking forwards, I have also agreed with Group Leaders and reported to full Council in January that we will trial in the new municipal year some changes to how we deal with questions at meetings whereby questions which relate to Cabinet (executive) functions are raised and answered at Cabinet meetings, whilst Council (non-executive) related questions will still be dealt with at full Council meetings. This will have the effect of enabling questions relating to Cabinet reports to be submitted, as well as an increase in the number of meetings that questions can be submitted.
- 6.7.8. As reported last year, I was pleased that the Council agreed to re-introduce the Mayoral points system and for 2025/2026, the Conservative Group have accepted the Mayoralty and I wish Councillors Clarke and Spring, the Mayor-elect and Deputy Mayor-elect, respectively, in their roles in the new municipal year. I would also like to place on record my thanks to the hard work this year from our current Mayor, Councillor Nestorov, and our Deputy Mayor, Councillor Hamandishe.
- 6.8. Electoral and Member Services
- 6.8.1. It's been an almost unprecedentedly busy period for the small Electoral Services team. I was fully apprised of the arrangements put in place for the planning and conduct of the PCC elections on 2 May along with the Neighbourhood Planning Referendum for Arches (Chatham). These were yet another set of successful elections, including the introduction of new limits to the number of completed postal vote packs that could be handed in and a requirement to complete a form.
- 6.8.2. Before they could complete all the necessary post-election activities, of course, an unscheduled General Election was called on 22 May. With just 31 working days' notice, the team successfully conducted these high-profile elections, including liaison with colleagues at Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council, with whom we share the constituency of Chatham & Aylesford. As well as booking 100 polling stations, recruiting and training 700 staff, validating candidate nomination papers, getting ballot papers, poll cards and postal vote packs quality checked, printed and despatched, over the period from when the election was announced the team processed 15,600 applications to register, 4,200 applications for a postal vote as well as 285 applications to register from overseas electors, whose franchise was extended for the first time, and just under 1000 other election-related applications.
- 6.8.3. The team also had to respond to over 1300 applications that were received after the respective deadline. That all of these applications were processed in time for the election is a testament to the hard work, long hours and commitment of the elections team and I wish to put on record my profound appreciation of their contribution to democracy in Medway.

- 6.8.4. 7 November 2024 saw the Neighbourhood Planning Referendum for Hoo St Werburgh & Chattenden which resulted in overwhelming support for the Plan which has since been formally adopted by the Council. Of course we have also just had by-elections in Gillingham South and Rochester East & Warren Wood and an uncontested Parish by-election in St Mary Hoo.
- 6.8.5. As part of my regular meetings with the Assistant Director, I have been maintaining an overview of the implementation of the wide-ranging changes in legislation arising from the Elections Act 2022 and their impact on the planning and delivery of elections and electoral registration activity. Between July and November 2024, the team were required to undertake an exercise reviewing and contacting all 6000 EU citizens registered to vote and confirm their continued eligibility as well as conduct the annual canvass contacting all households in Medway to ascertain who is resident at each address.
- 6.8.6. The Electoral Services team have also started an exercise to contact over 35,000 postal voters in Medway who need to renew their postal vote application now in accordance with new legislation. Due to the high volume the team are phasing the exercise over the remainder of the year, sending emails where feasible to minimise the printing and postage costs. If a postal voter does not respond to the exercise, their postal vote will only be removed on 31 January 2026 and of course they can re-apply for a postal vote after that date.
- 6.8.7. Officers have been supporting each of the main political groups to consider what briefings and training should be delivered in phase 2 of the Member Development programme. They are currently collating the information provided with a view to submitting to the Member Development Advisory Group for prioritising the different comments.
- 6.8.8. The team have organised several useful briefing sessions for Members on key issues of interest throughout the year including: NHS Kent and Medway; Children in Care; Kyndi, Medway Development Company and potholes. We have upcoming sessions including Armed Forces Covenant training, PREVENT training and an update on the new River Strategy.
- 6.8.9. Finally, I would also like to pay tribute to the hard work and dedication of the Head of Electoral Services and Members' Services, Jane Ringham, who recently retired.

6.9. Finance

- 6.9.1. The Council continues to operate in exceptionally difficult financial circumstances, as the number of residents who need support from our statutory services across social care, special educational needs and disabilities and homelessness continues to rise. At the same time the cost of delivering these services continues to rise, with increasing complexity of our

residents' needs, inflation and staffing costs adding to our budget pressures. With the support of the Government through the Exceptional Financial Support scheme (EFS) we set a balanced budget for 2024/25. That budget represented a significant package of investment to right-size and transform key services including Adult Social Care, intended to deliver significant savings through reablement and demand management. While we had to make many difficult decisions including increasing the fees our residents and visitors pay to use some of our services, we retained the lowest council tax in Kent and protected a wide range of services that councils across the country were being forced to cut.

- 6.9.2. For the 2024/25 financial year, we revised and improved our arrangements for monitoring and oversight of the agreed budget, savings and transformational activities. The frequency of revenue budget monitoring has been increased so that monthly forecasts are reported at an officer level, enabling teams to take immediate action to manage variances ahead of reporting formally via Cabinet on a quarterly basis. In April 2024 the Cabinet agreed the One Medway Financial Improvement and Transformation (FIT) Plan, setting out the priorities, savings and other key actions that form part of our ambitious improvement journey. Collectively the activity in the plan sees the Council rethinking how we operate, support, and deliver high quality services to help us deliver our One Medway Council Plan in a financially sustainable way. We introduced arrangements for all teams involved in the FIT plan activity to track activity and outcomes on a monthly basis, and Finance worked alongside teams to validate progress recorded and ensure consistency with budget reporting. The FIT plan monitoring began reporting formally to Cabinet on a quarterly basis from Q2 in November 2024. This activity has been consistently among the very highest priorities for both the Cabinet and Corporate Management Team during 2024/25, and while initial rounds of the revenue budget monitoring projected significant overspends, in excess of the Council's available reserves, prompt and robust management actions have reduced this as the year progressed.
- 6.9.3. In the Autumn of 2024 the Government commissioned CIPFA to conduct an assurance review as part of the EFS process. [The report has been published by the Government](#) and will be shared on the Council's website in due course, but in summary acknowledged that the Council's financial position results from a shortfall in funding for statutory services, did not identify any ineffective or inefficient spend and remarked positively on the leadership, organisational culture and commitment to delivering for Medway's residents across the Council. Following this review the Government has confirmed agreement in principle to extending the EFS for 2024/25 and for the support required for 2025/26 to balance the budgets for both years. We are grateful to colleagues and Ministers from MHCLG and CIPFA for their positive engagement, support and insightful advice and guidance through this process.
- 6.9.4. Earlier than ever before, beginning in June of 2024 work began to develop the budget for 2025/26. The Medium Term Financial Outlook published in August 2024 indicated a potential budget gap in excess of £45million,

however significant effort to identify proposals for savings and income generation saw that reduced to c£26million in the draft budget in November 2024. We were pleased to note that the Government's shift in approach to prioritising funding towards areas with greater needs including deprivation resulted in Medway receiving a greater share of funding allocated to local government, with the Settlement representing an additional c£13million for Medway. On 27 February Full Council approved our budget for 2025/26, the culmination of months of hard work from my Cabinet colleagues, the Corporate Management Team and officers across the Council. The budget represents a significant package of investment demonstrating our commitment to delivering high quality services for Medway's residents, businesses and visitors, including:

- Investing almost £6.8million more directly into adult social care to continue the transformation programme, introduce dedicated specialist and intensive resources to support our most vulnerable residents, and to invest in the delivery of additional social care facilities through Care for Medway,
- Investing another £4.6million into children's social care, including investment to take our Children's Services from their Ofsted rating of Good to Outstanding,
- Investing £2million more on SEND to fund growing SEND transport costs,
- Investing a further £1.7million to provide temporary accommodation for those at risk of homelessness.

6.9.5. The EFS support secured has enabled this investment, alongside protecting the existing services valued by Medway's residents all while protecting the Council's general reserves at the minimum balance set by S151 Officer of £10million.

6.9.6. The Government has recognised that there is a crisis in public sector external audit, with nationwide delays and backlogs in audit delivery the focus of efforts from the Government, regulatory bodies and audit firms throughout 2024. The Council's Audit Committee have been regularly updated on the government's plans to address the backlogs and of the plans of the Council's auditors to meet the revised arrangements in place. I am pleased to note that the Council's draft Statement of Accounts for 2023/24 were published by the statutory deadline of 31 May 2024, and that the Council's external auditors, Grant Thornton, have delivered disclaimer opinions on the 2021/22, 2022/23 and 2023/24 Statements by the backstop deadlines set by the Government intended to return the system to normality. I am assured that work is already underway to prepare the Council's Statements for 2024/25 for publication by the deadline of 30 June 2025 and we will work with our auditors to support their audit in due course.

6.10. Strategic overview of Medway including Council Plan, Risk Management and Performance Monitoring

Risk Management

6.10.1. Risk management is a process which aims to help the Council understand, evaluate, and act on all their risks. It supports effective decision making, identification of priorities and objectives and increases the probability of success by making the most of opportunities and reducing the likelihood of failure. Risk management is an integral part of good governance. The Council recognises that it has a responsibility to identify and manage the barriers to achieve its strategic objectives and enhance the value of services it provides to the community.

6.10.2. The Council's Risk Strategy:

- promotes a common understanding of risk.
- outlines roles and responsibilities across the Council.
- proposes a methodology that identifies and manages risk in accordance with best practice thereby seeking to prevent injury, damage and loss.

The Strategy sets out an objective method for analysing risks taking into consideration the likelihood of the risk occurring and the impact should the risk manifest. The Strategy also states the Council's agreed tolerance level for risks. The Strategy is reviewed annually to ensure that it remains up to date and continues to reflect the Council's approach to risk management. The Strategy is reviewed by Corporate Management Team, Audit Committee, Business Support & Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet. The report was considered by the Audit Committee on 28 January 2025, Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 30 January 2025 and Cabinet on 11 February 2025.

Council Plan and Performance

6.10.3. The One Medway Council Plan's purpose is to set the vision and direction of the Council for the next four years. The One Medway Council Plan (OMCP) 2024/28 was agreed at Full Council on 15 May 2024. It sets out the Council's priorities over the next four years and includes the indicators we will use to track performance. These indicators are refreshed annually. The 2025/26 review is more light touch to ensure that the indicators continue to drive performance.

6.10.4. One Medway Council Plan 2024- 28, 2025-2026 key performance indicator refresh was agreed at Full Council on 27 February 2025. Monitoring of the One Medway Council Plan takes place on a quarterly basis, through Cabinet and Scrutiny.

7. Conclusion

7.1. I am immensely proud of what has been delivered through the services in my Portfolio in the last year, and of the collaborative approach taken by the

Cabinet and Corporate Management Team as a whole to securing investment in transformation and improving services for Medway's residents.

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Appendices

None

Background papers

None