

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

Thursday, 23 October 2025

6.30pm to 9.01pm

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), Browne, Hackwell BEM, Lawrence, McDonald, Pearce and Mark Prenter

Substitutes: Councillors:
Finch (Substitute for Lammas)
Campbell (Substitute for Bowen)
Kemp (Substitute for Brake)
Peake (Substitute for Jones)
Shokar (Substitute for Nestorov)

In Attendance: Paul Boyd, Chief Information Officer
Steve Dickens, Democratic Services Officer
Gemma Gilley, Head of Benefits and Financial Welfare
Samantha Kaszubowski, Kent Operational Leader for Thames Gateway, Maidstone, Medway & Swale Clusters, Department for Work and Pensions
James Larkin, Head of Internal Audit and Counter Fraud
Councillor Alex Paterson, Portfolio Holder for Community Safety, Highways and Enforcement

397 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Brake, Bowen, Jones, Lammas and Nestorov.

398 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

399 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests or Other Significant Interests and Whipping

Disclosable pecuniary interests (DPI)

There were none.

Other significant Interests (OSI)

There were none.

Other Interests

There were none.

400 Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Community Safety, Highways and Enforcement

Discussion:

The following issues were discussed:

Measuring improvements – it was asked how the Council measured improvements to services and value for money when scrutinising the effectiveness of Medway 2.0. The Portfolio Holder explained there was no longer a separate savings target assigned to the programme as it disincentivised individual departments from coming up with savings and efficiencies. He added that savings made were reported as part of departmental savings in the regular revenue monitoring reports and this sat within the wider FIT plan, which was supported by Medway 2.0 to target savings of £11.3m and an increased income target of £17.4m.

Members requested more information on progress of savings and subsequent reduction in posts. The Portfolio Holder stated that it was not a question of savings within a single financial year, rather the purpose was to change how the Council provided services, this would provide savings year on year into the future. One example of this was the vehicle reporting process which would create significant efficiencies, enabling officers to provide an improved service for residents. The initial design process had been completed, and this would be replicated across more than 70 further processes to create efficiencies across the Council.

External partners - further information was requested regarding the Portfolio Holder's links with external partners in relation to Medway 2.0. The Portfolio Holder stated that Medway 2.0 had good links with technology providers such as Microsoft, in addition Medway Council had been praised by Jadu at the LGA conference and had also received recognition for its use of Magic Notes which created significant efficiencies for Social Workers.

Translation Services – information regarding the cost of translation services was requested, the Portfolio Holder undertook to provide this following the meeting, however he noted that the Council had a legal duty to provide equality of access to services for its residents.

Speed of change – a Member expressed disappointment at the pace of change to services and that some web services were not mobile compatible.

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The Portfolio Holder stated that in his view services were updated quickly following feedback, in particular from the Member User Testing Group.

The Chief Information Officer added that it was a key priority to ensure that all Council services were available online using mobile compatible devices and this should be completed by the end of the financial year

Digital Infrastructure– further information was requested regarding paragraph 6.6 of the report (page 12 of the agenda refers). The Portfolio Holder explained that it was the aim to bring processes within the Jadu and Microsoft eco-system where possible. This would reduce the number of software, systems and licenses the Council required and consequently reduce costs.

The Chief Information Officer added that the Council was creating an Azure Data Platform with Microsoft to join up Council systems and create efficiencies.

Challenges – A Member asked the Portfolio Holder how he had provided challenge to the service. The Portfolio Holder stated that he facilitated discussion with the Member User Testing Group and changes to apps were made in real time to analyse and streamline processes. He acknowledged there may be ways to better quantify challenge, but he was supportive of the collaborative approach and subsequent progress made.

Governance Framework – further information was requested on the governance framework and risk management regarding use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). The Portfolio Holder stated that governance was split across a number of Cabinet Members related to the relevant department which was under review. The aim was not only to make savings but to improve services, for example, Magic Notes which was used by staff in Social Care to reduce administration time had been transformational, showing a 63% reduction in time writing assessments and a 52% reduction in administration time away from contact with clients. This ensured social workers were able to spend more time utilising their professional skills in direct contact with clients and feedback from staff had been positive.

Climate Change - in response to a question regarding the Climate Change and sustainability implications of use of AI, the Portfolio Holder acknowledged concerns regarding the water intensive nature of AI. However, he noted the digital programme would look at the environmental impact as a whole.

The Chief Information Officer added that the Council's preferred software provider Microsoft had its own climate change goals to be net zero by 2030 and the Council would benefit from the work Microsoft did in progressing that aim.

Magic Notes – a Member asked whether the Magic Notes pilot had been successful. The Portfolio Holder stated the pilot had been well received and gave social workers more time to concentrate on the client, He added that he hoped it would improve services and trust in adult social care as a whole. Results would be seen through quarterly reporting, however, it enabled staff to use their professional skills rather than spending much of their time on

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paperwork. It would be for service heads to decide if staff resources could be deployed more effectively in response to those efficiencies, previously savings following transformation schemes had been reported through Medway 2.0 and this had been a disincentive to services to find savings.

CCTV – The Portfolio Holder was asked about the work regarding CCTV. The Portfolio Holder stated that he was pleased with the progress of the work between digital and CCTV and the move of the CCTV team to Gun Wharf had increased opportunities for partnership working and had increased the value of the land at the old Civic Centre Site in Strood.

Licensing - Members commented on the excellent work of the Licensing team. A Member stated that Licensing sometimes struggled to get the level of buy in from external partners that was required to manage licensing effectively. The Portfolio Holder thanked the Member for raising the issue and agreed to review and discuss with external partners to improve input.

It was commented that Licensing remained a paper intensive process, and it was asked whether any of the developments in AI could be of use for the licensing team. The Portfolio Holder stated that Licensing was a shared service with Gravesham Borough Council, so this made technological efficiencies more complex. There were areas where less paper-based systems could be used, but those opportunities would be easier to realise following Local Government Reform. The Portfolio Holder added that efficiencies did not only relate on new technology, for example the new Hackney Carriage tariff policy provided an opportunity to make better use of officer time.

The Chief Information Officer added that the Medway 2.0 programme prioritised opportunities to reduce costs and whilst there were efficiencies which could be made in Licensing, it was not a priority.

Kingsley House – The Portfolio Holder was asked for comments on issues at Kingsley House, he acknowledged that there had been some difficulties in residents accessing services at Kingsley House, and how this was delivered was being reviewed. The Portfolio Holder reiterated that he wanted residents to be able to access Community Hubs and find answers to their queries without being redirected to different departments and buildings and it was important to maintain an open and welcoming space whilst giving residents the privacy they need.

Markets - a Member asked whether markets were struggling due to issues related to licenses provided by the Council, the Portfolio Holder stated the market had experienced difficulties in relation to unpaid business rates and whilst this did not relate to his portfolio, he was aware the Council had sought an acceptable solution with traders, however, this had not been possible.

Future Challenges – in response to a question from a Member regarding the challenges for the year ahead, the Portfolio Holder stated that Agent X, the Council AI powered search engine would provide a support for all users in any

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language and give intelligent analysis of Council services. He believed this would mark a step change in service provision for residents.

The Chief Operating Officer added that in meeting with various teams across the Council the most noted concern was the environmental impact of Medway 2.0 and AI being water intensive rather than any particular concern about loss of jobs.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

401 Universal Credit and Welfare Reforms Annual Progress Report

Discussion:

The Head of Benefits and Financial Welfare Introduced the report which outlined a very busy year for the service responding to national issues such as the changes in Winer Fuel Allowance and local changes, for example the revised cost of living plan.

The Kent Operational Leader for Thames Gateway, Maidstone, Medway & Swale Clusters, Department of Work Pensions (DWP) added that the final migration notices from benefits to universal credit had now been sent. Locally, the Department continued to focus on payment timeliness achieving a performance of 96%-98% of 1st payments being made on time and in full within the first payment period which compared favourably with national performance at 93%.

The following issues were discussed:

Processing times - further information was requested regarding processing times, The Kent Operational Leader for Thames Gateway, Maidstone, Medway & Swale Clusters, DWP stated that this could be provided following the meeting.

Future challenges – in response to a question about future challenges for the DWP the representative stated that there were no significant changes planned to DWP presence in Medway. The regular outreach sessions at the Pentagon Centre and Salvation Army amongst others would continue. The DWP would also take part in a Youth Hub at Mid Kent College which will become a priority over the next year.

Remaining benefit claimants - it was asked what support was provided to the remaining 313 people claiming which had not been transferred to Universal Credit. The Head of Benefits and Financial Welfare stated there were a number of support options provided including financial welfare a benefit check to ensure claimants were in receipt to all the benefits they were entitled. The DWP representative added they would continue to make attempts to contact hard to

reach clients, including using their safeguarding team and other government departments as required.

Discretionary Housing Payment Budget – a Member noted there were already more applications than the whole of the last financial year and asked how the service forecasted need. The Head of Benefits and Financial Welfare explained that the amount of money received from central government was capped and awards were prioritised on the basis of need with particular priority to vulnerable groups and those at risk of homelessness. The amount provided in awards varied significantly, if there was any variation from the budget, this would be reported as a budget under or overspend through regular monitoring.

Council Tax repayment - More information was requested regarding non-payment of Council tax and how those issues were considered. The Head of Benefits and Financial Welfare stated that a welfare based approach was taken, the Council could go through the court system, however, if people in council tax debt contacted the council, it would seek to find a solution to spread payments and use its discretion to ensure payments were made by the end of the financial year. There was also other support Council could provide including benefits checks, and hardship payments.

Decision:

The Committee noted the work referenced in this report.

402 Counter Fraud and Corruption Strategy 2025

Discussion:

The Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud introduced the report. He explained that the Counter Fraud and Corruption Strategy was subject to annual review, but Member approval only sought when significant changes were required. This was the first significant change since 2022.

Changes to the strategy were required following the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023 which created a new offence of failure to prevent fraud. The offence would occur where a large organisation benefited from the fraud of an employee and had failed to put in place reasonable measures in place to prevent that fraud.

The strategy had been rewritten to provide clarity and a clear policy statement by management to set expectations and make the strategy more understandable for staff. The Head of Internal Audit and Counter Fraud added that the Service had undertaken a self-assessment of against Home Office guidance which would be considered by the Audit Committee in October 2025.

The following issues were discussed:

Audit Procedures – a Member commented on a recent high-profile incident in another authority and asked what measures were in place to prevent similar

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incidents of fraud in Medway. The Head of Internal Audit and Counter Fraud stated that regular Internal Audits were undertaken to assess effectiveness of internal controls, and there was also assessments of fraud risk as well as fraud awareness training for staff. Council procedures also ensured effective segregation of duties to prevent members of staff having the ability to carry out fraud, however fraud was often found where staff became complacent, so vigilance was required.

Self-Assessment - further information was requested regarding the outcome of the self-assessment, the Head of Internal Audit and Counter Fraud stated that the only defence for organisations was to have appropriate procedures in place to prevent fraud. The self-assessment was based on guidance provided by the Home Office and the results were largely positive. A number of actions had been identified to enhance the protections already in place.

In response to a question about how the service was raising its profile, the Head of Internal Audit and Counter Fraud stated that the service offered monthly counter fraud awareness training and also team specific training. The service also carried out annual surveys on the work of the teams, with the Internal Audit surveys aimed at Service Managers and Assistant Directors who had the most contact with the team and the Counter Fraud survey was for all staff. Once agreed, the Counter Fraud strategy would be sent to all staff via Meta compliance to raise awareness of the issue. The Member commented that the team provided an excellent service and encouraged Members to take an active part in such surveys.

The Committee discussed the proactive Counter Fraud work currently undertaken by the service. This included investigation of misuse of Blue Badges with Civil Enforcement Officers. Fieldwork undertaken earlier in the year had found 25% of badges had been misused, which compared with 20% nationally. Education had been provided to Civil Enforcement Officers in ongoing enforcement and further similar fieldwork would be undertaken in the future.

It was asked what the trigger was to provide action from the service. The Head of Internal Audit and Counter Fraud stated that allegations received by the service were triaged then prioritised for investigation based on the quality of information received. The team also undertook proactive work in areas of high risk such as tenancy fraud.

Decision:

- a) The Committee considered the Counter Fraud & Corruption Strategy document presented at Appendix 1 and recommended approval by Full Council.
- b) The Committee agreed that when the Internal Audit and Counter Fraud Service provided surveys to the Council, Members be encouraged to take part.

403 The One Medway Council Plan Performance Monitoring Report and Strategic Risk Summary - Quarter 1 2025/26

Discussion:

The Chief Information Officer introduced the report which summarised performance of those Council Plan items which were under the remit of the Committee and the Strategic Risk Register. There were four indicators under the remit of the Committee and performance continued to improve towards the four-year target.

The Chief Information Officer added that format of the report would move toward a new system based on SharePoint and Power BI technology to improve readability. This would be complete for the next financial year, however improvements in relation to the Risk Register report would be made throughout the year.

The following issues were discussed:

Readability – Members expressed concern that it was difficult to review performance effectively. The Chief Information Officer acknowledged this and stated that changes were being made to presentation of the information. The direction of travel was positive, and the Council was on course to meet targets by the end of year four so was considered green.

A Member commented that it was difficult to scrutinise the information in the report due a lack of data, the Chief Information Officer stated that the data was available in the narrative of the report, however he acknowledged that it was difficult to read effectively.

Decision:

- a) The Committee considered the Q12025/26 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.

404 Work Programme

Discussion:

The Democratic Services Officer introduced the report, he highlighted the proposed change to the work programme and updated the Committee that membership of the next Task Group Medway 2.0 had been agreed.

The following issues were discussed:

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Workloads – a Member commented that agendas for Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings were becoming larger, and he was concerned that the number and length of items placed additional strain undertaking effective scrutiny for both officers and Members.

It was requested that some work be completed how other unitary authorities had dealt with this challenge. The Democratic Services Officer undertook to review and provide a briefing note to the Committee.

The Chief Information Officer suggested that Members could be offered a session on the use of technology to reduce their workload related to meetings and this was agreed.

Members discussed ways in which workloads could be reduced such as avoiding duplication of being considered by more than one Committee and issuing some agenda reports for information only.

There was agreement that the issue was one of concern, the Democratic Service Officer undertook to consider with colleagues, options how this could be reviewed further by Members either through the current forums available to Members or via a working group.

Decision:

- a) The Committee agreed the provisional work programme at Appendix 1 to the report.
- b) The Committee noted the work programmes of the other Overview and Scrutiny Committees at Appendix 2 to the report.
- c) The Committee noted the progress made in the establishment of the Medway 2.0 Task Group.
- d) The Chief Information Officer to provide a training session for Members on the effective use of technology in the preparation of meetings.

Chairperson

Date:

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