

Regeneration Culture & Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee

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The River Medway Strategy

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Summary

The River Medway Strategy has been developed following extensive consultation with key stakeholders with different interests in the use and future of the River Medway.

It is recognised that the River Medway is under-utilised asset and there are key challenges to realising its potential. Medway Council and stakeholders have a common aspiration to overcome these challenges and maximise opportunities to make the most of the river economically, socially and environmentally to Medway's benefit. The River Medway Strategy provides a framework to enable this.

1. Recommendation

- 1.1. The Committee to note and comment on the River Strategy and to recommend that Cabinet approve adoption of the River Strategy.

2. Budget and policy framework

- 2.1. Officers are considering how best to resource the River Medway Strategy, and the Cabinet report will provide an update on this and will establish an initial two-year work programme to progress the Action Plan.
- 2.2. The Strategy sits within the Councils policy framework.

3. Background

- 3.1. The River Medway is central to Medway's identity, history, and future development. The Strategy sets out an approach to ensure the full potential of the river within the current boundaries of the unitary area of Medway Council is realised as a key asset for the people of Medway, Kent, and to the wider world.

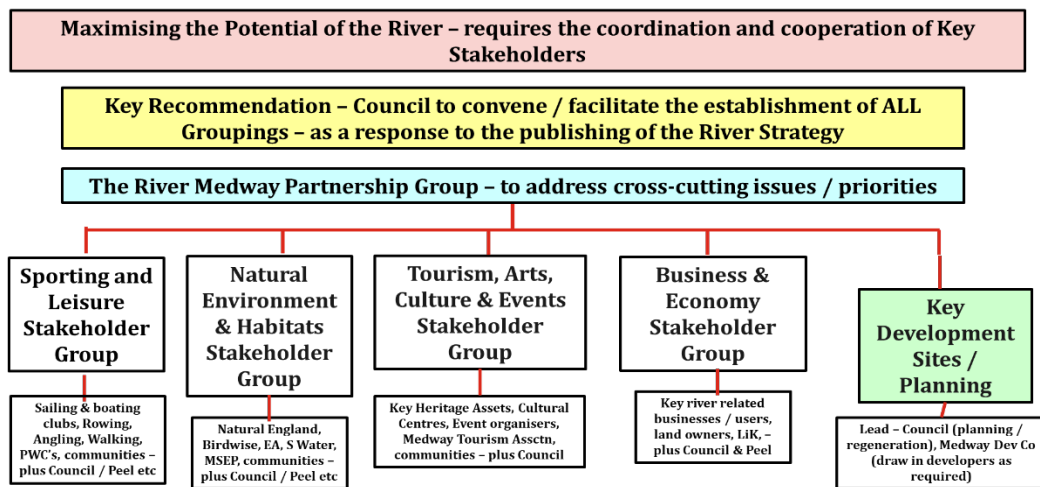
- 3.2. The river is one of Medway's greatest assets and the genesis for settlement in the area. It lies at the heart of Medway and provides a unique core to a wide mix of activities and functions, which create the character and identity of the place. The River Medway is fundamental to Medway's maritime history and heritage and is synonymous with the evolution of the place and its communities, with its use changing significantly over generations.
- 3.3. A diverse range of groups and stakeholders currently use and engage with the River Medway and its waterfront: commercial and industrial users; recreational, sporting and leisure users, river tour operators; hobbyists; environmental groups; heritage enthusiasts; birdwatchers; walkers; and an increasing number of both residents and visitors. It is of importance to all parts of the community, including families, children, and young people through education, culture, recreation, and volunteering.
- 3.4. The resulting River Medway Strategy is structured around five themes, each with a context, challenges and opportunities element. This is followed in the report by an Action Plan and Implementation/Next Steps chapter. The five themes are outlined in the Diagram 1, below and set out in more detail in the body of this report: -

Diagram 1: The Five Themes of the River Medway Strategy



4. Implementation and Next Steps
- 4.1. Diagram 2 below outlines the suggested partnership structure for implementing the River Medway Strategy. Stakeholder theme groups are proposed working to and with a wider River Medway Partnership Group that would address cross-cutting issues and priorities and provide a coordination role, with the Council supporting via facilitation and enablement. The Partnership and the Theme Groups would work together on implementing the River Medway Strategy Action Plan and securing onward necessary investment.

Diagram 2: River Medway Strategy, Governance Structure.



4.2. Leisure and Sport Activities

- Develop the River Medway offer as a destination in the Southeast with more events, attractions and facilities to enable sailing, boating and other sporting activities.
- Develop and support nationally and internationally recognised teaching and training facilities for sailing and other water sports activities.
- Establish the case for a “clean” River Medway, attracting visitors, eliminating any environmental and health concerns and ultimately encouraging participation in “immersive” activities on the river.
- Establish a business case of potential projects, including both hard projects such as physical infrastructure and soft projects and secure further public and private funding sources into river activities.
- Create good quality riverside pathways and developing walking “schemes” to direct residents and visitors to the best walking routes.
- Improve river accessibility and increase the level of demand of people using the river, the range of activities undertaken and the volume of vessels coming into the area by water.
- Undertake a feasibility study to assess the opportunities and viability of a medium-term strategy to maintain, refurbish, and reinstate a range of river access infrastructure (pontoons, moorings, slipways) and to construct new access points.
- Improve the use of river-based infrastructure and facilities at the Strand, particularly the public slipway, improving River frontage access and links to adjoining sites.

- Increase use of the Riverside Country Park, considering any additional river access options that could be developed around the park and linking the park with riverside walkways.
- Capitalise on the connections to London via High-Speed Rail for example, to Strood, Rochester and Chatham to attract a wider visitor profile to the river and develop a sustained campaign around this.
- Establishing a new body empowered to strategically manage the river to manage, maintain and address health and safety and security concerns on the river and for infrastructure along the river.
- Coordinate the 'Medway offer', including promoting the river, organising events, searching for funding opportunities, producing guidance and regulations for river users.

4.3. Economy and Business Activities

- Investigate the opportunities at Grain relating to the development of carbon capture operations for the available land parcels within Uniper's ownership.
- Investigate the use of National Grid's three jetties to transport liquified carbon and the potential for ammonia storage and green ammonia.
- Thamesport, to investigate developing their construction sector focus with a wider range of importers who can efficiently supply the London and Southeast markets from this location. This should include better coordination of timber, steel or other construction import/exports through Thamesport by relocating existing businesses from elsewhere in Medway.
- Uniper and Peel Ports, to investigate bringing back into use the existing Kingsnorth jetties.
- Commission a Planning, Development, and Feasibility Study to investigate establishing a strategic employment location around the wider Kingsnorth area, the viability of re-purposing the existing jetties and linking this to new users, relocating from elsewhere in Medway or further afield. The study should also consider whether relocations from the Medway City Estate are feasible, and how that would impact on the medium-term planning and development strategy for that estate.
- Peel, the current owner of Chatham Docks, does not consider the continuation of the existing operational docks to be viable due to the cost of maintaining the functioning of the lock gates, the level of income

being generated and the demand for such facilities and the lock gates will be permanently closed. The whole area is the subject of a proposal to develop the next phases of Chatham Waters, including office and residential space and leisure facilities. Medway Council is currently working to produce a new Local Plan that will set a framework for the area's growth up to 2041; a draft plan is expected to be published for consultation in January 2026.

4.4. Environment and Habitat Activities

- Improve coordination and management of the existing set of national and international designations.
- Develop eco-tourism and eco-education programme and additional visitor interpretation centres to bring together visitors and residents for recreation purposes while protecting natural habitats.
- Investigate potential of Section 106 payments from new development and how this could support the river environment and habitat.
- Develop a river basin management plan to protect the aquatic ecology, unique and valuable habitats, drinking water resources, and bathing water with controls on pollutants reaching rivers.
- Consider the medium-term requirements to accommodate additional flooding within key development sites adjacent to the river.
- Create better coordination of river management. Peel Ports has enforcement powers but not sufficient resources to always enact and could work closer with Natural England and Environment Agency to perform a wider, coordinating role across the river on all ecological and environmental aspects.
- Consider the feasibility of extending saltmarshes where rising water levels are impacting existing areas and where wider catchments are required to improve levels of flood protection, and investigate saltmarshes uses as carbon sinks and using river as a green heat source.

4.5. Tourism, Heritage and Culture Activities

- Create a group of key arts, cultural, heritage and tourism organisations and individuals to explore long term plans for tourism, heritage and culture around and on the river and enhance cooperation and coordination.

- Prepare an initial investment strategy to test the feasibility and viability, as well as consider the outputs and the benefits to be gained from an integrated approach to tourism, visitor economy, arts and culture, and heritage initiatives.
- A new 'story' for Medway should be created that incorporates the river, its role and importance as the lifeblood of the Medway area. This narrative should be embodied into the stories of the areas rich maritime and naval history and shoreside heritage assets along the river, incorporating stories of the towns, settlements and attractions.
- Develop a five-year rolling event programme with some big events with a national or international profile focused on and around the river.
- Consider the potential for the private sponsorship of new events / initiatives that combine the heritage, arts and culture aspects of Medway and opportunities for investment in both expanding current assets and creating new assets to promote the tourism and visitor economy.

4.6. Development and Planning Activities

- Develop design guidelines for more effective use of river frontages to maximise access provision and views.
- Encourage high-quality, mixed-use developments that integrate with the river and enhance its appeal and accessibility.
- Expand the types of Developer Contribution obligations for developing riverside sites beyond bird disturbance and flood protection for example contributing to habitat protection, flood risk management, and biodiversity enhancement.
- Create overarching development briefs to include design guidance for key sites to attract developers and investors and ensure sustainable growth.
- Undertake detailed appraisals of Council-owned sites to assess the potential to optimise mixed-use development and promote the outcomes with developers.
- Investigate introducing new types of development, such as "floating homes" along the lines of developments in Holland such as at Schoonschip in Amsterdam. There are currently many house boats at sites along the river, but these have lacked sufficient investment in essential infrastructure, such as suitable waste collection and pumping

out arrangements, and new developments would provide the opportunity to address some of these issues.

- The Medway River Strategy will empower river users to affect positive change to improve the river offer and improve the ecological health of the Medway Estuary and its 11,000 acres of salt marsh habitat.

5. Options

- 5.1 Option1: Overview and Scrutiny Committee to provide comments on and support that the River Medway Strategy to be presented to and then Cabinet for approval.
- 5.2 Option 2: Overview and Scrutiny Committee do not support the River Medway Strategy.

6. Advice and analysis

- 6.1 The recommendation is that Overview and Scrutiny Committee approve Option 1.

A Diversity Impact Assessment (DIA) has been completed, and its findings are summarised here:

The River Strategy is the first of its kind in 20 years and will enable a diverse range of groups and stakeholders who currently use and engage with the river and its waterfront for a variety of purposes including sport, leisure and professional marine centred services such as river tour operators and engineering services.

There are no identified negative aspects from implementing the River Medway Strategy. Implementation should assist all groups to gain access to and benefit from the improvements to the river and its environs.

7. Risk management

- 7.1. The following table sets out the key risks identified for the River Medway Strategy at this stage.

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Strategy Delivery Risk – lack of finance	Considerable funding is required to enable strategy implementation	Funding and investment plan and applications to be made	BII
Strategy Delivery Risk – lack of stakeholder engagement	A wide range of stakeholders are necessary to implement strategy	Existing strong partnership and stakeholder relations which will	CIII

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Strategy Delivery Risk – Planning consents	Lack of planning consents and environmental challenges	continue to be developed Early engagement with planning team and environmental agencies	BII
Strategy Delivery Risk – Inclement weather	Unfavourable weather conditions	Contingencies within project planning and timescales	AIII
Strategy Delivery Risk – lack of river users	People not using new river infrastructure and facilities	Active marketing and promotional campaigns and plans, Co-creation with users	CIV

For risk rating, please refer to the following table

Likelihood	Impact:
A Very likely	I Catastrophic
B Likely	II Major
C Unlikely	III Moderate
D Rare	IV Minor

8. Consultation

- 8.1. The Strategy has been developed involving extensive consultation and engagement with key stakeholders and external agencies with an interest in the River Medway. A series of interviews and workshops were held and were well attended with positive input and feedback which has helped shape the strategy. Where possible the methodology for the implementation of the River Medway Strategy will capitalise on and align with existing groups and organisations already with a vested interest in maximising the opportunities of the river, for example and to name a few - Creative Medway, Medway Swale Boating Association, Sun Pier House, Peel Ports, Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust and Sea Scouts.

9. Climate change implications

- 9.1. The River Medway Strategy provides a strong framework for climate action, identifying opportunities for both mitigation and adaptation measures.
- 9.2. Positive measures include the potential restoration and expansion of saltmarshes, which act as natural carbon sinks and provide vital flood protection. Eco-tourism and education initiatives present opportunities to raise awareness of climate impacts on the river, aligning with Priority 1 – Knowledge and Empowerment – in the Council's Climate Change Action Plan 2025-28. The strategy also supports exploring the river as a renewable heat source and working with stakeholders on carbon capture and clean energy opportunities, contributing to the Council's decarbonisation goals and aligning with the UK City Net Zero Declaration signed by Cabinet in August 2025.
- 9.3. To mitigate potential risks such as increased emissions from river use and development, flood vulnerability and added pressure on sensitive habitats already affected by climate change, individual actions in the River Medway Strategy Action Plan will be considered for their carbon impact and resilience benefits, prior to implementation.

10. Financial implications

- 10.1. The development of the River Medway Strategy itself has been funded by Medway Council within existing budgets.
- 10.2. The delivery of the Strategy's Action Plan will require investment to be secured with an Investment Plan to be created and enacted. Subject to resources, different funding sources will be researched including public, private and voluntary sectors. Provisional estimates for some of the interventions in the Action Plan are outlined but further feasibility work is required to finesse these and until this is completed the overall cost of delivering the River Medway Strategy cannot be determined.
- 10.3. Any additional Council funding would need to be approved as part of the Council's budget for 2026/27 through the normal governance routes.

11. Legal implications

- 11.1. There are no legal implications directly arising from the report however some of the interventions and other activities proposed within the strategy will require input, for example during any contract processes or to develop funding and grant agreements with third parties as and when required.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Draft River Medway Strategy

Appendix 2 – Diversity Impact Assessment

Background papers

None