

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL
RECORD OF DECISION OF THE CABINET

Decision Made: 21 December 2011

THE BIGGER SOCIETY IN MAIDSTONE

Issue for Decision

To agree Maidstone Borough Council's proposed approach to the Bigger Society.

Decision Made

1. That the objectives and aims as set out below be agreed.
2. That the recommended approach to the Council's role in promoting the bigger society be agreed.
3. That the bidding process for the bigger society fund be agreed

Reasons for Decision

The Government defines the Big Society as "what happens whenever people work for the common good. It is about achieving our goals in ways that are more diverse, more local and more personal"

The three core components of the Big Society agenda have been defined as;

- Empowering communities: giving local councils and neighbourhoods more power to take decisions and shape their area;
- Opening up public services: enabling charities, social enterprises, private companies and employee owned co-operatives to compete to offer people high quality services; and
- Promoting social action: encouraging and enabling people from all walks of life to play a more active part in society, and promoting more volunteering and philanthropy.

Localism is seen as the means by which we create the big society. The following themes for localism have been identified by the Government:

"Lift the burden of bureaucracy – by removing the cost and control of unnecessary red tape and regulation, whose effect is to restrict local action; and

Empower communities to do things their way – by creating rights for people to get involved with, and direct the development of, their communities.

Increase local control of public finance – so that more of the decisions over how public money is spent and raised can be taken within communities; and

Diversify the supply of public services – by ending public sector monopolies, ensuring a level playing field for all suppliers, giving people more choice and a better standard of service.

Open up government to public scrutiny – by releasing government information into the public domain, so that people can know how their money is spent, how it is used and to what effect; and

Strengthen accountability to local people – by giving every citizen the power to change the services provided to them through participation, choice or the ballot box.

Objective and aims

In order to ensure that the best possible value is gained for the borough it is important that the Council is clear on what it hopes to achieve through the Bigger Society fund.

The suggested objective is “That communities or groups in Maidstone are empowered and enabled to meet their own needs in a way that suits them, particularly where service provision does not exist or has been reduced.”

A community need not be defined geographically; it could be a group of people with a common requirement, for example, people living in different rural areas or elderly people.

Maidstone’s Approach

Cuts to local government budgets has meant decisions being taken about which services should be prioritised and where spending should be reduced. In order to inform this decision, Cabinet carried out a pairwise analysis of the services that the Council provides. The results are in the table on the next page.

REVENUE	High	Medium	Low
Invest	Economic Development		
Maintain	Parking and Transport Housing		Environmental Health
Reduce	Planning and Building Control	Community Safety Waste Collection and Recycling Community Development Recreation, Sport and Open Spaces	Culture and Heritage Tourism Street Cleansing

The public were consulted about the budget for discretionary services in October of last year and a similar exercise is currently being undertaken to help determine budgets for next year. The Council has also identified in its strategic plan service design principles which include the following two principles relevant to localism:

- Residents and businesses are the starting point for services; every service must be considered from the perspective of the citizen and delivered at the lowest possible level – a bottom-up approach.
- We will enable service delivery and seek to commission services rather than deliver them ourselves wherever appropriate.

Bigger society will need to compensate for smaller government. The Council will need to redefine its relationship with government and other parts of the public sector, engage with the private and third sectors and refresh its approach to community leadership. This will require taking on a new role within the borough to help facilitate communities to receive services in the way they want them provided, taking on a variety of roles as creative commissioner, supporter, catalyst, connector and safety net depending what is needed in each case. The Council will work to bring together Maidstone's communities, businesses, voluntary groups, local authorities, partners and individuals to deliver the objective of the Bigger Society.

Several actions have been already been identified and are set out at Appendix A to the report of the Chief Executive. This action list is not exhaustive and will evolve over time as additional actions are identified and explored.

Research has been carried out with officers, local business and voluntary groups to determine how the sectors can work together to create a bigger society in Maidstone. The next step in this exercise is to create a contact website that will help the sectors to co-ordinate their volunteering efforts. The Council will continue to undertake research, looking for innovation and best practice and learning lessons from initiatives that have been undertaken elsewhere in the country.

A bigger society fund of £100,000 has been identified by the Council as part of the proposed Medium Term Financial Strategy. This could be used for initiatives with a cost to the Council such as setting up the 'dating' website. It could also be used to help community groups launch initiatives where an initial investment is needed. In order to ensure that any funds given to community groups are fairly distributed a panel should be created to decide which applications are accepted. The applications should be assessed against a strict set of criteria. Proposals can be found at Appendix B. It is further suggested that there is no limit on how much of the pot a bid can be for or how many bids can be made as there is a risk that good ideas could be missed by applying these conditions.

A planning for real exercise has been carried out in Park Wood which has resulted in a Neighbourhood Action Plan being produced for the area. This

has identified a number of areas of improvement that local residents would like to see. The Council will now need to decide which of those actions to carry out and how to enable the community to find ways to complete the remainder. A similar exercise is planned to take place in Shepway in 2012.

The Open Public Services White paper talks about decentralizing power to the lowest possible level, wherever possible, "giving people direct control over the services they use. And where it is not possible to give people direct control, elected representatives should also have more choice about who provides services and how." Elected members will need to take a role in pushing for increased quality and greater choice in service provision. Local authorities and members will act as a champion for their local communities regardless of who is providing the services. Where Neighbourhood Action Plans are in place it is likely that Councillors will be asked to take a liaison role not only with the Local Authority but with all stakeholders who are in a position to deliver services to or offer help in their community. This will include holding providers to account, irrespective of which sector they are from. This new role will require varying levels of training to be provided. Where possible this will be provided in house or free opportunities will be sought. However, this should be considered when allocating the Member training budget for future years.

Alternatives considered and why rejected

It could have been decided to not define the council's approach to localism and the big society. However, this would not have led to an efficient use of council resources and would make planning for the impact of the big society difficult.

Alternative objectives and aims could have been agreed but it is felt, for the reasons set out above, that the chosen objectives and aims are the most appropriate to deliver the bigger society in Maidstone.

Background Papers

None

Should you be concerned about this decision and wish to call it in, please submit a call in form signed by any two Non-Executive Members to the Head of Change and Scrutiny by: 05 January 2012
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