

Public Questions

(Relating to Agenda Item No.8 private Sector Licensing (Additional & Selective Licensing Schemes)

Question A – Harvey Sykes of Broadstairs, had submitted the following question to the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Homelessness, Councillor Louwella Prenter:

“The proposed selective licensing designation relies substantially on modelled predictions of poor housing conditions rather than representative physical inspections, yet the Council has not published the model’s accuracy or false-positive rate, evidence showing how many predictions were verified by inspection, or any comparison with other housing tenures.

On what evidential basis can Cabinet be satisfied that licensing every privately rented property in the proposed areas is necessary and proportionate?”

In response, Councillor Prenter stated that the proposed selective licensing designation was not based solely on modelled predictions of poor housing conditions. The Council had considered a broad range of evidence in accordance with the statutory requirements and guidance for selective licensing schemes.

The housing condition modelling was used as one component of the evidence base to help identify areas where there was a higher likelihood of poor housing conditions and wider private rented sector issues. This approach was widely used by local authorities because it was neither practical nor proportionate to undertake physical inspections of every privately rented property before determining whether an area may benefit from licensing.

The Council’s assessment also considered a range of other indicators, including the concentration of privately rented properties, levels of deprivation, housing demand, property condition complaints, enforcement activity, energy efficiency data, health and well-being indicators and intelligence gathered through the Council’s housing functions and partnerships. Together, these factors were used to identify areas where housing conditions and management standards may be contributing to wider social and economic issues.

The purpose of selective licensing was not to assume that every privately rented property was in poor condition. Rather, it was to establish a proactive regulatory framework that enabled the Council to identify and address poor property management and housing conditions, whilst also supporting responsible landlords who were already meeting their obligations.

With regard to proportionality, the Cabinet must be satisfied that the designation was likely to contribute to improving housing conditions, housing management standards, and wider community outcomes within the proposed areas. The evidence presented demonstrated that selected areas experience significantly high levels or higher levels of indicators associated with poor outcomes than in other parts of the area and in

existing enforcement powers alone had not delivered the scale of improvement needed.

The Council recognised that predictive modelling had limitations. However, it was an established means of informing strategic housing interventions and had been considered alongside multiple sources of local evidence. The Cabinet's decision was therefore based on the totality of the evidence presented rather than any single data set or modelled prediction.

Accordingly, the Cabinet could be satisfied that the proposal was both necessary and proportionate because it targeted areas where there was demonstrable concentration of private rented sector challenges where licensing was expected to deliver measurable improvements for residents and communities.

Members' Questions (Relating to Agenda Item No.7 Medium Term Financial Outlook 2026-2031)

Question B – Councillor Finch asked the Leader of the Council, Councillor Maple, the following:

“Could the Portfolio Holder please provide the latest external borrowing balance and borrowing maturity profile?

In giving his answer, can he include:

- the amounts falling due for repayment or refinancing during 2026/27, 2027/28 and 2028/29, along with the current weighted average interest rate and forecast interest; and
- the minimum Revenue Provision costs for 2026/27 and 2027/28.”

In response, Councillor Maple advised that the total external borrowing on 21 September 2026 was £ 759,538,921 and tabled the following information on the borrowing maturity profile:

Financial Year	Due for Repayment/refinancing	Forecast Interest	Minimum Revenue Provision
2026/27	£ 195,376,328.00	£ 32,332,078.00	£ 8,124,794.00
2027/28	£ 165,018,974.00	£ 36,590,073.00	£ 9,360,072.00
2028/29	£ 130,362,657.00		

Weighted average rate 4.52%.

Question C - Councillor Vye had submitted the following question to the Leader of the Council, Councillor Maple:

“Can the Leader of the Council provide the latest schedule of the Council's General Fund and earmarked reserves? In giving his answer can the Leader please include:

- The current balance for each reserve;
- The sums already committed or planned for use;
- The amount that is genuinely uncommitted; and
- The forecast General Fund reserve balance at 31 March 2027.”

In response, Councillor Maple tabled the information below:

Information on reserves:

Type of Reserve	Closing Balance 31/03/2026
	£
General Fund Balance	10,000,000
General Fund Earmarked Reserves	26,377,289
General Reserves	11,666
Insurance Fund	2,439,308
DSG Reserve	4,265,749
Schools Balances	841,553
HRA Reserves	1,636,566
Capital Grants and Contributions (incl. S106)	51,173,005
Capital Receipts Reserves	18,181,446
HRA Major Repairs Reserve	0
Total Usable Reserves	114,926,583
Unusable Reserve - DSG Adjustment Account	(23,529,748)

He also advised that the Council's usable reserves comprised of over 130 separate cost centres covering a whole range of purposes which was summarised in the table. This included the General Fund Balance, General Fund Earmarked Reserves, General Reserves just to name but three of the 10 types of usable reserves. Only the General Fund Balance and General Reserves balance were not allocated for particular purpose and were uncommitted. Together they amounted to £10,011,666 as at the 31 March 2026.

A proportion of Capital Receipts had been allocated although the rest remained uncommitted. The other reserves were all earmarked and in some case represented grant funding and other contributions (such as section 106 contributions) which were heavily ring fenced. However, the timing of when some of those earmarked reserves might be used was uncertain and therefore it was not possible to set out what the forecast General Fund reserve balance would be at the 31 March 2027.

Question D - Councillor Wildey had submitted the following question to asked the Leader of the Council, Councillor Maple:

“Can the Leader of the Council confirm the total amount borrowed by the Council since the current administration took office, the annual interest costs associated with said borrowing, and the estimated total interest payable over the lifetime of the loans?

In the answer, can the Portfolio Holder include what assessment has been made on the opportunity cost of these interest payments, and the equivalent investment that could otherwise have been made in front-line services such as social workers or provision of residential care places.”

In response, Councillor Maple advised that the Council had borrowed £1.063 billion since May 2023, including refinancing of existing debt as set out in the table that was circulated. The current loans carried an estimated total lifetime interest cost of £96.9 million. The Council's annual interest costs, which included borrowing undertaken before and during the current administration, were also shown in the accompanying table and forecasted to be at £28.9 million in 2027.

In respect of opportunity costs, the Council had not undertaken a formal assessment comparing borrowing costs directly against frontline service provision. However, by way of illustration, the estimated £96.9 million lifetime interest costs would be equivalent around 1,680 social worker years based on an average fully loaded cost of £57,624 per social worker or approximately 2,250 older persons residential care placements for one year at the current contracted rates.

It should be noted that borrowing is undertaken to finance the capital program of the Council and long-term assets. The alternative would not necessarily be the direct availability of equivalent funding for revenue services and borrowing direct decisions are considered in line with affordability. Credential borrowing requirements and the benefits of the investment being funded have been circulated.

The following information was tabled:

Total Amount borrowed since May 2023 (including refinancing)

	£	Total Interest Payable
PWLB	555,100,000	78,233,048.10
Local Authority	508,000,000	18,635,058.90
Total	1,063,100,000	96,868,107.00

Total interest paid (including loans taken prior to 2023)

	Annual Interest Paid by Medway	
	£'000	
23/24	15,328	
24/25	21,265	
25/26	28,591	
26/27	28,872	Forecast from Q1 2026/27

Public Questions

Question E – Mark Robinson, of Chatham, asked the Portfolio Holder for Community Safety, Highways and Enforcement, Councillor Paterson, the following:

“Monitoring undertaken in Medway between May and August 2026 has identified 869 individual private hire vehicles licensed elsewhere, specifically by Transport for London, operating in Medway, with each observation supported by the vehicle registration number, a date and time record and in many cases photographic evidence. This compares with approximately 450 vehicles licensed by Medway itself. There is also evidence of other private hire drivers licensed by authorities elsewhere in the country actively seeking to work in Medway without obtaining a Medway licence, raising serious questions about local regulatory accountability and the practical ability of distant licensing authorities to oversee drivers and vehicles working many miles from where they are licensed.

These situations create an economic consequence. Based on the observed scale of out-of-area private hire activity and estimated passenger revenues, we estimate that economic leakage from the Medway economy could now exceed £2 million every month, as passenger spending and associated revenues leave the area via booking platforms rather than being retained and recirculated through local drivers, businesses and suppliers.

Given the scale of this activity, will Medway Council assess the number of private hire drivers and vehicles licensed elsewhere that are regularly working in Medway and the implications for effective local enforcement and the resulting economic leakage? In giving his response could the Portfolio Holder advise whether the Council will:

- Make representations to Government supporting reforms which ensure that drivers and vehicles are effectively regulated in the areas in which they predominantly work; and
- consider the economic leakage from Medway when determining whether operating licenses should be granted to companies based outside of Medway.”

In response, Councillor Paterson explained that the reforms to ensure that drivers and vehicles were effectively regulated in the areas in which they predominantly worked were already in place under the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026, which received Royal Assent on the 29 April 2026. However, at the current time, these sections of the act were not in force, and the Council was awaiting the outcome of the public consultation from the Secretary of State in relation to the regulations as required by the Act. At that time, Medway Council, alongside all licensing authorities, would be invited to comment on the draft regulations. These regulations would be in relation to the practicalities of how the action would be taken.

In relation to determining whether to issue operating licences to companies based outside Medway, as set out in the Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Policy, Medway only issued operator licences to businesses with an operating base in Medway.

Mark Robinson asked the following supplementary question:

“My understanding is that on average no more than two new drivers secure private hire or hackney carriage licenses in Medway in each calendar month. Given the fact that this number is matched by the retirement rate of Medway drivers, any future reduction in the number of Transport for London licensed private hire drivers and vehicles may result in there being too few Medway licensed vehicles to meet demand. Does the Portfolio Holder agree that steps should be taken to make it easier for local drivers to secure a Medway licence by publishing a defined list of route questions to be the pool from which test questions may be selected and which would allow new drivers to at least know what they need to learn before taking the test? And will he instruct the licensing team to work with local operators to ensure this pool of questions is considered reliable and appropriate?”

In his reply, Councillor Paterson cautioned against the suggestion of making it easier to be a Medway licensed driver when in fact the Council was upholding a gold standard of professional drivers and this was consistently explained when making representations against trading by people who held licences outside of Medway.

He would have discussions with officers to explore what else could be done, but the license trade would certainly not want to give the impression that it was being made easier, nor did the Council want to place undue barriers on people entering the trade. The Council did want to maintain high standards whilst ensuring that processes were as straightforward and efficient as possible.

Question F – Ross Charles, of Rochester, had submitted the following question to the Portfolio Holder for Community Safety, Highways and Enforcement, Councillor Paterson:

“As we know, the bridge at Peters Village has blighted ALL surrounding villages and turned them into dangerous traffic hotspots. I would like to know what Medway Council intends to do about the excessive and dangerous speeds of vehicles, motorbikes and quadbikes tearing through Borstal Village from Borstal Street, through Wouldham Road and beyond. Considering there is a local school nearby,

countless homes for those with learning disabilities and a high population of elderly residents, it is time for the Council to act to slow down the traffic, treating this area as if it is a major A road.

There should be plans for traffic calming measures, average speed check camera, speed humps and/or the introduction of 20mph speed limits (although these are largely ignored), or do we have to wait for people to be killed first before you act?"

Councillor Paterson thanked Mr Charles for taking the time to share his concerns about traffic and raising the question on behalf of the Community. He advised that the safety of all road users remained a key priority for Medway Council. The Council understood that changes to the road network could lead to concerns from residents about vehicle speeds, traffic volumes, and driver behaviour and such concerns were taken seriously. As the Highway Authority, the Council monitored the operation of the road network and reviewed safety concerns using evidence such as traffic surveys, speed data, and collision records. This enabled identification of locations where there may be a road safety issue and determined whether further measures may be appropriate. This was done as part of an evidence-based approach to road safety.

Councillor Paterson added that in his eight years representing the Ward, this was exactly the sort of evidence that had helped to justify improvements that had been made such as the zebra crossing outside Sheridan Court and alterations to make the Shorts Way junction safer for drivers and pedestrians.

Where concerns related to speeding or driver behaviour, officers worked closely with Kent Police who were responsible for enforcement activities. Officers would continue to consider information provided by residents alongside available traffic and safety data as part of ongoing assessment of conditions in the area. Should future monitoring identify a need for intervention, appropriate options would be considered in accordance with national guidance and local safety priorities. Residents' concerns formed an important part of a wider understanding of how the network operated. The Council would continue to listen to and engage with local people as part of this ongoing process.

No supplementary question was asked as Ross Charles was not present.

Question G – Laurel Robinson, of Gillingham, had submitted the following question to the Portfolio Holder for Heritage, Culture and Leisure, Councillor Gurung:

"Following the landmark UK Supreme Court judgment in *For Women Scotland Ltd v The Scottish Ministers* and the subsequent Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) Code of Practice, it is established that single-sex communal spaces open to the public must be organised on the basis of biological sex to safeguard the privacy, dignity, and safety of users.

At Cozenton Park Sports Centre, separate single-sex communal changing spaces are strictly restricted to customers paying for top-tier Premium Memberships. General public users and families who cannot afford this premium price tier are forced into a standard mixed-sex layout. While individual cubicles and showers are

provided in this mixed-sex zone, they are not fully enclosed from floor to ceiling, creating a compromised environment that directly undermines the privacy, dignity, and physical safety of women, girls, and vulnerable users.

Given that the law and EHRC statutory guidelines require equal access to biological single-sex spaces without imposing financial barriers, and that individual cubicles are required to be fully enclosed, what immediate steps is the Portfolio Holder taking to audit the infrastructure at Cozenton Park to eliminate this discriminatory two-tier access system, and guarantee fully enclosed, legally compliant single-sex changing rooms and showers for all Medway residents?"

Councillor Gurung advised that the Council appreciated that changing provision was an important issue for many customers and recognised that individuals may have different views and preferences regarding privacy, dignity and the use of changing spaces.

Cozenton Park Sports Centre operated a changing village arrangement which comprised of individual changing cubicles and individual shower cubicles that were available for use by customers.

As a local authority, the Council had duties under the Equality Act 2010, including the duty not to unlawfully discriminate and to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations between people who shared a protected characteristic and those who did not. This was under the Public Sector Equality Duty under section 149. The protected characteristics included sex, disability, religion or belief, gender reassignment, age, and others. The Council kept its facilities and operating arrangements under review to ensure it remained compliant with relevant legislation, case law, and statutory guidance. In doing so, it sought to balance the needs of all users of the service, including those who preferred single sex environments and those who preferred individual private changing facilities. The current layout provided individual changing and showering spaces for all users and did not require customers to undress within a communal changing room.

The Council considered that the provision of individual cubicles was an important privacy measure that supported dignity and personal choice for all customers. This approach was consistent with the guidance published by Sport England in its accessible and inclusive sports facilities guidance which promoted the principles of privacy, dignity, inclusion, flexibility and user choice when designing and operating sports and leisure facilities. The guidance recognised that no single solution would meet the needs of all users and encouraged operators to provide facilities that were responsive to local communities and diverse community and customer requirements.

Officers were aware of the judgment of the UK Supreme Court in *For Women Scotland Ltd v Scottish Ministers* [2025] UKSC 16, which considered the meaning of 'sex' within the Equality Act 2010. Officers continued to monitor relevant legal developments, government guidance and sector guidance to ensure our policies and practices remain lawful and appropriate.

The Equality Act 2010 permitted service providers, in appropriate circumstances, to provide separate sex or single sex facilities where this was a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim such as privacy, dignity or safety. The legislation did not prescribe a single model of changing provision for leisure centres and allowed operators to determine the most appropriate arrangements having regard to their equality obligations, customer needs and the physical configuration of their facilities. The Council was therefore entitled to consider the nature of its facilities, operational requirements, customer needs, privacy arrangements, and equality obligations when determining the most appropriate changing provision. At present, the Council considered that the provision of individual changing and shower cubicles offered a reasonable level of privacy, dignity, and accessibility for users of the centre.

No supplementary question was asked as Laurel Robinson was not present.

Members' Questions

Question H – Councillor Howcroft-Scott had submitted the following question to the Leader of the Council, Councillor Maple:

“Whilst on the surface it might seem like a great idea for local authorities to be made responsible for delivering 20 hours a week of supervised community activity for those on Universal Credit seeking work for longer than 12 months, this could mean Medway Council having to support 1,925 potentially eligible people a week - a figure which nearly matches the Council’s current full-time posts.

At a central government contribution of £3,200 per jobseeker, wouldn’t this £6.16 million a year be better spent in Medway on creating secure, permanent employment in frontline services?”

In response Councillor Maple said that this was an example of political parties nationally, not locally, seeking to grab a headline without looking at the reality of what this meant in practical terms. Asking this Council and local Councils across the country to look after supervised community activity, in the case of Medway this would be equivalent to having a second workforce the same size as the existing workforce. Medway Council’s current workforce was just over 2,000 people. If £6.16 million was available, he would much rather have that for Medway Council frontline services, as every financial contribution would be welcome.

Councillor Maple stated that he thought that this was headline grabbing proposals from a national political party when actually the reality of it would not be delivered for the individuals concerned, would not deliver for taxpayers and therefore they should think again.

Question I – Councillor Tejan asked the Leader of the Council, Councillor Maple, the following:

“In light of the pause and review of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), will the Cabinet publish a fully itemised statement of all costs incurred to date, including officer time, converted into monetary value, consultancy and legal fees, communications expenditure, travel and meeting costs, and any other direct or

indirect expenditure, so that residents can understand the true financial impact of this work?”

In response Councillor Maple said that at this stage Local Government Reorganisation had been paused for a rapid review to be undertaken whilst further consideration took place and it was unknown how long that would be at this stage.

The position on cost remained limited and evolving. The Council had previously made public that up to £7 million of Capital Receipts had been earmarked to support preparation for LGR, including both Medway Council's preparatory work and the region-wide arrangements established to support the programme.

In terms of expenditure incurred to date, the principal identifiable cost related to the Kent-wide programme management office. However, Medway's planned £1 million contribution had not been made at the point the programme was paused and costs incurred by that office had been met so far through central government funding.

A significant amount of work had also been undertaken across the Council alongside officers' normal day to day responsibilities. Officers had not been working exclusively on LGR and time had not generally been recorded separately from business-as-usual activity. It was therefore not possible to provide a robust or meaningful estimate of officer time committed to the programme.

There had been some limited expenditure on specialist advice and support. However, much of this work related to ensuring that the Council was adequately prepared for any future decisions regarding local government structures in Kent and would have been necessary regardless of the pace at which the programme progressed. Overall, beyond the work of the original strategic partner, limited specialist support, and the Kent-wide program management office, it was not possible to provide a comprehensive itemised statement of LGR costs at this stage, particularly where officer time had been forming the majority of the Council's contribution.

Question J – Councillor Spring had submitted the following question to the Portfolio Holder of Business Management, Councillor Van Dyke:

“Given the uncertainty and potential anxiety that the recent halt of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) may create for employees, what assurances can the Portfolio Holder provide that staff mental health and wellbeing will be prioritised throughout the process, including what specific support mechanisms, monitoring arrangements and resources will be available to Medway staff affected?”

In response, Councillor Van Dyke said that she recognised that the pause in the LGR process might create uncertainty for Council staff and could understandably lead to anxiety about the future. The health, well-being, and welfare of our employees would remain a priority throughout this period.

Whilst there was currently no change to employees' terms and conditions, roles or employment arrangements because of the pause, it was appreciated that uncertainty

itself could affect well-being. The Council was therefore committed to maintaining open, honest, and timely communication with staff as further information became available.

A range of well-being support continues to be available to all staff with staff well-being a key theme within the council's people promise.

In practice, this meant access to Employee Wellbeing Champions and Mental Health First Aiders, access through the staff benefits and support hub on the Council's internet to a financial well-being hub and staff community groups, the Press Pause Campaign which encouraged staff to take short regular breaks throughout the working day, access to the Wellness bot, discounted leisure centre memberships, silver accreditation of Medway Healthy Working Workplace programme, and 24/7 access to Optima Health Employee Assistance Programme, Workplace Adjustment Passports, and Occupational Health.

Managers were also being encouraged to engage regularly with their teams and signpost to the available support.

Every effort would be made to ensure that staff continued to be kept informed on the position with LGR as it developed, continuing with regular staff newsletters and LGR devolution drop-in sessions which helped with monitoring employee well-being, as well as feedback from managers, staff and trade unions, enabling understanding and the ability to respond to emerging concerns appropriately.

Councillor Maple extended his thanks to the Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive for appearing with him in a video to all staff. He also added that he had joined the Chief Executive that day to speak to service managers, and to reiterate that he recognised the impact the announcement from the Government would have had on a very personal level. He encouraged anybody who was struggling at Medway Council and across any of the 14 Councils of Kent, to access all the support tools provided to them .