

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**MINUTES OF THE EXTERNAL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 16 JUNE 2009**

PRESENT: Councillor Hotson (Chairman)
Councillors Marchant, Mrs Gibson, Sherreard, Batt,
Yates and Chittenden

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence was received from Councillors
Mrs Parvin

9. The Committee to consider whether all items on the agenda should be web-cast.

Resolved: That all items on the agenda be web-cast.

10. Apologies.

Apologies were received from Councillors Mrs Paterson and Mrs Parvin.

11. Notification of Substitute Members.

It was noted that Councillor Chittenden was substituting for Councillor Mrs Paterson.

12. Notification of Visiting Members.

It was noted that Councillor FitzGerald was a visiting Member with an interest in Agenda Items 8, 9 and 10.

13. Disclosures by Members and Officers:

Councillor Mrs Gibson declared a prejudicial interest during Agenda Item 8, "Leader of the Council: Plans and Priorities for 2009/10" when Maidstone Housing Trust (MHT) issues were raised, as she was a Board Member for MHT.

14. To consider whether any items should be taken in private because of the possible disclosure of exempt information.

Resolved: That all items be taken in public as proposed.

15. Minutes of the Meetings Held on 21 April 2009 and 27 May 2009.

Members requested that the following amendments to the minutes of the meeting held on 21 April 2009 be made:

- Minute № 98, paragraph 6, bullet point 2: change "where" to "were";
- Minute № 98, paragraph 6, bullet point 4: remove the words "however staff would need to be paid for this time".

Councillor Marchant also requested that he be sent details of the European Legislation that required that casual staff be paid holiday pay.

Resolved: That

- a) The minutes of the meeting held on 21 April 2009 be agreed and duly signed by the Chairman subject to the following amendments:
 - i. Minute № 98, paragraph 6, bullet point 2: change "where" to "were";
 - ii. Minute № 98, paragraph 6, bullet point 4: remove the words "however staff would need to be paid for this time";
- b) The minutes of the meeting held on 27 May 2009 be agreed and duly signed by the Chairman; and
- c) Councillor Marchant be sent details of the European Legislation that required that casual staff be paid holiday pay.

16. Leader of the Council: Plans and Priorities for 2009/10.

The Chairman highlighted to the Committee a letter that had been received from Dr J M Speight with regard to the Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) consultation. He requested that the Leader respond to this in his presentation, and that officers be invited to the next Committee meeting to respond to Dr Speight's concerns, particularly with regard to the timescales for consultation. Dr Speight requested that the Assistant Director of Development and Community Strategy be invited to that meeting, and also stated that he was disappointed with the lack of response to his e-mail by the Committee. The Chairman reassured Dr Speight that the Committee was taking the issue seriously.

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Chris Garland, stated that he understood Dr Speight's concerns with regard to his consultation response not being fully included in the SCS consultation. However, Dr Speight's report had included some good ideas, particularly regarding public engagement, which were being considered by officers and the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) Board. The SCS was an evolving document and these ideas could be worked into future versions. Councillor Garland maintained that the SCS consultation had been both rigorous and robust.

Mid-Kent Improvement Partnership (MKIP)

Councillor Garland considered MKIP to be one of the key drivers to deliver substantial savings in light of economic pressures, reduced income from services such as planning, and the likelihood of a reduced Revenue Support Grant. MKIP was also valuable in terms of shared skills and knowledge. It was national Conservative policy to pursue shared services. Proposals this year included a shared Human Resources (HR) function, and the Head of HR was already assisting Swale Borough Council with this. It was likely that the arrangement would include a designated HR Officer for each Council, with one main strategic unit for all four councils. This would deliver £300,000 revenue savings per year for the Council, though this would not happen in 2009-10. Shared services in Legal were also being pursued, though it was essential that this did not result in a loss of sovereignty for the Council. A shared Revenues and Benefits service was being investigated which would deliver savings of £1.3 million. MKIP had long term aspirations to combine back-office functions into one building for all four councils, and possibly to then offer those services to other local authorities.

Councillor Garland emphasised that there were no current plans to pursue unitary status through MKIP.

With regard to shared services, a Councillor stated that while the Scrutiny partnership with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council worked well in some ways, there was concern over the reduction in support for Scrutiny. The Leader stated that it was not the place of the Executive to get involved in the management of Scrutiny, however he noted that the Scrutiny Section was placed under pressure last year due to a higher than average number of call-ins. The Chairman informed the Committee that the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee was carrying out a review of the Overview and Scrutiny Function this year and scrutiny support would be considered as part of this.

Local Strategic Partnership (LSP)

The LSP had operated through workshops rather than formal meetings last year. The Leader had been criticised for the lack of public meetings and formal minutes, however he considered the resulting SCS to be justification of this approach. This approach had also led to greater involvement from businesses and the LSP was becoming more robust. Officers had been instructed to invite the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) and the Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce (KICC) to join the LSP Board; if they were interested, this would go through the due process to be ratified, including a public meeting.

The LSP had been awarded £294,000 to take forward individual projects, and actions within the SCS had been developed with partners to ensure buy-in, both of which were positive steps for the future working of the LSP.

In response to a question, the Leader stated that attendance was still an issue but it was improving, though there was concern that some meetings were still "top heavy" with Council officers. The FSB, KICC and the Primary Care Trust were regular attendees, as were local churches.

A Member raised concern that the LSP sub-groups, including the Health Action Team and the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership, did not report to Members or publish minutes, indicating a lack of transparency. The Chairman agreed that greater transparency was needed.

Kent County Council (KCC)

Councillor Garland stated that relations with KCC had improved. KCC had assisted the Council on the Kent International Gateway (KIG) planning application in terms of both money and support; this would continue for the KIG hearing in the autumn, and KCC's support would give weight to the Council's argument.

KCC was interested in the High Street Regeneration project and had provided officer support for the design and implementation of this. The Leader and the Cabinet Member for Regeneration would continue to lobby for financial assistance.

There had recently been rumours that KCC intended to make a bid for unitary status, however Councillor Garland had spoken with the Leader and the Deputy Leader of KCC who had confirmed that the rumours were false. It was emphasised that such rumours should not be able to affect the good relationship between the County Council and District Councils.

A Councillor requested that the Leader lobby KCC for financial assistance for parish councils responding to the KIG inquiry, which had significant cost implications. Councillor Garland stated that parishes would receive officer assistance from both the Council and KCC. He also suggested that parishes should lobby Central Government as there was political pressure for KIG to move forward so it was important for the parishes to get into the Whitehall system.

Maidstone Housing Trust (MHT)

[Councillor Mrs Gibson declared a prejudicial interest due to her position as MHT Board Member and left the room for the duration of the section]

Councillor Garland and the Leader of the Opposition, Councillor Fran Wilson, were involved in re-negotiating MHT's governance arrangements. MHT was the Council's preferred provider of affordable housing and the Council had 75% nomination rights to MHT properties. MHT wanted to change its name to "Golding", pay board members and remove the Council's "golden share" arrangements. The Council had agreed to these in principle subject to several key points, and negotiations were going well. MHT would remain the Council's preferred provider but the Council would use other Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) as well according to their track record, ability to deliver and bearing in mind best value. The

Council was looking at working in partnership with an RSL consortium and developers to deliver more affordable housing.

In response to a question, Councillor Garland explained that MHT wished to expand beyond Maidstone which was why it wanted to change its name and governance arrangements. If it expanded beyond the Borough, it was not appropriate for the Council to continue to have constitutional involvement with it, though it would continue to work with it as with any other RSL.

A Councillor stated that it was important to keep Members updated on the negotiations with MHT as this was a very important matter. The Leader agreed.

Sustainable Communities Act (SCA)

The Council had agreed a motion put forward by Councillor Batt at its meeting on 22 April 2009 to develop robust proposals to make use of the provisions within the SCA. Resource pressures would prevent the Council from meeting the 31 July 2009 deadline, however it was believed that there would be a further deadline in October 2009 which would hopefully be met. Most parishes were very keen on the provisions within the SCA. A citizen's panel would need to be developed to consult on proposals; it had been suggested that the LSP be used for this, but it was considered that this would be too narrow a forum. The Director of Prosperity and Regeneration was leading on this for the Council.

Other

In response to a question, the Leader stated that if Committees wished to interview Cabinet Members more frequently, they were welcome to request this.

With regard to regional issues, it was confirmed that the South East England Regional Assembly (SEERA) no longer existed. The Council was working reasonably well with the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA); SEEDA had supported KIG but following lobbying had agreed to speak with the Leader and other Council representatives to hear the Council's case against it. SEEDA was generally supportive of the Council and its actions. Councillor Garland stated that it was difficult to ascertain the value of SEEDA to the Council beyond relationships, though these were clearly important, as SEEDA was not able to provide any funding to the Council's regeneration and development projects. A Councillor suggested making a public appeal to SEEDA for financial assistance with regeneration projects, and the Leader stated that while forcing a clear response in this way could have benefits, this approach would not be helpful at the present time.

Resolved: That

- a) Dr J M Speight, the Assistant Director of Development and Community Strategy and the Community Planning

- Co-ordinator be invited to the July meeting of the Committee to discuss the Sustainable Community Strategy consultation; and
- b) The Leader's plans and priorities for 2009-10 be noted.

17. Cabinet Member for Community Services: Plans and Priorities for 2009/10.

The Chairman welcomed the Cabinet Member for Community Services, Councillor Marion Ring, the Community Development and Social Inclusion Manager, Ian Park, and the Community Safety Co-ordinator, David Hewetson, to the meeting. The Chairman informed Members that further to Mr Hewetson's attendance at an earlier meeting, crime statistics that had been requested had now been received and would be included on the next meeting agenda.

Councillor Mrs Ring referred Members to her action plan for 2009-10 (attached at Appendix A) and highlighted that for all actions, she needed to work with partners. It was vital that the right partners were in place and were prepared to deliver on key actions.

In response to a question, Mr Hewetson explained that the community safety booklet that had been distributed to 40,000 households in the Borough had no cost to the Council. The Kent Police Authority had covered most of the cost, with advertising revenue making up the shortfall. The booklet had only gone to 40,000 households as it was part of a free publication. Copies had also been given to public bodies and parish councils.

With regard to Borough Grants, following a best value review these had to help the Council to meet its strategic priorities. All applications were scored on this basis. The budget for these had been cut this year. For those applicants who had been unsuccessful in obtaining a grant from the Council, an officer was meeting them individually to assist them to apply for alternative funding. There would not be money available for parishes to bid for projects this year.

A Councillor asked what progress had been made on cold-calling zones. Mr Hewetson explained that cold-calling zones were a preventative measure, with posters being put up informing cold-callers that it was a "no cold-calling" zone. Police, councillors and Neighbourhood Watch were aware of this, so if a cold-caller was reported, it could be dealt with more effectively. Two cold-calling zones were in place in the Borough and were proving to be worthwhile. The project was being led by the Neighbourhood Watch Officer at Mid-Kent Police.

It was highlighted by a Committee Member that youth services were delivered in conjunction with KCC, however KCC's spend on youth services was quite low. The Cabinet Member was asked whether enough support was received from KCC. Councillor Mrs Ring stated that KCC had not been as forthcoming with funding as she would like, so she was working hard to

ensure that they played a big enough role. She requested that Kent County Councillors kept encouraging KCC to make an appropriate contribution. Members agreed that a written report on KCC's involvement in and contribution to the Council's youth services should be received in 3 months.

Other issues discussed included:

- Last month had seen a 9.8% decrease in crime compared to an overall drop of 7.8% last year, though there were seasonal increases in violent crime and issues with double counting of some crimes;
- The transfer of the CCTV control room was due to take place in January 2010, and it was likely that this would be in conjunction with the establishment of the multi-agency Community Safety Unit;
- The Youth Café project had been taken over by a Trust and the Café was expected to open by November 2009;
- The Council was monitoring the situation regarding the swine flu pandemic and would put actions in place and work with partners as appropriate to deal with this;
- Older person's exercise areas in parks were considered a good idea and Age Concern was believed to have funding for equipment for these;
- The Cabinet Member was involved with the YMCA play area scheme in Coombe Farm, though it was noted this was for Coombe Farm only and not the rest of Tovil; and
- Approximately the same number of places were available on Hotfoot play schemes this year as last year.

Finally, the Chairman requested an update on the Committee's 2008-09 report, "Diverse Communities: Community Cohesion and the Integration of Ethnic Minorities in the Borough". Mr Park explained that the actions outlined in the response to the report were being worked on. It was hoped that the Mela would take place over more than one day this year, and the St George's Day parade had been successful. The LSP had agreed to approach the Maidstone Cultural Group or the Mela Steering Group to improve ethnic minority representation on the LSP. A report would go to the LSP Board shortly to try to encourage community cohesion to be dealt with within all LSP sub-groups to ensure an integrated approach. The Committee requested an update on progress in 3 months.

Resolved: That

- a) A written report on Kent County Council's involvement in and contribution to the Council's youth services be received in 3 months; and
- b) A written report on progress on the "Diverse Communities: Community Cohesion and the Integration of Ethnic Minorities in the Borough" report be received in 3 months.

18. Work Programme 2009/10.

The Acting Overview and Scrutiny Manager outlined the topics that had been put forward as work programme items following the work programming workshop on 27 May 2009. It was also highlighted that the Committee was also responsible for scrutiny of the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership following the implementation of that aspect of the Police and Justice Act 2006.

The Chairman stated that it was important for the Committee to press for continued support for the Scrutiny Section to ensure that all of the work that the Committee wished to carry out could be done. The Committee agreed to write to the Chief Executive with regard to this.

The Committee agreed to carry out a review of rail services to London, noting that these were being cut and residents were being forced to use alternative train stations to access services. Additionally, Maidstone was a Growth Point and appropriate public transport for the growing population was therefore vital. It was agreed that parish councils should be consulted as part of this review.

A review of holiday play schemes was also approved, and it was suggested that this should take two months later in the year.

A Member highlighted that the Sustainable Communities Act was dynamic and an exciting opportunity and Scrutiny could help officers to develop proposals. The Acting Overview and Scrutiny Manager confirmed that the Act fell within the remit of the Corporate Services OSC, however permission could be obtained from the Chairman of that Committee to take on the review. The Committee agreed to request this permission and, subject to this, invite the lead officer to the Committee's meeting in July to provide an update on the Council's response to the Act.

A written update on the progress of the Mental Health Working Group was requested for the July meeting.

Resolved: That

- a) A letter be sent by the Chairman on behalf of the Committee to the Chief Executive, copying in Group Leaders, with regard to resources for overview and scrutiny;
- b) A major review of railway services between Maidstone and London be carried out;
- c) A review of holiday play schemes be carried out later in the Municipal Year 2009-10;
- d) Permission be requested from the Chairman of the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee to take on scrutiny of the Sustainable Communities Act;
- e) Subject to (d) the lead officer on the Sustainable Communities Act be requested to provide an update on

- the Council's response to the Act at the July 2009 meeting; and
- f) An update on the Mental Health Working Group be provided at the July 2009 meeting.

19. Future Work Programme and Forward Plan of Key Decisions.

The Committee agreed to begin its review of railway services at its July 2009 meeting, alongside consideration of the Sustainable Community Strategy consultation and an update on the Sustainable Communities Act as agreed during earlier items, and agreed that due to the number of issues on the agenda, suggested timings should be included.

Resolved: That

- a) The Committee begin its review of railway services at its meeting on 14 July 2009; and
- b) The agenda for the 14 July 2009 meeting include suggested timings for items.

20. Duration of the Meeting.

6:30 p.m. to 9:05 p.m.

21. Appendix A

CABINET MEMBER FOR COMMUNITY SERVICES

ACTION PLAN 09/10

Introduction

This is a wide ranging portfolio and it covers the following:

Young People

- To be the lead Cabinet Member for young people

Lifelong Learning

- To be the Lead Cabinet Member for Lifelong Learning

Health

- To be responsible on behalf of the council for all health and community health matters including the

development, in conjunction with the council's partners, of the Community Health Plan

Crime and Disorder

- To be responsible for all aspects of community safety in the borough

Social Inclusion

- To formulate and review policies to achieve a more socially inclusive society in Maidstone
- To guide, advise and provide a strategic overview on social inclusion issues

External Affairs

- To take responsibility for relationships with external partners and agencies, including parish councils (Kent County Council (KCC), the Primary Care Trust (PCT) and the Police.

My priorities for the year within my brief are as follows:

Young People

- To oversee the opening of the Youth Café on a sustainable basis
- To support the development of the Maidstone Youth Forum for the engagement of all young people in the borough with Kent County Council
- To support the development of a joint District Youth Strategy for the Borough
- To seek opportunities for additional funding to enhance the provision and support for children in need in respect of the Hotfoot Play Schemes and other activities organised and facilitated by the council
- To work in partnership with KCC Youth Service and the YMCA to develop youth involvement and participation in positive activities at the play areas in Park Wood, Mangravet and Clare Park as part of their refurbishment

Lifelong Learning

- To work with KCC to help ensure that the proposed Maidstone Skills Studio serves the needs of the community.
- Through the LSP and the Children and Young People's Local Partnership Boards to support actions within the council's remit to improve educational attainment and skills/qualifications levels within the borough.
- To continue to lobby education and training providers on behalf of local community education needs.

Health

- To help ensure the efficient and effective use of the Choosing Health Plan and other related funding initiatives to promote public health and associated community development activities within the borough
- To lead and develop the multi-agency Maidstone Health Action team as a thematic sub-group of the LSP to achieve improved health outcomes
- To deliver a programme of healthy lifestyle initiatives from out of the Urban Blue bus in various locations within the borough, in partnership with other agencies.

Crime and Disorder

- To work closely with the SMP to continue to reduce levels of crime, disorder and anti-social behaviour
- To work with police and partners to increase public reassurance and improve perceptions on ASB and crime reduction (NI 17 and NI 27)
- To promote the development of a multi-agency Community Safety Unit at Maidstone House by January 2010
- To ensure the re-location of the CCTV control room to Maidstone House is effectively managed and achieved within budget by January 2010
- To publish a free Community Safety booklet delivered to 40,000 households in Maidstone, To promote crime prevention and safety messages from a variety of SMP partners.

Social Inclusion

- To support the Mela and use it to build on its success in promoting and delivering Social inclusion and community cohesion objectives

- To support the development of the Corporate Equality Plan to engage and involve hard to reach and socially excluded groups in the borough
- To support the development of neighbourhood action plans, working with key partners in programmes to help reduce deprivation and its consequences
- To work to improve access to the council's services and facilities for all residents of the borough
- To ensure borough grants provision is effectively targeted.

External Affairs

- To promote productive relationships with local parish councils, including regular liaison meetings and an annual conference to consider matters of mutual interest
- To promote effective partnership working with the voluntary and community sector within the borough as a means of delivering Council and shared priorities.
- To continue to develop effective working relationships at KCC Cabinet level on community matters affecting the borough
- Developing good effective relationships with the PCT to achieve shared objectives
- To promote effective working with housing providers in the borough in order to achieve portfolio priorities.

Older People (Emerging Theme)

- To support the development of the Older Person's Forum to effectively engage older people in the borough.

Working with partners

- To promote the consideration of issues affecting older people