

## **Regeneration, Culture and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**24 March 2026**

### **Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Heritage, Culture and Leisure**

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Nina Gurung, Portfolio Holder for Heritage, Culture & Leisure

#### Summary

This annual report provides an account of the role of the Portfolio Holder for Heritage, Culture & Leisure. It details their ambitions for their areas of responsibility, how they have and will undertake political challenge and leadership and what their priorities and ambitions are for the year ahead.

#### 1. Recommendation

1.1 The Committee is asked to note the report.

#### 2. Budget and policy framework

2.1 The areas within the terms of reference of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and covered by the Portfolio Holder for Heritage, Culture & Leisure, as set out in the Council's Constitution are:

- Festivals and Events
- Medway Theatres
- Rochester Corn Exchange
- Culture Development
- Archives
- Libraries and Community Hubs
- Heritage
- Medway Sport

#### 3. Background

3.1. 2025 was a standout year for Culture, Libraries and Heritage in Medway, a year in which the service not only delivered an ambitious programme but did so with confidence, creativity and an increasingly collaborative spirit. What

emerged was a compelling picture of a place where culture is not an optional extra, but a driver of community pride, economic activity, inclusion and identity. This report celebrates the breadth and depth of that success, offering a narrative that both honours the teams involved and clearly demonstrates the value they delivered to Medway's residents and visitors.

#### 4. Festivals and Events - A Year That Began with Energy and Ended with Civic Pride

- 4.1. In 2025, the Festivals and Events Team delivered a vibrant and inclusive programme that brought Medway's communities together, strengthened local pride and supported businesses and tourism across all five towns. Free festivals, cultural celebrations and community-led events created moments of joy, connection and shared identity throughout the year.
- 4.2. Major Events - the year began with the 43rd Rochester Sweeps Festival, which once again transformed the city into Europe's largest May Day celebration. More than 74,000 visitors enjoyed a rich programme that included a new international community stage celebrating Medway's diverse cultures. Audience feedback remained exceptionally strong, with high ratings for atmosphere, performances and community spirit.
- 4.3. Armed Forces Day at The Historic Dockyard Chatham welcomed around 8,000 attendees, supported by a newly created Veterans Database to deepen engagement with Medway's military community.
- 4.4. Remembrance and Christmas formed a significant part of the year's programme. Remembrance Sunday was coordinated across four key locations supported by a central Event Control.
- 4.5. Rochester Christmas Market enjoyed one of its busiest years, attracting more than 230,000 visitors, while the Dickensian Christmas Festival returned at full strength with more than 80 performances and a new coach management system that facilitated more than one hundred coach arrivals. Proudly, once again, we were able to bring back relaxed Christmas Market experience for our community members special needs so that they could enjoy the Markets without feeling overwhelmed or excluded.
- 4.6. Christmas lights and festive activities were delivered across Medway's towns in collaboration with traders, community groups and local forums, creating a warm and welcoming seasonal atmosphere.
- 4.7. Medway's Commemorations of VE Day 80 and VJ Day 80, A Year of Powerful Tribute and Community Pride - in 2025, Medway delivered a remarkable and deeply moving programme to mark the 80th anniversaries of VE Day and VJ Day, creating moments of reflection that resonated across all five towns and the Hoo Peninsula and brought communities together through beacon lighting, fairs, street parties in a shared act of remembrance. Medway's commemorations stood out as one of the year's most successful and meaningful achievements for the Festivals and Events, Culture Development,

Heritage and Libraries, Highways and Communications teams, blending creativity, sensitivity and a strong sense of civic pride, earning accolades from local residents, Armed Forces family and veterans, and recognised regionally and nationally.

- 4.8. The marking of VE Day 80 created a striking visual moment for residents across Medway. Searchlights illuminated the night skies above every town and the Hoo Peninsula, casting powerful beams of light that could be seen from up to four miles away. This contemporary alternative to the traditional fire beacon offered a dramatic and dignified tribute, connecting communities through a shared visual experience and ensuring that the significance of the anniversary was felt widely. Many residents commented on the beauty and emotional impact of seeing the coordinated lights from their homes, viewing points and public spaces.
- 4.9. For VJ Day 80, Medway delivered an equally thoughtful and resonant programme. The Historic Dockyard Chatham provided an evocative backdrop for a community focused commemoration that honoured those who served in the Far East. The event included the premiere of the *Medway Peace Poem* film, commissioned by Medway Libraries written and performed by local residents and filmed at heritage landmarks across the area. This creative, locally rooted piece captured personal reflections on conflict, peace and reconciliation, and was received with great warmth by residents and visiting dignitaries alike.
- 4.10. These commemorations also strengthened the year's already deep partnership working with the Royal School of Military Engineering and uniformed services. The Festivals and Events Team worked closely with military colleagues throughout the planning and delivery process, ensuring the parades and events were respectful, well-informed and aligned with national activity. This collaborative approach helped reinforce Medway's longstanding relationship with the armed forces community and contributed to the professionalism and authenticity of the commemorations.
- 4.11. Feedback from partners, veterans, community groups and attendees highlighted how meaningful the programme felt, with many expressing admiration, pride and respect for Medway's commitment to marking both milestone anniversaries with creativity, dignity and inclusive participation. The events were widely praised for balancing solemnity with accessibility, ensuring that residents of all ages could engage with the commemorations in ways that felt relevant and moving.
- 4.12. Overall, Medway's marking of VE Day 80 and VJ Day 80 stands as a major success for 2025. Through innovative programming, strong partnership working and a deep respect for the significance of these anniversaries delivered commemorations that united communities, honoured the past and strengthened local pride in Medway's heritage and identity.
- 4.13. Commercial Successes - the team generated income to the service with a wide range of external organisers, supporting events such as Rochester

Castle Live, Taste of the Caribbean Festival and Circus Extreme. These partnerships brought high-quality cultural activity to Medway while creating significant economic value for local traders, suppliers and hospitality businesses.

- 4.14. A new Romanian market was successfully delivered at Luton Recreation Ground in partnership with a European events company. Strong audience numbers and positive trader feedback have already led to confirmed plans for an expanded programme in 2026.
- 4.15. Community Support and Capacity Building - the team continued to nurture Medway's thriving community events scene by combining clear processes, practical support and opportunities for organisers to build confidence and skills.
- 4.16. The Event Application system provided a streamlined way for local groups to plan and deliver their own events. This enabled a wide variety of neighbourhood-led activities including the Isle of Grain Carnival, Cuxton Big Lunch, the Vines Cherry Picnic, Walderslade Sings, Family Fun Days and other seasonal celebrations.
- 4.17. The Community Grant Scheme funded a broad range of cultural programming including BOING, Medway Pride, Electric Medway, Medway River Lit, the Sticks 'n' Stones Festival, Fort Amherst Summer Proms and the Festival of Chatham Reach, supporting smaller organisations to contribute to Medway's cultural life. All of these events promote community engagement, wellbeing and inclusion.
- 4.18. UKSPF funding strengthened local capacity further through the creation of a High Street Events Toolkit and free "Events Uncovered" training sessions. These resources gave organisers the knowledge and tools needed to run safe, engaging and sustainable events.
- 4.19. Partnership work with internal services, including Medway Sport, Public Health and Greenspaces, supported events such as the Medway Mile, outdoor yoga, eco crafting and volunteer networking.
- 4.20. Strong Partnerships Across Medway - Partnerships remained central to the success of the 2025 programme. Across town centres, the team worked closely with Love Chatham, the Chatham Town Centre Forum and Love Gillingham partners to animate High Streets through popular free community events such as Chinese New Year festival, Super Saturday, Dino Day and the Love Gillingham Big Day Out. These collaborations not only brought excitement and the community together, but also supported local businesses, increased footfall and created wide-ranging lively, welcoming public spaces.
- 4.21. A long-standing partnership with Rochester Cathedral continued to play a crucial role. The Cathedral's indoor cultural programme complements our major outdoor festivals and is essential to the successful delivery of large-scale events in the city.

4.22. Our civic and cultural partnerships were strengthened further through meaningful engagement with faith communities and Medway Interfaith Action (MIFA) that focus on fostering dialogue, mutual respect, and understanding among various faith communities. A major highlight was the first Medway delivery of the sacred Hindu ritual Karkidaka Vavu Bali, delivered with the Kent Ayyappa Temple Trust and supported by Medway Towns Rowing Club, River Projects Team and the Environment Agency. The event attracted participants from across the UK and received national visibility through Malayalam media coverage. This work demonstrated Medway's commitment to cultural inclusion and to supporting faith groups with significant and meaningful events.

4.23. Together, these partnerships form a resilient network that underpins Medway's festivals and events programme, ensuring it remains vibrant, inclusive and rooted in local identity.

## 5. Medway Theatres – Creativity, Growth and a Transformational Project

5.1. The Central Theatre has demonstrated strong operational resilience this year, delivering 167 performances and attracting 85,644 audience members, with six weeks remaining in the financial year. Customer satisfaction remains exceptionally high at 96 percent, reflecting both service quality and the strong audience experience. Despite seasonal fluctuations and the complexities of programming with national promoters, the theatre is fully booked to the end of the year, with long-term scheduling already extending into 2028. The combined focus on professional programming, community engagement, and forward planning continues to support audience growth and long-term sustainability.

5.2. Sleeping Beauty - The 2025-2026 pantomime season was another success, with over 25,900 attendees, 68.5 percent of whom were Medway residents. A relaxed performance was delivered again this year and received outstanding feedback, praised for its inclusive and welcoming atmosphere. Following their positive experience, Abbey Court School will return for an educational visit linked to their project on musicals, which will include a lighting demonstration and an opportunity for pupils to explore the stage.

5.3. In line with our community priorities, the theatre provided over 1,300 free or reduced-price tickets to charities and council teams working with children and vulnerable groups. As capacity decreased after 1 January, from an average of 77 percent before the new year to 45.7 percent afterwards, quieter performances offered an ideal opportunity to support wider access without affecting financial viability. Alongside this there is a special Relaxed Performance of panto that was been specially adapted for adults and children who might benefit from a more relaxed environment. It includes the house lights will be left on, no loud noises or special effects, audience can move around the auditorium, we provide a breakout area in case anybody needs a moment to themselves, and the show is British Sign Language interpreted.

- 5.4. The Brook Theatre Refurbishment - 2025 was a transformative year for the Brook Theatre refurbishment, marked by sustained progress, creative ambition and exceptional community engagement. From the moment the principal contractor Thomas Sinden Ltd. was announced, the project gained positive attention and quickly established itself as one of Medway's most transparent and well-supported cultural developments.
- 5.5. Significant headway was made on the building itself. As works unfolded, previously hidden structural issues were discovered, but the project team responded swiftly and creatively, adapting designs to protect the theatre's heritage while improving functionality and accessibility. This problem-solving strengthened the final design and ensured the building's historic character remained central to the project. Interior restoration also moved forward, with original plaster features, clock faces and brass fixtures carefully removed, catalogued and prepared for restoration or imaginative reuse. These details will allow the refurbished Brook to reflect both its past and its future.
- 5.6. A renewed creative vision threaded through the year. Artists were scoped for bespoke commissions, from textiles to crafted artworks, ensuring the theatre's interior will showcase local creativity as well as heritage. The team also helped shape the building's identity, finalising room names and planning for future heritage displays and interpretation.
- 5.7. Public engagement was one of the year's biggest successes. Unable to open the building physically, the team created a powerful digital experience for Heritage Open Days, offering behind-the-scenes glimpses of the refurbishment and stories about the building's history. The campaign reached more than 8,000 people and received overwhelmingly positive feedback. A "12 Days of Christmas at The Brook" series kept excitement high, while a refurbishment video featuring the Head of Service drew over 1,400 views. Contractors praised the theatre as the most community-engaged project they have ever worked on, highlighting the strength of collaboration and communication throughout the year.
- 5.8. Behind the scenes, operational planning advanced too. A bespoke room-booking system was developed with Council ITC team to streamline future theatre hire and ensure compliance with modern safety requirements. The design of a playful new external hoarding was out in place, ready to signal the creativity unfolding inside the building. Work also progressed with Thomas Sinden Ltd. on social value commitments, including early plans for heritage craft learning opportunities through the Herbert Baker Trust.
- 5.9. By the end of 2025, the Brook Theatre refurbishment stands as a clear success story, a project that has protected a much-loved heritage asset, embraced creativity, built strong community support and overcome challenges with confidence and collaboration. With solid design foundations, engaged contractors, and growing public anticipation, the Brook enters 2026 well positioned for the next stage of its transformation into one of Medway's leading cultural landmarks.

## 6. The Rochester Corn Exchange – A Venue Renewed and Redefined

- 6.1. The Rochester Corn Exchange has enjoyed an exceptionally successful year, with a vibrant and wide-ranging programme that has strengthened its role as one of Medway's most important cultural and community venues. So far in 2025/26, the venue has hosted 159 events, spanning weddings, charity galas, school proms, awards evenings, candlelight concerts, citizenship ceremonies, arts fairs, the Dickens Mistletoe Ball, university graduations and even a dedicated Baby and Toddler Week delivered by the Child Friendly Medway Team. This breadth of activity demonstrates both the flexibility of the building and the trust that communities, partners and clients place in the team. The year's strong programme has reinforced the Corn Exchange as a lively and inclusive hub where civic life, culture and celebration come together under one roof.
- 6.2. Alongside this wide and successful programme, the venue's commercial performance has strengthened considerably. Fifty-one event bars have been delivered to date, generating approximately £84,000 net. While this represents fewer bars than last year, the financial return has grown markedly, with average customer spend increasing by 30% per head. This rise reflects improved customer experience and a more strategic approach to sales, placing the venue on track to reach over £90,000 by year end.
- 6.3. The Christmas season was a standout success, with both Christmas party nights selling out before the end of October. These events generated £27,700 in ticket income, £2,000 in presales and £9,000 in bar income, totalling £38,800. Their popularity and delivery quality have prompted the introduction of an additional party night for 2026, signalling growing demand and confidence in the venue's ability to programme and deliver high quality, profitable inhouse events.
- 6.4. Digital engagement has also grown significantly, helping to raise the profile of the venue and support increased bookings. Combined posts across Facebook and Instagram have reached 195,840 views, with social media followers up by 51%. This expanding visibility is strengthening brand awareness and helping connect the venue with new clients and audiences.
- 6.5. The venue's commitment to the highest standards has been recognised externally too. Kent County Council's Prevent Team praised the team's newly adopted Prevent referral processes for external speakers and higher risk bookings. This reflects a proactive approach to safeguarding and reinforces the professionalism and reliability of the venue's operations. referral processes for external speakers and higher risk bookings.
- 6.6. Customer loyalty remains a defining strength. Nearly 37% of referrals have come from returning customers or personal recommendations, well above typical industry benchmarks of 20 to 30%. This demonstrates the high level of

satisfaction with the venue; the positive experience customers have during events and the consistent quality delivered by the team.

- 6.7. The year also saw a significant strategic development with the appointment of a Sales and Business Development Manager in August. Their early contributions have been notable, including streamlining processes, removing operational bottlenecks, introducing new ideas for income generation and strengthening the venue's marketing strategy. They have also led the refinement of KPIs, ensuring that future performance is supported by clearer and more measurable sales and conversion metrics.
- 6.8. Looking forward, the team is placing greater emphasis on developing more self-delivered events to reduce reliance on external bookings and strengthen revenue during quieter periods. Work with local suppliers, cultural partners and Medway's creative community is already underway, with the Culture Development Team helping to build new connections.
- 6.9. Overall, this has been a year defined by variety, growth and increasing confidence. The Rochester Corn Exchange is emerging as a venue that can deliver both cultural excellence and commercial success, positioning itself strongly for continued expansion and an even more ambitious year ahead.

## 7. Culture and Creative Industries – Medway as a Creative Force

- 7.1. The past year has been a remarkable period of growth and achievement for Medway's cultural sector, with the Culture Team delivering one of its strongest years to date. Sector support has expanded at an extraordinary pace, with 169 instances of direct assistance between April 2025 and January 2026, compared with just 65 over the same period last year. This dramatic increase reflects both rising demand and the team's strengthened capacity to offer surgeries, one-to-one guidance, partnership development, funding support and on-the-ground presence at events. Engagement with the fortnightly Culture and Heritage newsletter also continues to flourish, with nearly 1,000 new subscribers bringing the total to 5,839, while social media activity has reached a combined audience of more than 280,800 views and attracted 21,445 followers. These figures underline a cultural sector that is not only active, but increasingly connected, confident and engaged.
- 7.2. This sense of momentum has been mirrored in Medway's approach to public art. September saw the launch of *The Story of Water* at Chatham Waterfront Pumping Station, an ambitious new work by Kent artist Nicole Mollett and Dutch artist Nicole Den Hartogg. Commissioned in partnership with Medway Development Company and supported by Dutch Embassy funding, the artwork celebrates Medway's river heritage and its layered history, from natural ecology to conflict and resilience. Its unveiling helped cement a growing partnership between the Culture Team and the Regeneration Team, who now regularly draw on cultural expertise for public art commissions, with new installations planned for Gillingham, Strood and Chatham.

- 7.3. Creative health has also taken significant strides forward. Through the Medway Creative Health Place Partnership Programme, seven artists received up to £10,000 each, alongside mentoring and career support, to develop innovative creative health projects. A further 101 artists took part in professional development sessions, strengthening skills across the wider sector. Partners including Ideas Test, Live Music Now, Nucleus Arts, Icon Theatre and Medway Libraries have delivered projects ranging from the Lullaby Project for new parents to the COPD Choir, the Brompton Halloween Trail and beatboxing bins in Luton. These projects have demonstrated, in practical and powerful ways, how creativity can support wellbeing, connect communities including our children and young people, and shape healthier places. As the £400,000 Arts Council-funded programme enters its final phase, plans are already being developed to secure legacy and future opportunities.
- 7.4. Medway's commitment to inclusion and cultural participation is further reflected in the continued success of the Medway Arts and Homelessness Forum, now in its third year of funded activity and facilitated by Creatabot, whose team brings lived experience of homelessness. The Forum's programme has been both imaginative and impactful, from the Take and Tweak street photography project culminating in an exhibition at Rochester Cathedral, to popup craft workshops at local festivals. The development of a metal memorial tree sculpture by acclaimed artist David Tovey marks a bold next step, while the premiere of a new Homeless in Medway board game attracted interest from Margate in producing a local version. The Forum has also put forward a proposal to the Housing Team for a further three-year programme and is developing a sustainability plan with support from Arts and Homelessness International, bolstered by successful UKSPF funding and a Heritage Place application for oral histories and photo archiving.
- 7.5. The Culture Team has continued to champion programmes that support older residents, with Songs and Scones once again achieving near full attendance across library venues. The team is now working with Live Music Now on a long-term fundraising strategy to sustain the programme beyond 2027, ensuring older and isolated people continue to benefit from high quality music in welcoming community settings.
- 7.6. One of the year's standout achievements has been the growth of Medway River Lit 2025, the area's literary festival delivered by Wordsmithery. The festival drew internationally acclaimed authors and poets to Medway and saw a 61 percent increase in attendance, attracting 1,028 live audience members, 25 percent of whom travelled from outside Medway. The festival started with the Award ceremony for Medway Youth Laureates and provided paid work for 57 writers and performers and offered 86 hours of work experience for young people considering cultural careers. With 111,708 online engagements and its most diverse programme yet, including Somali, Nigerian, Iranian, Irish and neurodiverse artists, the festival has grown both in ambition and impact. Wordsmithery also expanded into new venues and secured UKSPF funding for its wider Rippling Out Further programme, with Culture Team support now focused on helping secure Arts Council funding for future festivals.

- 7.7. Celebration and creativity continued through U.Dance, delivered by Loop Dance Company at the GlassBox Theatre. This joyful event brought together 136 dancers from a wide range of cultural backgrounds and abilities, performing to an audience of 256 and showcasing the strength, diversity, talent, inclusiveness and immense potential within Medway's youth dance sector.
- 7.8. The Culture Team has also played an important strategic role in the ongoing refurbishment of the Brook Theatre. Their advice on business planning, the return of Creative Companies in Residence and future residency models has shaped the emerging vision for the building. Sector support packages have been developed to ensure organisations benefit directly from the significant investment underway, alongside fundraising bids to both the National Lottery Heritage Fund and Arts Council England for heritage engagement, audience development and strategic programming.
- 7.9. Finally, the team has taken a proactive role in sector communication ahead of local government reorganisation. Working with Kent County Council and Arts Council England, the Culture Team helped deliver cross Kent briefings for National Portfolio Organisations and led a Medway-wide online session for the culture, heritage and sports sectors. This work provided clarity, reassurance and practical guidance during a period of change, demonstrating the team's leadership and commitment to the sector's stability.
- 7.10. This year has seen Medway's cultural and creative industries strengthen their regional influence and national visibility, with major progress across investment programmes, placemaking initiatives and high-profile creative commissions.
- 7.11. The Create Growth Programme continued to perform strongly in its final year, supported by a 12-month DCMS extension. Medway recruited new high growth creative businesses, including local brands such as Tatty Devine and New Planet Film & Media. Evaluation has been extremely positive, with **97%** of participants recommending the programme and the South East ranked among the best performing regions nationally. With a new programme manager in post and an extended contract with Creative UK, partners are now shaping a legacy that includes a regional investment fund, potential Creative Opportunity Zones and deeper work with sector bodies across priority subsectors like screen, music and gaming. A new PR campaign led by Pilory Barn is raising the region's profile, already showcasing Medway's Kalikas Armour as an example of local creative excellence.
- 7.12. Alongside business support, Medway has made significant strides in place-based creative regeneration through the Chatham Creative Quarters (CCQ) initiative. A successful stakeholder event in July aligned partners behind a shared vision for positioning Chatham within the Thames Estuary Production Corridor. Work is well underway on creating dedicated digital pages that highlight each Quarter's cultural identity and investment potential. Planning has begun for a series of showcase events designed to build visibility and

attract partners and investors. CCQ has already gained national attention through the Medway Urban Room pilot and a presentation at the iPlace25 conference, strengthening its reputation as an innovative model for culturalled placemaking.

- 7.13. Medway's role in Creative Estuary also continued to grow. Chatham hosted the *House of Stars* and *New Chronicles of Mudfog* commissions, engaging young people in reimagining Dickensian themes through AR game development. Sun Pier House launched *300 Steps to the River*, a wide-ranging celebration of the town's riverside heritage. The Estuary Festival, launched in June, brought major installations to Medway, including Ben Judd's *Thought Forms* on Fort Darnet, the *Medway Superstars* film portraits at Chatham Dockyard, the immersive *ANCHORED* aboard LV21 and large-scale exhibitions such as *Common Grounds* in Gillingham. These projects have deepened community engagement and highlighted Medway's creative identity to regional and national audiences.
- 7.14. The Docking Station project continues to progress as one of Medway's most significant upcoming pieces of creative infrastructure. Planning consent for Phase 2 was secured, and the University of Kent confirmed its commitment to the full business case. This year, the project received an additional £250,000 National Lottery Heritage Fund award, meaning all capital funding required for building works is now secured. Community engagement has continued throughout, ensuring the development reflects Medway's heritage and creative potential. Fundraising for fit-out remains a priority, with risks actively tracked, and the next phase will focus on consolidating funding and progressing design and delivery.
- 7.15. Across all activity, the year has demonstrated a creative sector with growing confidence, stronger partnerships and increasing ambition. Businesses supported through Create Growth are now benefiting from a legacy package of ongoing mentoring and industry showcases. Medway's partnerships, with the British Business Bank, universities, Creative UK and regional sector networks, have expanded significantly, reinforcing the area's role as a place where creative businesses can start, grow and innovate.
- 7.16. We are very pleased that Chatham has launched an ambitious and community-backed bid to become the UK's first Town of Culture in 2028, positioning its rich maritime heritage and growing creative sector at the centre of its case. The campaign is led by the Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust with support from Medway Council and a broad coalition of cultural partners, reflecting a strong civic commitment to celebrating the town's distinctive identity. The national programme, newly introduced by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, will award the winning town £3 million to deliver a six-month programme of cultural activity, with shortlisted areas also receiving £60,000 development funding. Chatham has a powerful story to tell, one of innovation, rebellion and creativity, shaped by its maritime heritage and driven by the energy of its communities, aiming to secure investment that would create new opportunities, strengthen local pride and further position Medway as a destination for arts, heritage and community engagement.

- 7.17. Overall, this has been a year of real momentum. Investment is increasing, Medway's creative identity is strengthening, and the foundations for long-term growth and national visibility are firmly in place.
- 7.18. Taken together, this has been a year in which Medway's cultural and creative sector has not only grown, but truly flourished. From pioneering public art and nationally recognised festivals to sector support on an unprecedented scale, Medway has demonstrated what is possible when creativity, partnership and ambition come together with purpose.
- 7.19. Working with the Culture Team's leadership, we have strengthened the entire ecosystem, empowering artists, supporting organisations, nurturing new talent and unlocking major investment in place making and infrastructure. As Medway moves into the year ahead, it does so with renewed confidence, deeper collaboration and a cultural identity that is resonating more widely than ever before, firmly positioning the area as a place where creativity thrives, communities connect and the sector continues to push forward with pride and momentum.

## 8. Medway Archives – Connecting People with Their Past

- 8.1. The Medway Archive Centre has had a successful year, welcoming 860 visitors, responding to 958 digital enquiries, and engaging 1,011 attendees across its events programme. Nine Saturday drop-ins continued to draw steady interest, and the 2025 lecture series was fully booked, attracting 267 people across six talks that explored subjects including Chatham's Theatre Royal, Borstal Prison, Medway's forts, the explosive works at Cliffe, Rochester High Street, and the life of shipwright and naval architect William Pearce.
- 8.2. The Centre supported major cultural activity by loaning items from the Short Brothers Collection to Rochester Cathedral's *Pioneers of Flight: Made in Medway* exhibition. Staff also took resources into the community, contributing to two Medway Live events, the Medway History Showcase at the Royal Engineers Museum, and the annual Armed Forces Covenant Conference.
- 8.3. Our Christmas event was the most popular to date, offering behind the scenes tours of the new Dickens Reading Room, displays from the Percy Fitzgerald archive, book sales, and seasonal refreshments.
- 8.4. This year saw the launch of *Medway Remembers*, a volunteer project creating a searchable record of Medway's Second World War military and civilian casualties. We also introduced Archive Taster Sessions, giving small groups an insight into archival careers. Work began on reorganising the strong room to improve efficiency and create capacity for new accessions. Retrieval times have already improved significantly, shifting from a multiday task to completion within a single Tuesday morning.

## 9. Community Hubs and Libraries – A Trusted, Valued and Transformative Service

- 9.1. Community Hubs and Libraries have delivered a year defined by growth, innovation and strong community impact. The service welcomed 715,954 visitors, a 1.4% increase on 2024, and delivered 110,571 event attendances, a 7.8% rise on the previous year, reflecting increasing use and demand across the network.
- 9.2. The year began with an energetic programme of Easter celebrations, World Book Night events, school visits and activities supporting Medway Smile Month. The June staff development day strengthened staff skills and knowledge, ensuring residents receive confident guidance on both library services and wider council support.
- 9.3. Summer saw continued momentum. July brought high visitor numbers with the launch of the Summer Reading Challenge, and August, usually quieter, still exceeded August 2024 by 4.3%, demonstrating strong ongoing engagement. Autumn continued this positive trajectory through International Literacy Day, Roald Dahl Day and school holiday events, supported by further digital-resource training for staff. Even in November and December, despite usual seasonal dips and temporary closures at Rainham and Strood and a single full-service closure on 27 December, libraries saw consistently good participation in key activities and strong customer feedback.
- 9.4. Digital engagement remained an essential part of the offer. Online registration continued to rise, and digital books made up nearly 20% of monthly loans. Bookings through borrower accounts also cut down on missed reservations, improving access and efficiency.
- 9.5. Expanding Opportunities for Culture, Learning and Participation - this year brought exceptional growth in cultural and learning programmes. The World Book Day Festival delivered 62 events with over 5,000 attendees. The Summer Reading Challenge was the strongest on record, engaging more than 5,400 participants across four age groups. Libraries distributed 5,717 early-years resource packs, supported 39 young people through work experience placements, and consistently delivered full audiences through the Wigmore Lecture Series (600 attendees) and Songs & Scones (around 300 attendees).
- 9.6. The service also benefited from a growing volunteer base. Libraries now support seven digital inclusion volunteers, and the award-winning Repair Café saw its volunteer team grow from 11 to 15 volunteers per session, with two new young people joining this year, a clear sign of widening community ownership and intergenerational impact.
- 9.7. The Repair Café itself continues to be a powerful example of sustainability in action. Over the year, 325 people attended, bringing 319 items, a 10% increase on the previous year. Of these, 208 items were successfully repaired, preventing them from entering the waste stream and contributing to

local circular economy goals. New sustainability initiatives were added too, including Gillingham's Clothes Swap, which is gaining in popularity and further encourages reuse and recycling.

- 9.8. Public trust in the service remained exceptionally high throughout the year, with satisfaction scores of 98.7% in Q1, 100% in Q2, and 99.54% in Q3 — all well above target and a clear reflection of the value residents place on the service.
- 9.9. Innovation, Digital Growth and Modernisation - innovation has been a defining feature of the year. Online joining was introduced for all borrowers, wi-fi printing was expanded across more libraries, and staff completed the first phase of VR training with the University of Kent, preparing libraries to offer immersive digital experiences in future. Procurement of new self-service kiosks is now nearing completion, with installation planned at most service points in early 2026. Equipment enabling full delivery of hub services in every library has also been rolled out, with implementation due by year-end.
- 9.10. Investment in Spaces, Accessibility and Community Infrastructure - Significant upgrades across the library estate strengthened the physical environment for users. We have utilised S106 funding to provide an accessible toilet at Hoo, creation of new IT space and a meeting room at Rainham, new shelving and a Story Chair at Luton, and new furniture and a teen area at Twydall. At Strood, a full lift replacement restored accessibility. Further improvements funded directly by the service enhanced spaces at Strood, Twydall and Luton.
- 9.11. The mobile library replacement has progressed well, with procurement due to complete before year-end and the new vehicle expected to launch in Q1 2026/27. The Home Library Service strengthened its safeguarding and service quality through updated DBS checks, customer surveying, and planning for the launch of the new Home Delivery Service in Q4.
- 9.12. Progress also continued generating commercial income. The long-term lease opportunity for a nursery provider at Hempstead Library moved forward, with planning approval secured and lease being completed. This will provide a sustainable income stream and relieve ongoing budget pressure.
- 9.13. A Service Ready for the Future - across the year, Community Hubs and Libraries have shown resilience, adaptation and ambition. With rising visitor numbers, expanding cultural participation, strengthened digital inclusion, environmentally focused community action, inter-generational interest, high public satisfaction and significant investment in buildings and staff, the service ends the year in a strong position.
- 9.14. As Medway moves into the National Year of Reading, and with a new Library Plan in development for 2026/27, the foundations for sustained success are firmly in place.

10. Medway Heritage Attractions – Excellence, Investment and Growing Visibility
  - 10.1. The past year has been an exceptional one for Medway’s heritage portfolio, with Rochester Castle, the Guildhall Museum, Upnor Castle and Eastgate House all achieving significant milestones, strengthening visitor engagement and enhancing Medway’s national cultural reputation.
  - 10.2. Rochester Castle began the year in spectacular fashion, forming the atmospheric backdrop to Medway’s VE Day commemorations. Lit in red and blue, with a beacon joining others across the towns, the Castle became the setting for a globally streamed poem written by Medway residents, bringing the local community together in a moment of powerful reflection. Momentum continued to build with a major stakeholder event in June, where representatives from the creative, heritage, education and tourism sectors came together to shape an ambitious programme for the Castle’s 900th anniversary. The session generated a wealth of ideas now being progressed with support from the Heritage Place Team and funders including Arts Council England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund, ensuring next year’s celebrations will be inclusive, high quality and distinctive.
  - 10.3. Enhancements across the year have continued to elevate the visitor experience. Live musicians performing inside the Keep were introduced for the first time, adding atmosphere and increasing engagement. Rochester Castle achieved a strong Visit England assessment, receiving top marks for interpretation, retail, cleanliness and staff knowledge, echoing its excellent TripAdvisor score of 4.3 and its 2025 Traveller’s Choice award. Essential conservation work has also been undertaken, including the replacement of the steps to the Keep and continued improvements to the Esplanade railings, ensuring the monument remains safe and welcoming ahead of its milestone year. Work has also begun on a new multimedia guide for the Castle Gardens, enriching interpretation and encouraging deeper exploration of the site. Visitor numbers have remained strong, with over 50,000 people welcomed so far and income rising by 9 percent year to date.
  - 10.4. The Guildhall Museum has also enjoyed an outstanding year, delivering a rich programme of education, engagement and exhibitions. Demand for learning activity has continued to grow, with thousands of children and adults taking part in sessions both onsite and through outreach. Highlights have included the Mess Room object-based programme, record attendance at the annual U3A study day, adult education sessions for ESOL learners, and lively coffee mornings at Twydall Library showcasing objects from the collection. Specialist audiences have also been welcomed, from Kent Quilters to the Medway Amateur Transmitting Society. The museum’s new annual pass has proved a major success, with over 1,000 sold since April and queues forming for the first time at launch thanks to the hugely popular ‘Meet the Flock’ event featuring the museum mascot, Grip, and a live raven.

- 10.5. The museum's quality was affirmed through its Visit England assessment, which awarded top marks for first impressions, visitor information and signage, alongside a superb TripAdvisor rating of 4.6. New storytelling sessions tied to original objects have increased family engagement, while Christmas activity with costumed elves created memorable experiences for visiting children. The Guildhall Museum was also invited to join the national Learning Places project, helping refine its mission, enhance programming and strengthen staff development in partnership with the Group for Education in Museums.
- 10.6. Upnor Castle has delivered a refreshed visitor experience through a new multimedia guide, reenactments and outdoor theatre. Despite challenging conditions affecting visitor numbers across the sector nationally, Upnor still achieved 99 percent of its visitor target and increased shop spend by 1 percent. Family trails grew by 25 percent over the summer, and the site enjoyed national visibility through its appearance on More4's *Pub Walks with Alexander Armstrong*. Conservation work included repairs to the Barrack Block and specialist restoration of the Clock Tower plaster by an English Heritage conservator. Upnor's Visit England inspection returned a strong overall score of 81 percent, with particularly high marks for customer service and cleanliness.
- 10.7. Eastgate House also enjoyed a highly successful year, receiving its first Visit England assessment and achieving an excellent overall score of 80 percent, including perfect marks for customer service. Despite a one day closure in June for training, the month remained strong, supported by popular events such as the Teddy Bears Picnic. The heritage attraction exceeded its targets for events (up 31 percent), weddings (up 63 percent) and retail (up 21 percent), while admissions income reached 79 percent of target. Significant maintenance projects, including relining the pond supported by ward improvement funds from local Councillors and progressing the Windows Project, have helped preserve the authentic experience of visiting the building, while Dickens's Writing Chalet being added to the At Risk Register has opened the door to new funding opportunities. A major National Lottery Heritage Fund bid has been submitted to restore the Chalet and deliver a three-year programme of interpretation, engagement and partnership activity, supported by ten local organisations.
- 10.8. Together, these achievements reflect a heritage service that is vibrant, ambitious and performing at an exceptionally high standard. Medway's historic sites continue to attract strong visitor numbers, secure national recognition and deliver innovative, inclusive programming. With major anniversaries, investment projects and new interpretation on the horizon, the coming year promises to build on this success and further strengthen Medway's position as a destination where heritage is not only preserved but brought vividly to life.
11. Heritage Place - Strategic Vision and Sector Leadership
  - 11.1. Major progress has been made this year in delivering Medway's Heritage Place partnership with the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The ten-year

programme continues to support the Council and the wider heritage community to use heritage to build pride in place, inspire communities and drive regeneration.

- 11.2. A significant milestone was the launch of the comprehensive Heritage Audit, based on 84 sector responses, interviews and extensive data analysis. The audit highlighted the breadth and national significance of Medway's built, industrial, cultural, working-class and natural heritage, while identifying opportunities to strengthen sector skills, improve access to funding, enhance visitor infrastructure and raise the profile of Medway's intangible heritage. The audit now provides a strong evidence base for a new heritage strategy currently in development, and a roadmap for future investment.
- 11.3. Work on the new heritage strategy and governance model is underway in partnership with Council services, the heritage community and strategic stakeholders including Historic England. A series of themed engagement events has ensured the developing strategy reflects sector and community priorities. Evaluation of the first phase of Heritage Place activity highlighted a clear shift towards strategic, cross-service, heritage-led regeneration coordinated through the Heritage Place programme. Historic England's Historic Places Panel visit further endorsed Medway's collaborative approach, particularly the development of a new Heritage Planning Policy aligned with the Local Plan.
- 11.4. Sector support has expanded significantly, including a monthly skills development programme addressing gaps identified by the sector on topics such as digital interpretation, youth engagement and funding. Officers have supported 11 direct National Lottery Heritage Fund bids, with another 18 in early-stage development. Early successes include a new Tempo-led heritage volunteering programme designed to strengthen and diversify local volunteering opportunities.
- 11.5. This year also saw the launch of a new round of Small-Scale Development Fund grants (£250–£8,000) and a new Collaborative Project Fund (£15,000 - £30,000) for partnerships benefitting young people. Uptake of application support, including 1:1 guidance and access support, has been strong. These funds directly respond to findings from the Heritage Audit, and the evaluation of the first phase of the Heritage Place programme which highlighted the exceptional impact of previous funding rounds.
- 11.6. A more partnership-driven approach to heritage is becoming firmly established. The Heritage Lottery Funded Whose Hoo programme has begun delivery, with capital works progressing at Slough Fort and the former Thames and Medway canal, expanded volunteering opportunities including archaeology and beach cleans, youth activity with local schools, development of new footpaths and interpretation, and collaborative work with farmers and landowners on water management, species conservation.

- 11.7. Public engagement and visibility have increased through the launch of the Heritage Audit at Medway History Showcase and a new promotional video and themed press activity.
- 11.8. Public engagement has also been high with the rollout of the Medway Heritage Map, which invites residents to share the heritage they value.

## 12. The New Visit Kent Team and Priority Focus

- 12.1. After a difficult year seeing Visit Kent go into administration in September, the newly restructured Visit Kent team, a partnership between Kent County Council and Medway Council, has now been established and is moving at pace to relaunch the countywide visitor economy service.
- 12.2. The immediate priority is to reintroduce a credible, coordinated voice for Kent and Medway's tourism sector, supported by refreshed branding, a new website presence, strengthened stakeholder engagement and clear messaging about the offer.
- 12.3. For Medway, the new Visit Kent offer provides a more focused, insight led and accountable framework for promoting the area, engaging local businesses and aligning with countywide activity. There is a clear emphasis on measurable impact, stronger advocacy and improved coordination, which positions Medway well as the shared Destination Management Plan and new partnership structures are finalised.

## 13. Conclusion, A Year of Momentum, Impact and Cultural Confidence

- 13.1. 2025 marked a year in which Medway's Culture, Libraries and Heritage services not only delivered but thrived. This was a year of large audiences, rising participation, increased income, creative expansion, strengthened partnerships, national visibility and unwavering community trust.
- 13.2. Medway enters 2026 with strong foundations, renewed confidence and an increasingly distinctive cultural identity, one built not just on the services offered, but on the pride and participation of its people.

## 14. Medway Sports Centres

- 14.1 Medway's sports centres, including the Strand open air swimming pool and Watling Park football centre, have enjoyed a highly successful year with record membership numbers and all centres are on course to exceed budgeted income and Financial Improvement and Transformation plan targets.
- 14.2 This has enabled the service to project increased income targets for 2026-27, further reducing the annual Council subsidy in line with the long-term ambition to make the centres operationally sustainable.

14.3 In addition to our regular sports centre programme, the service has also delivered a range of targeted community sessions aimed at engaging with marginalised and vulnerable groups, and currently attracts more than 500 participants monthly. These include:

- Muslim women's yoga – (now self-sustainable within the community)
- Calm Football for people with SEN
- Football for Homeless people
- Football for asylum seekers and refugees– 15 weekly participants
- Chair yoga – now self-sustainable within the community- 22 weekly participants
- Drop-in football – 120 weekly participants
- Teen girls yoga – new session
- Homes for Assisted Living -Chair fitness
- Walking cricket
- Multi-sport disability club

## 15. Sports and Leisure Events

15.1 Medway Park staged more than 200 event days in 2025-26, ranging from school sports days to the International Dance Festival.

15.2 The most popular event days were:

Dance events = 16 days (not including set-up dates)

Basketball events = 19 days

Badminton events = 25 days

Athletics events = 13 days

School summer sports days = 13 days

Mini Youth Games = 19 days

Swimming Galas = 13 days

15.3 Early indications suggest similar a booking trend for events in the forthcoming year.

15.4 The hugely successful International Dance Festival expanded in October 2025 to five competition days with more than 10,000 competitors from across the world. The event was supported by the Shared Prosperity Fund which helped to maximise the visitor experience with translators, additional cleaners, centre dressing, extra waste removal, and additional overnight staffing to reset the facility ready for the following morning's competition. This additional financial support helped us deliver the most successful festival to date. As well as confirming their booking for 2026, discussions are now being held with the organisers on how a second ballroom could be utilised to further increase participation for 2027.

## 16. Active Place Partnership

- 16.1 Sport England has chosen Medway as one of 90 places across the country to become an Active Place Partner. This makes Medway part of £250m funding scheme running across England until 2028, delivering on Sport England's aims in its Uniting the Movement strategy and supporting the Government's wider goals of improving health, growing local economies and building stronger, fairer communities.
- 16.2 Sport England's social value research shows that every £1 spent on community sport and exercise delivers £4.38 back for the economy and society in community cohesion, health and wellbeing, and employment and economic growth.
- 16.3 Medway's Active Place Partnership steering group consists of representatives from a range of organisations including Medway Council Public Health team and will use initial funding from Sport England to pilot a range of activities and interventions, enabling research into their effectiveness before undertaking more widespread programmes for communities across Medway.

## 17. Sports centre capital investment

- 17.1 Extensive capital investment, through both the Council's capital programme and external funding continue to benefit Medway's sports centres.
- 17.2 At Medway Park, work has begun on the new gym extension which will increase the capacity of the gym and the range of equipment available to customers. It is anticipated the newly-enlarged gym will be open in June 2026.
- 17.3 This will be the latest in a range of improvements to the centre, which include a larger aerobics studio, a new spin room, improvements to the wetside changing area. There will also be a new table tennis centre created once the new gym is open, which in turn will free up additional space in sports halls.
- 17.4 There have also been a number of improvements at Strood Sports centre, with more planned for the coming year. A new reception area leads to a fully renovated sports hall, which has proved increasingly popular. The extensive class programme at Strood has also benefitted from the opening of a new studio, enabling further growth of the class programme.
- 17.5 These works are the precursor to further improvements which will include upgraded changing rooms and the installation of a new junior gym for 8-14 year-olds alongside the main gym.

17.6 Hoo Sports Centre will also benefit from improvements, with the installation of a second gym and renovation of the changing rooms planned for the coming year.

17.7 The Strand has undergone a range of improvements, with the opening of the new splashpad for younger children and the upgrade of the tennis courts in partnership with the Lawn Tennis Association.

## 18. Multi-sport Playzone funding

18.1 Further works have begun at The Strand this month, on the installation of a new multisport playzone, funded by the Football Foundation. It is envisaged this will be open by the end of May, enabling team sports to be played alongside the renovated tennis courts.

18.2 This forms one of the three playzones being installed, with others at Deangate Ridge and Maidstone Road sports ground. These are scheduled to be installed over the summer 2026.

18.3 Football Foundation funding for the three playzones totals £694,000.

## 19. Football pitch funding

19.1 The Football Foundation has also given a £600,000 funding grant for the improvement of grass football pitches across Medway.

19.2 This is a multi-year investment to improve the quality of the football pitches and is being delivered through the Medway Football Steering Group, a co-ordinated group made up of local football league representatives, Kent FA and the Council.

19.3 As part of the funding agreement, Medway Council will be investing circa £280,000 in grass football pitch improvements over the next six years.

## 20. Summer of Sport

20.1 Throughout August a range of low-cost or free community activities were staged across Medway. These included:

- Walking Tennis
- Casual run at Deangate
- Walking Group at Deangate
- Hockey with Anchorians Hockey Club
- Cardio Tennis
- Teen Cardio Tennis
- Family Tennis

- Outdoor Circuits at Deangate
- Castle Community yoga
- Outdoor yoga at Deangate
- Park Sport at Great Lines, Palmerston Park and The Strand
- Kayaking with Medway Watersports.

20.2 There was also an extensive Holiday Active Fund programme, with more than 2,000 participants over the summer (programmes were also held at Easter with 600 participants).

20.3 Medway Park also hosted the annual Medway Mile, which again saw record participation of over 3000 runners, joggers, walkers and strollers complete their mile around Great Lines Heritage Park and our landmark heritage site, the Royal Naval Memorial, Chatham. The free community sporting event organised in partnership with Child Friendly Medway, Public Health, Adult Education as well as many local health, fitness and wellbeing organisations across Medway with have-a-go activities such as athletics, weightlifting, rowing, break dancing, basketball, cycling and much more proved to be very popular. The Medway Mile will celebrate its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2027.

## 21. Young people

21.1 A vast range of activities are offered for Medway's children and young people. The flagship Mini Youth Games for primary school pupils attracted a record 5,775 participants taking part in 22 events across the academic year, from badminton, basketball and table tennis to hockey, rugby and football, supported by our local sports partners including sports clubs and champions, demonstrating a strong collaborative approach that is aimed at widening sporting experiences and opportunities to our children from an early age. We are aiming for participation from All Medway primary schools at the next Mini Youth Games.

21.2 In addition to this the Medway primary cross-country attracted 866 participants in four events, and the Inclusive Youth Games had 131 participants over four events.

Medway Sports also continues to offer Athletes Support Programmes that provides children and young people showing exceptional promise and competing at a recognised national level an annual Medway Junior Membership for young people under 16, with extended access until 6pm, and annual Medway Gym and Swim Membership for young people aged 16 and over.

21.3 Medway Park and Strood also staged a number of sports camps, with more than 1,500 participants.

Partnering with MedwayGo (Medway Holiday Activities and Food Programme), and free to children who receive free school meals, the holiday programmes accessed by over 2600 children provided brilliant opportunities for children from Reception to Year 11 to have a great time making friends, keeping active and learning new skills, and a free balanced meal as part of their session.

## 22. Training and Development

22.1 The Sport, Greenspaces and Climate Response service operates a hugely successful apprenticeship programme. In the past year, Medway's sports team have recruited to and upskilled twenty-four employees across the service, with all apprentices who have completed the programme achieving a pass or distinction first time.

22.2 Apprenticeships offered include Leisure Team Member Level 2, Customer Service Practitioner Level 2, Leisure Team Manager Level 3, Customer Service Specialist Level 3, and Operations Manager Level 5.

22.3 Within the last two years up to 90% of apprentices have been offered a full time position within our sports centres; this has made recruitment focused and retention strong, with all apprentices passing their qualifications being offered a permanent position. This approach has meant the service has offered consistent high-quality training and support, ensuring a meaningful training experience for the individual and nationally qualified employees for the Council.

22.4 In addition to our apprenticeships we operate a Young Leaders Programme, designed to give students the opportunity to develop their skills and support our Mini Youth Games events.

22.5 The Young Leaders programme included:

### Activity Volunteer Award

- 18 Mid Kent college students attended the 2 day Course with a focus on Badminton/Table Tennis
- All students supported the MYG Badminton/Table Tennis

### Netball - Activity Volunteer Award

- 34 students completed the course, and all supported the MYG Netball across three days

### Tag Rugby

- 14 students completed the course, and all supported the MYG Rugby across two days

### Kent FA Referee Course

- 22 students completed the Official Kent FA Course

- All students supported MYG Football

#### Level 1 Activator

- 15 Students completed the 2 day course
- Students supported the MYG Cricket and Athletics

## 23. Engagement

- 23.1 Apart from service user engagements in person or via telephone calls, Medway Sport has been very successful in increasing information-sharing, engagement and visibility via social media platforms and currently boasts:

Facebook - 15,528 total followers (up from 12,389 in February 2025)

Instagram – 6,283 total followers (up from 4, 414 in March 25)

Newsletter subscribers – 20,652

Medway Sport media platforms are also popular in terms of highlighting the achievements of and celebrating local athletes and sports personalities, as well as promoting opportunities for Medway residents to meet visiting Olympic and national champions in different sports genres.

## 24. Affordable Sports Membership

- 24.1 Our strategy to ensure competitive pricing and affordable memberships by freezing of Premier Membership fees for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time for Medway residents in a highly dynamic market alongside providing state of the art gym equipment and wide-ranging fitness facilities has proved to be extremely successful with yearly increase in uptake of Premier Memberships.

## 25. Providing political leadership and challenge

- 25.1 Heading one of the most public-facing portfolios brings its own sets of challenges as hurdles. The financial pressures are relentless, the public expectations high, alongside significant rise in the costs of goods and services. Nonetheless, the phenomenal successes and achievements of the Medway Culture, Libraries, Heritage and Sports teams as highlighted above, while positively engaging our communities across Medway is a bold testament to how rewarding it can be, when we utilise the opportunities and work together to harness our potential, to ensure the highest outcomes for Medway.

I remain deeply committed and continue to work closely with the leadership team, ensuring there is clear direction, progress and that we remain highly ambitious to deliver the best culture, libraries, heritage, sports and leisure services, experiences and offers for Medway's residents.

I meet regularly with the Director of Place and the Heads of Service who are responsible for managing the services in my portfolio. I am briefed on the day-to-day activities, performance, challenges, risks, and opportunities in each service and am engaged in the development of plans and discussion of risk management strategies so that our services remain safe, uninterrupted and key projects are delivered within timescales to the highest standards.

I am highly approachable, willing to listen, and provide reliable, robust guidance, support, steering, monitoring, prioritising and timely decision-making within my portfolio responsibilities.

I believe that a motivated team always performs better. Our Heads of Service ensure that our staff members feel valued, supported and listened to, and have opportunities to grow. Team members and managers appreciate my in-person visits to thank and recognise their hard work and hear their experiences, including challenges, rewards and opportunities. The visits are also helpful in me supporting the Heads of Service to share our strategic goals and aspirations with management teams; through actively engaging, inspiring trust and communicating our vision, I help the Heads of Service motivate their teams to drive our priorities forward.

The Heads of Service are encouraged to promote innovation, creativity and safe spaces for reflective learning, aimed at building an empowered workforce that is invested in delivering the best outcomes through evaluating outcomes and areas for improvement. They have truly delivered this and more.

I monitor customer feedback, including compliments and complaints, and work with the Heads of Service to ensure timely and appropriate response to all enquiries. Good practice examples are shared and excellent work always applauded and cascaded to individual teams/staff members. Mentoring and growing our own talent that also promotes team stability and staff retention is now firmly embedded within the services.

## 26. Championing the Interests of service users / Medway residents / Children and Young People

26.1 Community engagement, pride in place, and well-being through Heritage, Culture, Libraries and Sports programmes remain top priorities for myself and the Heads of Service. Our emphasis on bringing together local communities, volunteer groups, schools, young people, community champions as well as regional and national partners across heritage, culture, sports and leisure sectors for different planning, projects, programmes and key events have evidenced One Medway approach and really strengthened the trusting relationship with the Council. The collaborative partnerships have also been instrumental in galvanising co-creation and delivery of wide-ranging programmes including those of national significance e.g. VE80 and VJ80. Indeed, all the extremely meaningful outcomes as highlighted above in this extensive report covering Heritage, Culture, Sports and Leisure sectors are something all of us in Medway can be very proud of. It has equally been extremely encouraging to hear from regional and national partners how

excited and proud they feel to work with Medway not just for a one off programme but multi-year programmes bringing multi-year external investments.

These partnerships have also been instrumental in raising Medway's profile, generating wider interest, and helping the Council's capacity building e.g. the Heritage and Culture team have increased their capacity to offer surgeries, one-to-one guidance, partnership development, funding support and on-the-ground presence and event feedbacks. Working closely with Council communications team, local, regional and national press/news platforms, we have successfully and repeatedly put national spotlight on our biggest community events drawing near-record number of visitors, that have also hugely boosted local economy.

My vision and determination to promote accessibility and inclusiveness at our events, libraries and sports programmes for all members of our communities - including those with special educational needs, disabilities, people from marginalised and vulnerable groups- is reflected across my portfolio- the embedding of this important culture has been achieved through the brilliant leadership of the Heads of Service, senior managers and hard work of all our officers, of which I am extremely proud.

Our events and programmes are attracting world renowned authors, poets world-class athletes, creative talents while we are creating wide-ranging opportunities for Medway's own children, young people as well as aspiring leaders to learn, experience, derive inspiration from, grow and meet their full potential.

## 27. Conclusion

It would be an understatement to express how proud I am of the Heritage, Culture, Sports and Leisure leadership team and the highly dedicated staff members across my portfolio, through whose hard work we continue to deliver the highest standards of services throughout the year for the residents of Medway across all areas. I am proud that we remain highly aspirational and excited for Medway as we continue our important work to engage, benefit and uplift our communities.

## Lead Officer Contacts

Paul Cowell - Head of Culture, Libraries & Heritage  
[paul.cowell@medway.gov.uk](mailto:paul.cowell@medway.gov.uk)

Bob Dimond - Head of Sport, Greenspaces and Climate Response  
[bob.dimond@medway.gov.uk](mailto:bob.dimond@medway.gov.uk)

Appendices

None

Background Papers

None