

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

Thursday, 27 March 2025

6.30pm to 9.20pm

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

Substitutes: Councillors: Field (Substitute for Cook)
Howcroft-Scott (Substitute for McDonald)
Spring (Substitute for Clarke)

In Attendance: Samantha Beck-Farley, Chief Organisational Culture Officer
Paul Boyd, Chief Information Officer
Steve Dickens, Democratic Services Officer
Wayne Hemingway, Head of Democratic Services
Michael Kelly, Head of Category Management
Councillor Vince Maple, Leader of the Council
David Reynolds, Head of Revenue Accounts
Phil Watts, Chief Operating Officer

798 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Clarke, Cook and McDonald.

799 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting held on 30 January 2025 was agreed and signed by the Chairperson as correct.

800 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

801 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests or Other Significant Interests and Whipping

Disclosable pecuniary interests (DPI)

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There were none.

Other significant Interests (OSI)

There were none.

Other Interests

Councillor Bowen declared that she was a member of the Unite union.

Councillor Browne declared that she was a member of Unison.

Councillor Field declared that he was a member of the TSA and Unison

Councillor Hamilton declared that she was a member of the National Education Union (NEU).

Councillor Howcroft-Scott declared that she was a member of the National Education Union (NEU), the Fostering Trade Union, Unite and the TUC Disabled Workers Committee

Councillor Jones declared that he was a member of the PCS union

Councillor Prenter declared that he was a member of ASLEF union.

Councillor Pearce declared that he was a member of Unison.

In attendance for agenda item 5, Councillor Maple declared that he was a member of the GMB Union.

802 Attendance of the Leader of the Council

Discussion:

The Leader of the Council thanked the Committee and the other Overview and Scrutiny Committees for the work they had undertaken in the last year, he also thanked officers within his portfolio for their support and the people of Medway for supporting the Council and recognising the good work the Council did.

The Leader provided one update to the report, he had recently submitted a letter to the government to advocate for four unitary authorities for the Kent region. The government would provide feedback to the Council in the next few weeks prior to formal feedback in the week of 28 April.

The following issues were discussed:

School Streets – A Member commented that some residents had not received a response from the Portfolio Holder for Community, Safety Highways or the relevant services after making enquiries regarding the school streets scheme. The Member added that they had witnessed parking violations near to areas of school streets scheme ignored and this was a risk to young people in the area.

The Leader of the Council stated that he wasn't aware of the particular circumstances of the case and asked the Member to pass on the details to him, he added that the administration wanted to hear from residents regarding the scheme and the Rainham scheme had been amended following consultation with residents.

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Welfare payments – A Member asked the Leader if he would write to the government opposing planned welfare changes which would result in around 1,000 local people including 200 children falling to poverty. The Leader of the Council stated that he had not read the green paper and would not comment on the detail until he had done so, however, he had a long history of assisting residents with Personal Independence Payments (PIP) and the administration had worked with 1,600 residents who had been affected by changes to the winter fuel allowance and was ready to assist residents in the future.

Children Services – The Leader was asked for his thoughts regarding the investment made in Children Services. The Leader stated that he was pleased with the progress made by Children Services and thanked the previous administration for its part in the improvement journey. There were currently significant delays in completing Education Care Health Plans (ECHPs) so the administration brought in temporary staff to deal with the backlog and this was being progressed. The Leader explained that if the Council regressed in the quality of provision the service would be removed from the Council. It was vital both for Medway's young people for the service provided to be good but also for the future financial sustainability of the council. He added that the administration continued its work in rightsizing the service.

Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) – the Committee discussed plans for local government re-organisation, the Leader paid tribute to the work of the Chief Executive and stated that they continued to work with Leaders of the other authorities in the Kent region, whilst they did not agree on all aspects, they had a positive working relationship, particularly compared to other regions. The authorities in Kent were agreed that they did not want a single or two authorities for the region, and there had been no proposal for the successor authorities to include areas outside of the Kent region or for Kent boroughs to be re-organised with another region in the new authority.

The Leader added there was a difference of opinion regarding the preferred number of unitary authorities for the Kent region, though the differences were not based on political grouping. He had advocated for four unitary authorities and plans for LGR would be considered at a special Council meeting in November.

Further information was requested regarding consultation with residents. The Leader stated the administration was the most transparent in the history of Medway Council and had increased engagement with residents through Medway Live, weekly Medway Minute videos and had welcomed increased scrutiny through supplementary questions to Council and proposals to have questions to Cabinet. He was committed to engaging with the public on LGR and other issues.

In response to a question whether the planned new Council chamber took account of Local Government reorganisation proposals, the Leader stated that the building plans had taken into consideration the possibility that a new larger unitary authority may have more representatives.

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The Leader was asked to provide further detail on £450,000 allocated to the LGR in the budget, he explained that there was a capacity issue in preparing for LGR and a new Policy Unit would be developed with a service manager, four policy officers and administration support.

Household Support Fund – the Committee discussed the Household Support fund and the work it did to prevent holiday hunger amongst school children. The Leader praised the work of the team which had received national recognition regarding the Household Support Fund. He stated that he expected local government to receive a multi year settlement in future budgets would enable the Council to target resources more effectively. It was asked whether children who are home schooled could be included in the offer for free school meals during school holidays. The Leader stated that home schooling is an area which may benefit from consideration as the numbers of home schooled children have risen significantly, it was however a matter for the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee to consider whether it wished to undertake any work in this area.

Festivals – the Committee discussed festivals in Medway, it was asked following the cancellation of the English festival if Rainham would have its own festival in the future. The Leader acknowledged there had been difficult decisions made due to the current financial climate such as the cancellation of the Rochester summer Dickens festival and the English festival. However, the Council had a number of events across the towns during the year such as the Will Adams Festival and the Love Gillingham event and he was delighted that the Poet Laureate would be coming to Rainham in the near future.

Progress of the administration – the Leader was asked what his greatest successes were in the first two years of the administration. The Leader stated that he was pleased to have delivered two budgets for Medway in the current financial climate and the two CIPFA reports which showed that the Council was run effectively. He was also proud of the work of this and the previous administration had undertaken in achieving a good Ofsted rating for children services. The Leader also highlighted the success in the last general election of former Portfolio Holders and improvements in communications, scrutiny and governance. He acknowledged that the Council did not always get things right and that there was more to do, but he was pleased with the progress made and proud to be Leader of Medway Council and a council where all Members had integrity.

It was suggested the Committee receive a report regarding the CIPFA Audit published, this was agreed by the Committee.

Street homelessness – The Leader was asked for his thoughts on street homelessness which was increasing. The Leader acknowledged there was work to be done. In 2023, the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) was enacted due to excessive heat for the first time and a local charity One Big Family received recognition for the work they have done in relation to homelessness and summer weather. The Leader stated that he thought SWEP

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due to excessive heat would be required more regularly over the next decade and highlighted that One Big Family had noted an increase in female homelessness which had significant implications for violence against women. The winter scheme would end in two weeks; however, those people would still be homeless and need support including many who were from outside the authority so, whilst being compassionate, the council must also follow its legal requirements.

Decision

- a. The Committee noted the report.
- b. The Committee requested a briefing note setting out the structure of the new Policy Unit created to support Local Government Re-organisaiton.
- c. The Committee requested the recently published CIPFA audit report be considered at the June meeting of the Committee.

803 Members Item: Wellbeing and Employee Welfare

Discussion:

The Chief Organisational Culture Officer introduced the report which provided a response to the Member's item regarding employee sickness absence and welfare. In the last year 22,000 working days had been lost due to sickness in the council which averaged 10.44 days per FTE, 25% of which was due to mental health issues. In the most recent staff survey, 13% of staff and 12% of managers stated that they felt there was not enough support in relation to mental health.

The Chief Organisational Cultural Officer added the sickness absence policy was scheduled for review by the Employment Matters Committee in May with the aim of simplifying procedures.

The following issues were discussed:

Wellbeing – Members welcomed measures to enhance staff wellbeing and mental health training sessions for managers walking meetings, it was asked whether walking meetings might constitute a hazard risk for staff. The Chief Organisational Cultural Officer undertook to consult with Health and Safety regarding any potential risks.

The Committee discussed the importance of mental health and wellbeing of staff, it was asked if there were any technological resources the council could utilise to benefit from early identification. The Chief Organisational Cultural Officer stated that as part of the contract with Care First, staff had access to an app which provided information for people who may be struggling and HR ran a number of events and highlighted the issue of stress in its regular newsletter. HR worked closely with Public Health colleagues to consider ways to promote positive mental wellbeing in the workplace.

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Absence – the Committee commented that there was a disparity in sickness levels between the three departments. In response to a question why there was over 2,000 absences without a reason stated, the Chief Organisational Cultural Officer explained that there may be occasions where the reason has been kept private for medical reasons or that that a diagnosis was made after a sickness absence form had been submitted, however, she was confident managers were undertaking absence reviews and were aware of the reasons for sickness. She agreed the number was too high and HR were considering this as part of the policy review.

It was asked if the median and mode sickness absence could be provided to the Committee in addition to the 10.44 days mean figure provided. The Chief Organisational Officer undertook to provide that information following the meeting.

Disability – it was asked whether the Council made appropriate reasonable adjustments for its disabled staff when they were absent through sickness. The Chief Organisational Cultural Officer stated that the Council had positive contracts with Occupational Health and Care First, the Council had a healthy mind and wellbeing group which provided support for staff and there was flexibility in the Council's policies to take account of difficult cases. Contracts with Care First and occupational health were due for renewal soon and the council were keen to explore further options for supporting staff.

Union involvement – further information was requested regarding consultation with the councils' recognised unions. The Chief Organisational Cultural Officer explained that the council regularly consulted with staff and unions and the press pause campaign was an initiative which followed as a result of consultation with unions.

Working from home – the Committee discussed the impact working from home on staff. The Chief Organisational Cultural Officer stated that working from home was a positive for many staff but the Council needed to be mindful of social isolation and other potential issues such as staff having a suitable home working environment.

She added that the majority of staff had a hybrid contract and prior to the partial closure of Gun Wharf there had been a return to a positive vibrant working atmosphere in Council offices.

Comparative data – it was asked how the Council compared to other authorities and the private sector. The Chief Organisational Cultural Officer stated that sickness absence was higher than many other authorities across Kent, she undertook to provide a briefing note with further detailed comparative data.

A Member commented that in other Committee meetings, services had reported one of the reasons for a higher sickness absence had been the

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additional capacity within the NHS and staff as a consequence of having received long awaited hospital appointments.

Decision

- a. The Committee noted the report.
- b. The Committee asked the Council to work with its recognised Trade Unions to further develop staff wellbeing strategies to reduce sickness and increase wellbeing as the Council moves towards the goal of being an employer of choice.
- c. The Committee requested The Chief Organisational Officer to provide a briefing note on sickness absences with additional data on the median and mode sickness absence levels and the some comparative data with other employers.

804 Procurement Strategy 2021-2025 Update Report 2025

Discussion:

The Head of Category Management introduced the report. He explained that the current Procurement Strategy had drawn to a close and the assessment was attached at Appendix 1. A new ambitious strategy would be presented to the Committee for pre decision scrutiny in the coming year.

The following issues were discussed:

Engagement with Councillors – it was asked whether assessments such as Engaging with Councillors were realistic and up to date, for example was Councillor development being progressed. The Head of Category Management stated that training was available, but no specific date had yet been set.

Decision

- a. The Committee noted the achievements of the fourth year of the 2021-2025 Procurement Strategy as outlined in in Appendix 1 with updated comments.
- b. The Committee noted the conclusion of the 2021-2025 Procurement Strategy.
- c. The Committee noted the development of a new Procurement Strategy in the 25/26 financial year derived from the objectives within the National Procurement Policy Statement (NPPS).

805 Use of Agency Staff and Consultants

Discussion:

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The Chief Organisational Culture Officer introduced the report which provided an overview of agency staff employed by the Council. There were 211 agency staff employed by the Council in quarter three, compared to 193 at the same point last year.

The increased use of agency staff had principally been focused in response to an identified need to increase the establishment following rightsizing and restructure in Adult Services and to clear the backlog of statutory Educational Care Health Plan (ECHP) in the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) service. The Chief Cultural Organisational Officer added that many of the agency staff working in SEND did not work full time but were paid per assessment.

The following issues were discussed:

Staff conversions – it was asked how many officers had converted from temporary contracts to permanent members of staff, the Chief Organisational Cultural Officer stated that agency staff were treated as members of the team and the Council had been successful in converting many temporary staff to permanent contracts, she did not have detailed numbers to hand so would provide additional data to the Committee following the meeting.

It was commented that temporary staff who had been in place for four years had the right to a permanent position and it was asked whether this had applied to any staff and were any temporary staff currently eligible. The Chief Organisational Cultural Officer undertook to provide that information following the meeting.

Apprenticeships – in response to a question about apprenticeships, the Chief Organisational Cultural Officer stated that the apprenticeships programme was successful, and it was quite rare for an apprentice candidate to not be successfully match with a permanent position in the Council. The Newly Qualified Social Worker Scheme had seen more mixed results in retaining staff, however, with the new pay and conditions agreed at budget council it was expected that this would improve. The Chief Organisational Culture Officer undertook to provide further detail regarding apprenticeships which find permanent positions at the council following the meeting.

Legal Services – further information was requested regarding the number of temporary staff in place in Legal Services following the investment made in the service. The Chief Organisational Culture Officer stated that the council retained a number of temporary staff to retain flexibility to meet changes in workload. The council had decided to move away from using barristers to reduce costs.

A Member welcomed the use of temporary staff as part of the commitment to reduce the backlog of ECHP plans.

Decision

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- a. The committee noted the achievements in Children's Services and noted other areas of use of agency staff.
- b. The Committee requested a briefing note providing additional data regarding the number of conversations from temporary to permanent roles, details of apprenticeships, and the number of temporary staff which have converted to permanent roles following four years of working as agency staff and the number of agency staff currently eligible to convert to permanent staff following four years of service.

806 Council Plan Performance Monitoring Report and Strategic Risk Summary - Quarter 3 2024/25

Discussion:

The Chief Organisational Culture Officer introduced the report which outlined progress of key performance indicators within the remit of the Committee and a review of the strategic risk register. All indicators within the remit of this Committee were annual figures, and the committee were asked to note the narrative updates provided. In addition, there had been no change in the strategic risk register scores in the quarter.

Decision

- a. The Committee considered the Quarter 3 2024/25 progress of the performance indicators used to monitor progress of the Council's priorities, as set out in Appendix 1 to the report.
- b. The Committee noted the Strategic Risk Summary as set out in Appendix 2 to the report.

807 Revenue Budget Monitoring - Round 3 2024/25

Discussion:

The Head of Revenue Accounts introduced the report. He stated the projected £8.4m overspend in round three showed an improved position by £2.4m on the previous quarter. Departments within the remit of the Committee continued to show an underspend against their budgets.

The following issues were discussed:

It was asked if the Revenue and Capital Budget Monitoring reports could be reported to the Committee at an earlier date in future. The Democratic Services Officer undertook to review the proposed draft schedule of meetings to consider whether the date of Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee could be brought forward to reduce delay.

Decision

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

808 Capital Budget Monitoring Round 3, 2024-25

Discussion:

The Head of Revenue Accounts introduced the report, he explained that there was an error in the report, the total figures provided in table two of the report (page 127 of the agenda pack refers) were incorrect, however the rest of the table was correct.

The following issues were discussed:

Underspend – in response to a question regarding the underspend against the budget, the Head of Revenue Accounts stated that they represented costs which had not yet been realised and if they were not required within the financial year, it would be removed from the budget.

Data Centre Refurbishment – an update was requested on progress of the refurbishment of the data centre, the Chief Information Officer confirmed that works had begun.

Decision

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

809 Work Programme

Discussion:

The Democratic Services Officer introduced the report, he highlighted that the dates Portfolio Holders were held to account by the committee would be reported to the next meeting of the Committee.

The following issues were discussed:

It was confirmed that the recently published CIPFA Audit report would be included in the agenda for the next Committee meeting.

Decision

- a. The Committee agreed the provisional work programme at Appendix 1 to the report.

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- 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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