

Public Questions and responses - Cabinet, 13 January 2026

Question A - Bryan Fowler of Chatham, asked the Portfolio Holder of Economic and Social Regeneration and Inward Investment, Councillor Harinder Mahil, the following:

'The public toilets at Chatham Bus Station are a gruesome place and the Disabled Persons/baby Changing Cubicle has been closed since August 2025.

Will the Council consider using Pride in Place funds to restore these facilities?'

In response, Councillor Mahil advised that the accessible toilet at the bus station was closed last summer following damage to the emergency alarm system and reports that the facility was being misused. Improvements had been made to address these issues and a new entry system would be installed shortly. Officers were also looking to implement a new emergency communication system to further enhance the safety and well-being of users. Officers were working to complete these improvements as soon as possible.

The work was being funded through existing budgets for maintaining and improving facilities at the bus station, and therefore the Pride and Place funding could be used for other projects across Medway.

Bryan Fowler asked the following supplementary question:

'This has taken a long time to get done and it isn't a good look for any of us when we've in effect forced people that are caring for children and are disabled, to travel some distance across a bus lane to go to the toilet. So can you be more precise about putting a time scale on that please?'

In response, Councillor Mahil advised that he did not have information on the timescales at hand and would get it to Mr Fowler as soon as possible.

Post note:

The installation of the two-way communication system was the most important upgrade, as it would support any user getting into difficulty. It had been confirmed that this would be operational by 1 March 2026 and the facility could then be reopened.

Question B - Benjamin Pranczke of Gillingham, had submitted the following question to the Leader of the Council, Councillor Vince Maple:

'Medway Council has now submitted its bold vision for local government, truly Kent Reimagined, which is now with the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG).

Does the Leader agree with me that the model from Kent County Council (KCC) which basically is "Back to the Future" effectively trying to delete the last 27 years is not fit for purpose, and with a single council means the Reform leadership are

making it much less likely that devolution resources and powers will be available to communities across Kent & Medway?’

In the questioner’s absence, Councillor Maple responded that he agreed that the 1A model, as many people had referred to it, was almost back to the future, creating a single upper tier authority for the region of Kent and Medway.

It would ultimately be for the Government to decide which model they wished to take forward, however he hoped the Government would allow all 5 proposed options to be consulted on. He urged residents to think very carefully about what it meant, not just for local government organisation, but for devolution. A single unitary authority model, as being proposed by the Reform UK led Kent County Council, would mean that improvements in things like public transport and skills would be further away. He asserted that the model put forward by this Council was a bold provision and truly reimagined.

Question C - Neil Davies of Chatham, had submitted the following question to the Portfolio Holder of Housing and Homelessness, Councillor Louwella Prenter:

“Homelessness and rough sleeping in Medway has increased since 2020 by between 90% and 170% depending on which source and which specific definition is used.

Given those figures and the extra £500,000 that was given to Medway in October last year by central government taking the budget over the original £4.6 million, how does the Council feel its progressing with its plan to reduce homelessness within Medway by 2030?”

In the questioner’s absence, Councillor Louwella Prenter advised that the need for homelessness assistance in Medway remained high and was increasing, with 2,941 approaches to the end of Q3, compared with 2,610 last year. The Council’s messaging was proving effective with more cases seeking assistance at the prevention stage rather than as homeless-on-the-day, allowing the team more time and opportunity to achieve outcomes that resolved housing problems. This demonstrated the effectiveness of dedicated and focused early interventions. Even though demand was increasing, currently 72% of all cases where a duty had been accepted had been prevented or relieved from homelessness compared to 67% 24/25 and 63% 24/24. Medway’s letting agency (OML) had been set up and currently managed 33 properties. In December the team assisted 97 households to secure private rented accommodation.

Figures had peaked in 2017, with 44 people. Following the 2018 creation of Medway’s Rough Sleeping Initiative, numbers had consistently stayed between 10-20 people found on one night, with one exception in 2020 during the ‘everyone in’ scheme, due to the covid pandemic. The 2025 figure was 12. This showed the effectiveness of current provision compared to some authorities in England where numbers had been steadily increasing.

Additional projects funded this year had seen: a winter shelter operating from the start the January to end of March; a new project set up with drug and alcohol treatment services for vulnerable people; additional temporary accommodation for people sleeping rough; funding of voluntary partners to add paid staff to a large

shared supported house; as well as a new project for vulnerable women who had been homeless due to past domestic abuse. Along with 180 units of temporary accommodation being purchased this year, this all worked towards reducing the numbers who would otherwise be homeless.

Medway Housing would continue to work in a One Medway way with partner departments and external agencies, to make best use of all the available resources and deliver the Council's plans to 2030.

Member Questions

Question D – Councillor Joanne Howcroft-Scott asked the Portfolio Holder for Economic and Social Regeneration and Inward Investment, Councillor Harinder Mahil, the following:

“Following the success of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund scheme, can the Portfolio Holder update on what role community groups, cultural organisations and local institutions have played so far, and setting out how will they continue to be involved as projects move into delivery?”

In response, Councillor Mahil advised that community groups, cultural organisations and local institutions had been integral to the delivery of the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF). Since SPF Year 2, the fund had operated as an open application process accessible by all appropriately legally constituted organisations across Medway. Community groups, cultural organisations and local institutions had been beneficiaries of the funding from that point.

The fund had been designed to support local communities, by building the capacity of local groups, increasing the service provision across the region and providing opportunities for all. The SPF application process offered Medway the chance to support local communities deliver projects and initiatives that were ‘by the community, for the community’.

Councillor Mahil proudly stated that the SPF programme had been involved in and supported over 149 projects, and this would not have been possible without Medway's community groups, cultural organisations and local institutions who were intrinsic to the success of the scheme in their role as project deliverers.

Beyond their role as project deliverers, the successfully funded local community groups all participated in the UKSPF board meetings and engaged with one another creating a platform for each organisation to promote their own services and generate organic collaborations with organisations from different communities or representing different causes they would not have typically had the opportunity to engage with. Each year this dynamic group was then asked for feedback to ensure continuous improvement in the SPF programmes management and processes.

An example in isolation for the impact of the SPF programme in building the capacity of local groups was the SPF's support of the High Street Heritage Action Zone Cultural consortium in becoming a Charitable Incorporated Organisation, which then provided them the appropriate legal constitution for them to be able to bid for different funding streams as an established legal entity This organisation was now known as ‘Intra Community Trust’, and was just one example of the type of support provided through the SPF funding.

Moving forwards, into Year 5 of the SPF (which would likely be under new branding), cultural organisations and community groups would continue to be the backbone of this programme providing the delivery of projects and programmes that made the SPF programme what it was.

Question E - Councillor Chris Spalding had submitted the following question to the Portfolio Holder for Community Safety, Highways and Enforcement, Councillor Alex Paterson:

“Can the Portfolio Holder state how many flags were removed from lamp posts and other street furniture within All Saints ward specifying the number by village:

- a) Allhallows;
- b) Grain;
- c) Stoke; and
- d) St Mary Hoo.

In giving his response, the Portfolio Holder should state the combined cost of this removal and what has happened to the flags that have been removed?”

In response, Councillor Paterson stated how proud he was of the work that had been undertaken by council officers and by the Council’s contractors, in the removal of illegal flags. He was also grateful to residents who had contacted him, not just from his own ward, but from across Medway, and to the elected members from around the county from areas where they felt their administration had not shown the clear moral leadership that had been shown by this Council, with the removal of these flags. He stated that the remaining flags that could be seen elsewhere in the region of Kent spoke volumes about how correct this Council had been in taking action.

Councillor Paterson advised that a total of 90 flags were removed from the Isle of Grain as part of the total operation as previously experienced. As with the removal of fly tipping or any other illegal installation, there was a cost to the community of any clear up after law breakers. He felt it regrettable that despite a clear indication that any flags put up would be removed, some individuals had chosen to continue to. Regrettably some of those people had been elected members who should know better and he was sure that Councillor Spalding would want to join him in condemning those who wasted public money. He stated that he was pleased to see that one of the chief self-identifying flag raisers from Medway was now serving a prison sentence for a variety of offences, which included public order offences. These people were not patriots.

Councillor Paterson finished by stating that all the flags that had been removed, had been retained and treated with the respect they had not hitherto been shown by those attaching them half-mast to lampposts. These flags would now be used in a community project to celebrate the vibrant and diverse place that we were proud to live in.

Question F - Councillor George Perfect asked the Leader of the Council, Councillor Vince Maple, the following:

“Can the Leader of the Council please provide an update on the outcome of his recent meeting with the Minister for Local Government Baroness Taylor of Stevenage?”

In response Councillor Maple stated that it had been a positive meeting with Baroness Taylor, someone he had known for a number of years and someone who really ‘got’ local government. He felt that Stevenage was a better place because of her service. They had spoken about a number of issues in their limited time including: local government reorganisation; the financial situations of this council and councils generally; the difficult situation that had been experienced in Swale, which would also be addressed at full Council the following week; and civility and public life, including protection for all councillors. He had also spoken about achieving city status, something he had written to Baroness Taylor about before, and the meeting had concluded with him inviting her to Medway this year, to come and see some of the fantastic projects being carried out. He advised that she was naturally, particularly interested in housing, and his plan was to show her some of the great work being carried out by the Council, in particular by the Council run Medway Development Company (MDC).

Question G - Councillor Habib Tejan asked the Portfolio Holder for Community Safety, Highways and Enforcement, Councillor Alex Paterson, the following:

“How is the administration measuring the impact of digital transformation on service efficiency and cost reduction, specifically what barriers have delayed the delivery of the Financial Improvement and Transformation (FIT) plan savings and what is been done to overcome them?”

In response, Councillor Paterson advised that digital transformation was an important objective for the administration, as recognised in the key strategic document, the One Medway Council Plan 2024/28. The Plan included a specific objective to “Develop and facilitate easy-to-use and simple digital solutions for residents to access services and engage with the public sector.”

There were four performance indicators that monitored the progress and impact of this objective:

- achieve a 50% reduction in incoming telephone calls to Medway Council;
- Medway Council’s corporate website to have an accessibility score of 90% compliance;
- 80% of customers to rate our digital services as ‘very easy’ or ‘easy’ to use; and
- increase digital interactions with residents by 60%.

The theme of these measures was to enable high-quality, accessible, and easy-to-use digital services that made it easier for most residents to access information and “self-serve” without needing to contact the Council by telephone, email, or letter.

This approach to digital transformation not only made services available to residents 24/7 and provided a quicker and better service, but was also much more efficient for the Council, allowing resources to be focused on residents who needed additional support and enabling cost reductions.

Targets had been set for each of these measures, with the aim of achieving them by March 2028. Performance reporting against these measures was publicly available in the quarterly update reports that were reviewed at Cabinet and at the Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

A significant amount of work was underway within the One Medway Financial Improvement and Transformation (FIT) Plan to deliver improvements and cost savings across the Council while progressing the ambitions in the One Medway Council Plan.

The FIT Plan was regularly reviewed by the Corporate Management Team, and a publicly available report on progress against the FIT Plan targets was presented to Cabinet on a quarterly basis. During 2024/25 the FIT Plan had helped deliver over £28.6m of savings and income. There had been several barriers and challenges to achieving the targets within the FIT Plan, such as changing demographic pressures and the impact of cost-of-living challenges for residents, which could limit income growth in some areas of the Council and create additional pressures on services.

Whilst recognising that some of these barriers were outside the Council's control, work continued to overcome these challenges by transforming how services were delivered. The FIT Plan contained a wide range of "Key Actions" designed to implement solutions to increase prevention work and signpost residents to relevant services to support the Council's social care and housing challenges. The Benefits and Welfare service also distributed around £57.5 million each year to residents to support them with the cost-of-living crisis.

Questioners were not present for the following questions. Responses were not given at the meeting but are listed below.

Question H - Councillor Andrew Lawrence had submitted the following question to the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Homelessness, Councillor Louwella Prenter:

"Can the Portfolio Holder please advise how many unlicensed Households in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) are operating in Medway and what action she is taking to bring these into compliance, in giving her answer would the Portfolio Holder agree with me that enforcement action may actually deter those who see Medway as "paved in gold" for creating new HMOs?"

Response:

The Council has a statutory duty to licence large HMOs (defined as where there are five or more tenants forming two or more households using shared facilities such as toilets, bathrooms or kitchens) under the Housing Act 2004. This is to ensure minimum standards of safety and maintenance.

The Council sets out its approach to housing enforcement for mandatory licensing in its Housing Enforcement Policy (found on our website). As part of the Council's ongoing commitment to providing good quality affordable housing, the Cabinet

approved the introduction of Additional and Selective Licensing and the commissioning of statutory consultation to provide additional evidence.

As part of the exercise to consider the implementation of additional and selective licensing, a tenure intelligence report was commissioned, this piece of work looked at the potential number of HMOs (including reviewing existing licensed properties) to establish the need for additional licensing.

The Council does not know where unlicensed HMOs (those which would require a mandatory license) are in Medway unless a complaint or other intelligence is received. However, as part of the tenure intelligence exercise the evidence gathered suggested that Medway may have as many as 750 predicted HMOs (in the non-mandatory category). This intelligence supported the recommendation to introduce additional licenses as per the October Cabinet paper.

The Private Sector Housing Team has increased their enforcement action over the last few years, with the team issuing £97,000 of fixed penalty notices since January 2025.

The implementation of additional licensing will increase the capacity and ability to enforce minimum standards in all forms of HMOs in the proposed designation areas (areas which have the highest number of predicted HMOs which are currently outside of mandatory licensing). This would deter landlords from setting up low quality HMOs where they could not meet licensing requirements.

Question 1 - Councillor Phil Filmer had submitted the following question to the Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Strategic Regeneration, Councillor Simon Curry:

“Can the Portfolio Holder please explain how the proposed Article 4 Direction will not displace the issue of Households in Multiple Occupations (HMOS) into areas of Medway not covered by the Article 4 Direction?”

Response:

Legislation and Government guidance on the use of Article 4s are very clear. They must not cover an entire Council area and should be evidence based. At present, with the work that has been done on licensing, the evidence only supports Article 4s within the selected 7 wards. Once served, the Council and Planning Authority will need to monitor impact and if the Article 4s result in pressure on other areas, consideration will be given to the serving of further Article 4s.

Please note though that the Article 4s that have been put in place are subject to the Secretary of State not disagreeing that the chosen wards and the evidence support and justify the serving of them.

Also, be aware that the serving of an Article 4 does not mean that all applications for small scale HMOs will be refused, but just that they require planning permission. Any planning application received will be considered against all material planning matters including national and local planning policy.