

Cabinet

16 December 2025

Transfer of Greenspace Functions from Medway Norse

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Simon Curry, Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Strategic Regeneration

Report from: Mark Breathwick, Assistant Director Community and Culture

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Summary

This report seeks Cabinet approval for the transfer of a range of greenspace functions currently operated by Medway Norse as part of the joint venture agreement to Medway Council with effect from 1 April 2026; with consequent reduction in annual payment to Medway Norse to be allocated to the sport, greenspaces and climate response service to operate these functions.

1. Recommendations

- 1.1. Cabinet is asked to approve the following recommendations:
- 1.2. Transfer the greenspaces client management function to Medway Council, reducing the 2026-27 payment to Medway Norse, with the attributed budget to be used by the Sport, Greenspaces and Climate Response service to fund in-house client management function.
- 1.3. Transfer the urban ranger function to Medway Council, including TUPE of relevant staff, and remove the discrete funding paid to Medway Norse for the operation of this function, with the attributed budget to be used by the Sport, Greenspaces and Climate Response service to fund in-house urban ranger function.
- 1.4. Transfer the operation of Medway's country parks, including TUPE of relevant staff, and remove the discrete funding paid to Medway Norse for this function, with the attributed budget to be used by the Sport, Greenspaces and Climate Response service to fund in-house country parks function. (This does not include the operation of the cafes at Capstone and Riverside Country Parks which form part of a separate lease agreement).
- 1.5. Transfer the allotments function to Medway Council, including TUPE of relevant staff, and remove the discrete budget paid to Medway Norse for this

function, with the attributed budget to be used by the Sport, Greenspaces and Climate Response service to fund in-house allotments function.

- 1.6. Transfer the trees function to Medway Council, including TUPE of relevant staff, and reduce the 2026-27 funding payment to Medway Norse, with the attributed budget to be used by the Sport, Greenspaces and Climate Response service to fund in-house trees team function.

2. Suggested reasons for decision(s)

- 2.1. Transferring the client management function to the Council will give greater oversight of the greenspaces work remaining in the joint venture, improving accountability and responsibility and enabling improved financial monitoring.
- 2.2. Transferring the country parks, urban rangers, allotments and trees teams to Medway Council will improve operational effectiveness, ensuring increased priority and greater responsiveness is given to the needs of residents.

3. Budget and policy framework

- 3.1. Decisions on the operation of services within the joint venture with Medway Norse have been a matter for Cabinet since the inception of the joint venture. There are no anticipated budgetary implications, as the annual budget payment to Medway Norse will be reduced to enable the sport, greenspaces and climate response service to deliver the greenspace functions which are transferring.

4. Background

- 4.1. The joint venture between Medway Council and Medway Norse began operating in 2013.
- 4.2. Over the following years, a range of greenspace services and associated staff have been transferred into the joint venture. These have included maintenance and upkeep of Medway's parks, play areas and woodlands; amenity grass cutting; operational responsibility for the country parks; preparation and maintenance of grass sports pitches; upkeep of Medway's allotment sites; responsibility for trees on Council land; the work of the urban rangers; and general grounds maintenance.
- 4.3. Since 2017 it has also included the client management function. This made Medway Norse both the organisation responsible for delivering the programme of works, and also the organisation with management responsibility for ensuring the delivery of the works was in accordance with Medway Council requirements.
- 4.4. As time has progressed, such an approach has given Medway Council less clarity in understanding how the budget is being spent, how works are being prioritised, and how standards are being maintained. While recognising there was a programme of board meetings and liaison board meetings, the nature of such quarterly meetings could not deliver the same level of oversight

necessary for a joint venture agreement which in the current financial year has required a budget from Medway Council of circa £5.47m.

- 4.5. This has manifested in a number of amendments to the original agreement over time, which have been verbally agreed but without formal written confirmation. In taking over responsibility for greenspace services late last year, this has resulted in considerable variations between what is in the original service level agreement and what is now being delivered. While the working relationship with partners at Medway Norse has been, and continues to be, strong, such lack of clarity has meant understanding the current operating model has been difficult, impacting the opportunity to implement priorities of the Portfolio Holder and provide effective transparency on how the annual budget is being spent.
- 4.6. Allied to this has been a lack of co-ordination and focus on areas which are important to Medway Council, through an unnecessarily complicated operating model.
- 4.7. An example of this can be seen in the fractured delivery model for allotments. Under the current arrangements, four different departments – two at Medway Norse and two in Medway Council – are involved in administering the operational function. This has led to a number of ongoing problems, ranging from inefficient and incorrect billing to lack of an appropriate programme of repairs and maintenance, and an inadequate supply of plots to meet demand. There are now more than 2,100 names on the waiting list. Bringing this function fully within Medway Council will enable greater accountability and ensure the required focus is given to this function to better address the needs of the community.

5. Options

- 5.1. Option 1: Continue with the current joint venture model, leaving the client management function and country parks, allotments, trees and urban rangers under Medway Norse. This option would not require the TUPE of any staff from Medway Norse to Medway Council.
- 5.2. Option 2: Return the client management function to Medway Council to enable greater oversight. Leave country parks, allotments, trees and urban rangers under Medway Norse. This option may require the TUPE of some staff from Medway Norse to Medway Council, depending on how Medway Norse currently delivers the client management function. Guidance on this has been sought from HR colleagues.
- 5.3. Option 3: Remove the totality of greenspaces from Medway Norse and seek a different operating model, through either returning the entire operation to Medway Council or seeking alternative external providers. This option would require the TUPE of all greenspaces staff from Medway Norse to Medway Council.
- 5.4. Option 4: Return the client management function and selected other functions to Medway Council, as set out in Section 1.2-1.5 above. This option would

require the TUPE of staff working in these areas from Medway Norse to Medway Council.

6. Advice and analysis

- 6.1. Option 1: Continuing with the current operating model will fail to address the lack of detailed transparency and clarity over how Council budget is being spent on greenspaces, nor will it provide improved accountability or responsibility as there will be no differentiation between the delivery arm of the functions and the management oversight of those functions. Thus, this option is not recommended.
- 6.2. Option 2: This would address the need to separate the client management function providing strategic oversight from the day-to-day operational delivery. However, it would not remedy the current type of operational ineffectiveness as outlined in section 4.7. Thus this option is not recommended.
- 6.3. Option 3: This option would mirror the approach being taken in the future delivery of Council FM services. While recognising this may be something the Council would wish to consider in the future, the Council's sport, greenspaces and climate response service has only been fully formed since July 2025. As such, establishing a complete understanding of how the current greenspaces Service Level Agreement (SLA) with Medway Norse works – particularly in the absence of a client management function within Medway Council – to provide meaningful advice to Members and senior officers is not currently possible. In addition, the extensive nature of the work involved, including first and foremost the TUPE of all greenspaces staff were this to happen, and preparing and tendering for alternative operators, would not be possible to implement by 1 April 2026. Thus this option is not recommended.
- 6.4. Option 4: This option enables the Council to establish clear operational governance through the re-establishment of the client management function, and to also seek to deliver directly other identified functions (namely country parks, allotments, trees and urban rangers) where it is believed the Council can improve operational effectiveness. Through discussions with HR colleagues, a timetable for TUPE of relevant staff from Medway Norse to Medway Council can be achieved by the implementation of 1 April 2026 (subject to ongoing discussions with Medway Norse on meeting the proposed timetable). For these reasons, this option is recommended to Cabinet.
- 6.5. A Diversity Impact Assessment will be undertaken as part of the TUPE process, subject to Cabinet's decision on the recommendations within this report.

7. Risk management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Transfer of greenspaces functions not completed by April 1 2026	The designated greenspaces functions cannot be transferred from Medway Norse to Medway Council by April 1 2026. This impacts on the delivery of the services to residents, the annual funding payment to Medway Norse, and the budget requirement for the sport, greenspaces and climate response service.	Formal notice of the transfer of services was given to Medway Norse in September 2025, as agreed with Norse parent company. A weekly programme of meetings have been established with accompanying transition plan to enable effective transfer in line with the agreed timescale.	CII
TUPE of relevant greenspaces staff not completed by April 1 2026	TUPE of staff in the designated functions is not completed by April 1 2026. This impacts on the delivery of services to residents as well as creating uncertainty for the staff affected.	Medway Council has provided Medway Norse with a timeframe for the implementation of TUPE in order to meet the April 1 2026 deadline. This is being monitored through the programme of weekly meetings and accompanying transition plan, as well as through ongoing engagement with HR colleagues.	CII
Insufficient budget provided for service to operate designated greenspaces functions	The identified budget requirement currently paid to Medway Norse is not transferred to the sport, greenspaces and climate response service, impacting the ability to deliver the services which have transferred.	The budget requirements form part of the recommendations to Cabinet within this report and reflect either the discrete sums paid to Medway Norse for the relevant functions, or the budget set aside by Medway Norse for delivery of the function. There is no additional financial demand on the Council's budget being requested.	CII

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 recommendations within this report have been set out following discussion with the Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Strategic Regeneration, the Director of Place, and the Assistant Director Community and Culture. They have been progressed through senior internal meetings and shared with the Council's non-executive directors on the board of Medway Norse. Directors at Medway Norse and the parent Norse company have been informed formally of the decision, and a programme of weekly meetings are being held to facilitate transition. HR colleagues have been informed of the recommendations and the prospective TUPE implications and have provided expert guidance on establishing the relevant transfer programme.

9. Climate change implications

9.1. There are no immediate climate change implications arising, as this is a transfer of existing services from Medway Norse to Medway Council. However, it is anticipated there will be longer-term benefits arising, with the Council have greater ability to prioritise programmes of works which align with the Climate Change action plan.

10. Financial implications

10.1. This report is requesting a revenue budget to provide a range of functions within the sport, greenspaces and climate response service. However, this will be achieved through commensurate reduction in the annual payment to Medway Norse (currently £5.47million) for the delivery of those functions, and therefore there should be no net cost implication for the Council.

11. Legal implications

11.1. Formal notification of the plan to transfer the relevant greenspace functions to Medway Council was given to Medway Norse on 30 September, 2025 by the Assistant Director Legal and Governance, in accordance with the procedure agreed with Norse parent company.

Lead officer contact

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Appendices

None

Background papers

None