

Members' Questions

(Relating to Agenda Item No.5, Local Government Reorganisation)

Question A – Councillor Perfect, asked the Leader of the Council, Councillor Maple, the following:

“Given the Cabinet recently instructed the Corporate Management Team to take all action necessary to reduce the Council’s overspend, can the Leader of the Council please explain how spending further taxpayer money (which otherwise would represent a saving on the Council’s current projected £10m overspend) on his dead plan for Local Government Reorganisation represents best value for Medway taxpayers?”

In response, Councillor Maple asserted that there was no plan that had yet been discounted. Options were being considered not just by Medway but by other councils up and down the country and not just unique to Kent. Conservative controlled Hampshire County Council was taking advice and guidance in the same way that Medway was considering agreeing at this meeting. He stated that although not every member of the Council had voted for the budget, there was already a budget line for local government reorganisation, so this was not an additional financial pressure. At this point there was an underspend because not all of the planned for posts had been recruited to yet, so this would keep the Council within the existing agreed budget.

Councillor Maple stated that it was worth recognising that this was the biggest change in local government for more than 50 years and was an opportunity. He further advised that the Council needed to ensure it was trying to get the very best that it could and as there was an existing budget for the work proposed, subject to the Cabinet decision, it would be progressing on that basis.

Question B – Councillor Hackwell, asked the Leader of the Council, Councillor Maple, the following:

“At the meeting of the Kent Leaders meeting a democratic voting system was used to select the two options to take forward with KMPG as the preferred Kent options. The administration is pursuing their scheme outside the preferred options which will cost money that simply put Medway has not got. In the recent Council's Medium-Term Outlook 2025-2030 it was stated that the projected budget shortfall for 2026/27 is £29.942 million, escalating to a cumulative £191.257 million over the medium term.

How can it be justified spending any council funds on this vanity project when all the directorates are being asked to not leave any stone unturned to identify any savings they can?”

In response, Councillor Maple stated that for the avoidance of doubt, the future of local government was not a vanity project. He referred to his response to the previous question - there was a Local Government Reorganisation budget which would remain within budget if agreement to spend was reached at the meeting that night. He considered it right and appropriate to take this once in a generation

opportunity and that the local community should not miss out on having a variety of options available. At Kent Leaders, there had been a very clear sense of trying to reach consensus which had been well documented elsewhere by at least three other council leaders. Other councils were also seeking advice and guidance, including Conservative controlled, Dartford, and he did not consider that the Leader there, Councillor Jeremy Kite, would consider it a vanity project either.

Question C – Councillor Tejan, asked the Portfolio Holder for Community Safety, Highways and Enforcement, Councillor Paterson, the following:

“The Kent Police and Crime Commissioner Matthew Scott PCC wrote to the Leader of the Council making clear that the Medway option for Local Government Reorganisation would require wholesale changes to the current Kent Policing model. Can the Portfolio Holder please clarify when he consulted with Kent Police on the Medway option and how the Police were able to inform this proposal?”

In response, Councillor Paterson stated that the current policing model operated on arbitrary boundaries which did not fully respect the administrative divisions and community identities that made up Kent and Medway. This meant that operations, for example to target nuisance bikes, where the Council had led the way with additional public spaces protection order powers, required Police Officers to cross multiple borough boundaries. In his view that made no operational sense and he believed that the Police and Crime Commissioner’s comments should be taken clearly in the context of the fact that he was an elected Conservative politician with his own agenda, particularly after the Conservative Party lost control of Kent County Council in May. He asserted that this represented a political perspective, not a professional judgement.

Councillor Paterson stated that furthermore, the White Paper made clear that over the long term there was an ambition to align public service boundaries in a much more coherent way than was currently the case. This included Job Centres, the Fire Service, the Probation Service and health services. Whether Mr. Scott liked it or not, that would also require the Police to review their operational activities.

In light of those changes, regardless of which reorganisation model was adopted, it would be sensible for any organisation which might be impacted to keep an eye on changes coming further down the line. That was a matter for them and not one which would have any material impact on his day-to-day dealings with senior Police Officers as the Chair of Medway Community Safety Partnership.

Question D – Councillor Wildey, asked the Deputy Leader of the Council, Councillor Murray, the following:

“Can the Deputy Leader please explain when and how health partners were consulted in relation to the Medway option for Local Government Reorganisation?”

In response, Councillor Murray stated that conversations about Local Government Reform had started with health partners as soon as the Council knew it was happening. Several meetings had taken place with health partners, where local government reform had been discussed. Health service colleagues were not part of Kent Leaders, but once the proposal had been announced everything had subsequently been shared with them. A meeting should have taken place with them a couple of weeks previously but had been cancelled and it was subsequently

announced that the NHS Kent and Medway Chief Executive, Paul Bentley, was moving on and a new Chief Executive would be in place. Councillor Murray advised that she had therefore written to Cedi Frederick, the Chair of NHS Kent and Medway, asking to reestablish the meeting with the new chief executive. This would then provide the previously anticipated opportunity to look at the new maps.

Question E – Councillor Joy, asked the Portfolio Holder for Children’s Services, Councillor Price, the following:

“Under the Medway option for Local Government Reorganisation, the plans would see huge changes to social care delivery across the county. Can the Portfolio Holder please update on his input into the Medway option, particularly as it relates to children’s services?”

In response, Councillor Price advised that he had been involved throughout all Cabinet discussions on the proposal, and that any model of Local Government Reorganisation would involve significant change. Officers in Children’s Services were working hard on the potential implications. Councillor Joy would be aware of Children’s Services reform under the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill, and Local Government Reorganisation would align well with school place planning and capacity across the north with the M2 providing effective transport links and there being reduced fragmentation.

Many educational leaders already practiced across Medway and Swale, as indeed did the Health Service. From the point of view of Children’s Social Care, closer alignment with education and health meant that the four models of unitary authorities would actually support long term demands by meeting local needs, particularly for areas with varying levels of deprivation and need. Moving to four unitary authorities, including the Medway option, could well support recruitment and retention of practitioners, and statutory partners were well used to working across the vast numbers of districts within Kent at the moment. It would be easier for them to work more holistically within four unitary authorities and the Police point of view had already been picked up because the education sector also worked closely with the Police.

Question F – Councillor Filmer, asked the Portfolio Holder for Strategic Regeneration and Climate Change, Councillor Curry, the following:

“Under the Medway option for Local Government Reorganisation, the plans would require wholesale change to a number of existing local planning authority (LPA) boundaries. Can the Portfolio Holder please update with his engagement with other LPAs across Kent on the Medway option, detailing how these discussions informed the option proposed?”

In response, Councillor Curry stated that the planning system dealt with the here and now. The reality was that not knowing what option might come to fruition made any kind of detailed discussions extremely difficult. As was the case for other neighbouring authorities, the Council was in the process of producing local plans and had a duty to cooperate on all planning matters with neighbouring authorities, so those discussions and conversations were continuing.

His understanding from the neighbouring authorities was that they were pushing ahead with their local plans. This seemed the most pragmatic approach. Medway’s

Local Plan would be submitted to the Planning Inspectorate before the end of this year for a decision by government next year. He understood that Gravesham were the closest to producing a local plan, with Swale and Tonbridge and Malling a bit further behind and Maidstone having already published theirs a couple of years ago. That was the situation the Council was currently in and how that would pan out in a new authority would be a decision for that new authority to make. Local Plans would continue existing plans and be absorbed by the new authority until it had the time and resources to produce one for the whole new area.

Question G – Councillor Lawrence, asked the Portfolio Holder for Economic and Social Regeneration and Inward Investment, Councillor Mahil, the following:

“Can the Portfolio Holder please set out what steps he took to consult with the business community on the rejected Medway plan for Local Government Reorganisation? In giving his answer can he set out why he thinks his plan would be better for business given the negative impact of the Labour Chancellor's policies which has seen unemployment rise in Medway by more than ten percent.”

In response, Councillor Mahil stated that as the process was currently ongoing the business community was being consulted, but until a proposal was presented there was nothing to consult them on. The main piece of feedback he had received from businesses was that they currently operated across local authority boundaries all the time, so he was unsure what answer Councillor Lawrence thought he might be able to give him.

Councillor Mahil thought that the focus should not be on Local Government Reorganisation but more about devolution, which would have the real effect on business, allowing for a regional strategy for skills development which was much more at the top of the agenda for business as seen in areas such as Greater Manchester.

Question H – Councillor Brake, asked the Leader of the Council, Councillor Maple, the following:

“Consultation should be at the heart of everything Medway does. The Leader of the Council claimed at the start of his administration that he would always seek to ensure everyone in Medway was part of decision making. Nobody appears to have been consulted on the Medway option for Local Government Reorganisation – not other Council leaders, the opposition, the working group, or even the Leader's own group. Can the Leader please confirm why he decided to proceed with this plan without consulting anyone else?”

In response, Councillor Maple stated that there were a couple of factual inaccuracies in the question, however from the Cabinet's perspective, the message had been very clear. The conversation had continued with council leaders. Every Kent Leaders' meeting had been attended, and this had been where much of the discussion had been taking place, at this region wide level.

As an administration they had ensured that there had been an early discussion which Councillor Maple thought had been one of the best cross party conversations about both Local Government Reorganisation and devolution. Engagement would be important throughout the process, consultation and the language was important.

Consultation on this process would be carried out by the Government at the end of the process towards the end of November. However, many submissions were being made. Councillor Maple would find out the exact number. The working group would continue to meet, and it had been a really positive working group thus far, but the Leader of the opposition had been very clear that his preference was for a different number of councils and that he would make that argument. The administration would continue to work on that cross party basis where they could and keep people informed as they progressed through those final stages. Most important were the 292,000 residents with which formal consultation would take place, not run by local authorities, but through Government early in the new year.

Question I – Councillor Kemp, asked the Leader of the Council, Councillor Maple, the following:

Can the Leader of the Council explain how he consulted with his group on the Medway option for Local Government Reorganisation, specifying the timeline around these discussions?

In response, Councillor Maple said that this information would not be shared. He advised that political group meetings were private meetings and he did not ever recall the Conservative Group publishing details of theirs. There was a long standing history which included the political parliamentary parties as well, having private conversations and he would never expect political groups to publicly air those discussions.

Question J – Councillor Gulvin, had submitted the following question to the Leader of the Council, Councillor Maple:

“Given the Leader’s plan for Local Government Reorganisation was met by fierce opposition from many Kent Local Government Leaders on a cross-party basis, and the Cabinet paper makes clear there is a risk in pursuing the dead Medway option, can the Leader please explain how proceeding at Cabinet tonight won’t further damage his and the Council’s reputation across Kent?”

In the absence of the questioner, the question was taken as read.

In response, Councillor Maple advised that he disputed the reference to ‘fierce opposition’, and similarly to group meetings, it was not appropriate for Kent Leaders’ meetings to be played out in the public domain. Both meetings were broadly run on consensus. There was a process, and it had been made clear that the decision was not around any individual particular application. There had been a number of options to consider and it needed to be decided which two would be submitted for central funding.

Question K – Councillor Anang, asked the Portfolio Holder for Heritage, Culture and Leisure, Councillor Gurung, the following:

“Given the huge changes that the Medway option will make to the cultural life of Medway, can the Portfolio Holder please update on how she engaged with local cultural institutions on the Medway option, detailing how this informed the proposals?”

In response, Councillor Gurung stated that the Council valued local heritage and cultural institutions in Medway and that was why the Council worked regularly in close partnership with them. They were currently being consulted as before the proposal was presented there would have been nothing to consult them on. She assured Councillor Anang that relevant organisations were being consulted.

Question L – Councillor Barrett, had submitted the following question to the Leader of the Council, Councillor Maple:

“Given the Medway option plan set out within the Cabinet report will seek to use urgency provisions to speed up procurement, can the Leader of the Council please explain his proposed strategy for engaging a strategic partner to deliver the Medway option? In giving his answer can he please detail how this will comply with the procurement act and the best value requirements as set out by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government.”

In the absence of the questioner, the question was taken as read.

In response, Councillor Maple stated that the working assumption was that the strategic partner would be KPMG and that it would be possible to include that in the original larger procurement.

Question M – Councillor Lammas, had submitted the following question to the Portfolio Holder for Education, Councillor Coombs:

“Given the Medway option for Local Government Reorganisation potentially will see consequential changes to the education authority boundaries, can the Portfolio Holder please provide details of her consultation with local schools, academies, higher and further education providers in relation to this option?”

In the absence of the questioner, the question was taken as read.

In response, Councillor Coombs stated that schools and other educational organisations were being consulted and conversations were ongoing. It had been raised in a number of formal and informal meetings, but before a proposal had been presented there had been nothing to consult them on. It had been raised with head teachers at the Medway Education Partnership Group the previous Thursday and an invitation for consultation and engagement was about to be sent out to schools.

Public Question

Question N – Matthew Johnson, of Snodland, had submitted the following question to the Portfolio Holder for Community Safety, Highways and Enforcement, Councillor Paterson:

“Serious, violent crime is on the rise in Medway. On Aug 25th a woman was violently sexually assaulted at knife point down Saunders Street in Gillingham. Will Medway Council work with the Police and release crime data relating to nationality?”

In the absence of the questioner, the question was taken as read.

In response, Councillor Paterson stated that contrary to the content of the question, serious violent crime was not on the rise in Medway. In fact, it was falling, with Kent

Police confirming it was at its lowest level since 2014/15, which was of zero comfort for the victim of the assault on Saunders Street.

Councillor Paterson advised that he was also unclear what comfort releasing crime data relating to nationality would provide for victims of crime. He could, however, see why it might be of value in a campaign of misinformation and division by racists. Last August, racist thugs had begun a campaign of violence in response to a false report about the identity of the man who killed three girls at a dance class in Southport.

He stated that in his opinion, even if the lies spread through social media had been true, it would not have justified the disgusting behaviour that had taken place. If crime data relating to nationality had been released by the Police, they would have likely turned out to be homegrown criminals. This outbreak of violent stupidity prompted the decision by police forces to release additional information about the identity of suspects, such as the individual charged with driving into a crowd of Liverpool fans earlier this summer.

Councillor Paterson thought it was a regrettable state of affairs but could understand the desire by police not to have to throw additional resources at an incident just because it was likely to be hijacked. In the Times newspaper the day before it had been reported that over a period of time where immigration in the UK had doubled, crime had halved. Correlation did not mean causation and did not point to a wave of immigrant criminality which he said had been invented by the right wing press or far right agitators to sow division and raise community tension.

Councillor Paterson asserted that these anti-immigrant lies had been peddled throughout history against migrant groups from the legend of *Sawney Bean*, the fictional Scottish Cannibal published in an English periodical at a time of fierce anti Jacobite feeling, to the vile Nazi propaganda used to justify the atrocities of that regime against Jews. He stated that women and girls were more likely to be the victim of violence by a male family member than by anyone else. That would not be solved by releasing the sort of data requested and was not something he would support.