

Member's Questions

Question A (in relation to Agenda Item 8) – Councillor Lawrence had submitted the following question to the Portfolio Holder for Climate Change, Councillor Curry and the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Homelessness, Councillor Louwella Prenter:

“In July 2023, former Cabinet Members, Councillors Naushabah Khan and Tris Osborne - now MPs for Gillingham & Rainham and Chatham & Aylesford respectively - granted without consultation a 'temporary 3-month' licence to occupy the former Wigmore Park & Ride site, assuring the public and Ward Councillors that it was unsuitable for permanent occupation. Three years later, following a costly court defeat caused by a lack of clear Council strategy, Cabinet is now asking Medway taxpayers to borrow £2.684 million to turn this 'temporary' measure into a permanent, expanded 14-pitch site.

Paragraph 8.1 of Agenda Item 8 astonishingly claims that 'a public consultation is not required... as the site is not near a residential area', completely ignoring established residents in Hempstead, Wigmore, and Bredhurst, as well as the once-planned 88 homes (including 22 affordable homes) directly opposite at Blowers Wood. Given these circumstances, how can the Portfolio Holder justify the recommendations within the report?

In giving their response, the Portfolio Holders should address:

- bypassing public consultation with local residents and Ward Councillors on a £2.684 million capital scheme.
- the total failure to explore or secure viable alternative uses for this valuable Council-owned asset over the past three years.
- the loss of 88 desperately needed local homes (including 22 affordable units) at Blowers Wood caused by this reactive planning panic.
- expecting Medway taxpayers to pick up a multi-million-pound borrowing bill to fix what can only be described as a masterclass in administrative ineptitude.”

In response, Councillor Curry advised that the report had been prepared in the context of the Local Plan examination and the outcome of the appeal decision last year on the former Park and Ride site at Wigmore.

He explained that the published report referred to requirements in national planning policy to provide for the needs of Gypsy and Traveller households. The Local Plan Inspectors had requested that the Council consider how it could increase the certainty of supply for gypsy and traveller pitches over the plan period.

The Council's review of its land for the Local Plan Inspectors had identified potential use of the Wigmore site to contribute towards supply in the plan period. Subject to the outcome of the Cabinet's decision on the report, should the site be supported as a potential allocation in the local plan for this specific purpose, the Planning Service would hold a focused consultation on this as a proposed modification to the

submitted plan. If agreed by Cabinet, there would be a planning application that would be the subject of public consultation as well.

Councillor Curry added that Councillor Lawrence referred to the 88 lost homes on the Blowers Wood site, and that the owners of the land, one of whom was present at the meeting, had written to all Cabinet Members about the question advising that they had no intention of not building and wanted to continue with the development of the site and were happy to work with the Council.

The Leader of the Council, for clarity, confirmed that a statement had been received by all Cabinet Members from the landowners of the Blowers Wood site.

Question B (in relation to Agenda Item 12) – Councillor Perfect asked the Leader of the Council, Councillor Maple the following:

“Whilst your government is now completely focused on the North, at the expense of everywhere else, Medway Council has a significant in year revenue gap. It was also shortchanged by £8m by the Government at the start of this year through the fairer funding review.

When is the Leader of the Council due to meet with the new Prime Minister and Secretary of State, to ask them both for a fairer funding settlement for Medway?”

In response, Councillor Maple stated that it was worth noting that in the first 10 days of being party leader and subsequently Prime Minister, Andy Burnham had not only been in the south east, but in Kent twice. He had personally been pleased to welcome him, with a number of colleagues, to his first meeting as Labour Party Leader, due to protocols around party leaders and prime ministers changing on the same day. The Prime Minister had then again been in Dover about a national issue, which happened to also be in the region of Kent and Medway. Councillor Maple therefore thought the Prime Minister was focused on Kent.

Councillor Maple stated that he did not need to remind Councillor Perfect, or anybody else, of the funding settlements that had been received for a number of years from the previous government, from 2010 to 2024. He reminded colleagues that, not in his words, but the words of the former leader of the Council, there was a 91% cut in the revenue support grants in 2010. So from that perspective, of course trying to catch that up was important. He welcomed the fair funding review, and welcomed the multi-year settlement. He posed the question as to whether there was there more to do to fix the finances of local government, and stated that absolutely, yes there was. Councillor Maple was pleased to have both Angela Rayner and Jim McMahon back in the Cabinet, who were good friends of Medway and he looked forward to working with both of them, alongside colleagues in the treasury, and indeed the Prime Minister - who he knew took a keen interest in what was happening in Kent and Medway.

Question C – Councillor Spalding had submitted the following question to the Portfolio Holder of Climate Change and Strategic Regeneration, Councillor Curry:

“With the ongoing hot weather and at a time when use of buses is being encouraged, it is, in my opinion, equally important to consider bus drivers, especially those on long routes such as the ones serving my ward at the very edge of Medway.

It has come to my attention that driver welfare is apparently not as good as it could be.

Does the Portfolio Holder share my view that bus drivers should be afforded appropriate considerations by bus operators to ensure their comfort and their safety, and by definition, the safety of passengers. When responding will he confirm he will write to all Medway's bus operators asking them to review their current policies and make changes if required and make changes as appropriate?”

In response, Councillor Curry agreed that the welfare and safety of bus drivers was extremely important, particularly during periods of hot weather. Bus drivers provided an essential service to communities across Medway, and their wellbeing was closely linked to the safe and reliable operation of local bus services.

Whilst employee welfare was a matter for individual bus operators as employers, he advised that he would expect all operators serving Medway to have appropriate measures in place to protect their staff and meet their health and safety responsibilities.

Through the Council's close working relationship with bus operators, including Medway's Enhanced Bus Partnership and the delivery of Medway's Bus Service Improvement Plan, regular dialogue was maintained on a range of issues affecting local bus services. Officers also shared relevant weather warnings with operators to support operational planning during periods of extreme weather. In light of the concerns raised, Councillor Curry advised that he had asked officers to discuss this issue with operators through the established partnership arrangements and to seek assurance that appropriate measures were in place to support driver welfare during periods of extreme weather. Councillor Curry thanked Councillor Spalding for bringing this matter to his attention.

Question D – Councillor Tejan had submitted the following question to the Leader of the Council, Councillor Maple:

“Will the Labour Group be repaying the £105,000 as well as any interest incurred for the failed Option 4D business case back to the Council?”

In response, Councillor Maple stated that the direct answer to the question was no. He advised that four legitimate proposals had been put forward, all of which were funded by taxpayers, three of which had not been chosen, and that it was perfectly legitimate for the taxpayers funding of all the options that had been worked on and put forward to the now former Secretary of State.

Question E – Councillor Joy asked the Portfolio Holder for Education, Councillor Coombs the following:

“Could the Portfolio Holder please provide the persistent absence statistics for each of the last three completed academic years?

In giving her answer she should provide:

- the attendance statistics broken down by school type, namely Primary and Infant Schools, Secondary Schools, SEND Schools, and Post-16/18 establishments, the figures for Looked After Children highlighted within each category;
- the actions the Council is taking to improve attendance across Medway schools;
- how both, local authority-maintained schools and academy trusts, are being held to account.”

In response, Councillor Coombs advised that persistent absence had reduced in Medway's mainstream primary schools over the last two completed academic years, from 16% in 2023/24 to 15% in 2024/25, and within secondary schools it had also improved, reducing from 25% to 23% over the same period.

For the same measure, in special schools, persistent absence had been recorded as 33% in 2023/24 and remained the same in 2024/25.

For Children in Care, persistent absence in primary schools reduced from 16% in 2023/24 to 15% in 2024/25.

In secondary schools, the rate had increased from 29% to 32%. Phase-specific data was not available for Children in Care attending special schools or post-16 settings.

Currently available from the Department for Education, provisional 2025/26 data indicated persistent absence rates of 16% in primary schools, 30% in secondary schools and 36% in special schools. These figures remained subject to change until final validated data was published.

Nationally, 18% of pupils were persistently absent during the 2024/25 academic year, a reduction from 20% in 2023/24. This meant that Medway's primary school persistent absence rate of 15% was below the national average, whilst secondary school persistent absence remained above the national figure.

Medway Council continued to work closely with schools through its Attendance service, providing support, challenge and training to improve attendance outcomes. This included regular communication with schools, ongoing monitoring of attendance data, targeted support meetings where attendance was a concern, dissemination of good practice, and early intervention for pupils at risk of becoming persistently absent.

The Attendance team worked closely with Health, Social Care and other partners to identify and address barriers to attendance, while supporting schools to implement sustainable improvement strategies and fulfil their statutory attendance responsibilities.

Both local authority-maintained schools and academies were held to account through regular attendance monitoring, data analysis, school engagement meetings and targeted challenge where concerns are identified. Officers worked directly with school leaders to agree improvement actions and provide support, while also working with academy trusts and regional partners to secure improvements where attendance outcomes remained a concern.