

**MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW AND  
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 8  
SEPTEMBER 2009**

**PRESENT:** Councillor Butler (Chairman for the duration of the meeting)  
Councillors Bradshaw, FitzGerald, Marshall, Parr and Wilson.

**APOLOGIES:** Councillors Mrs Marshall and Mrs Stockell.

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

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

**45. Apologies.**

Apologies were received from Councillors Mrs Marshall and Mrs Stockell.

**46. Notification of Substitute Members.**

It was noted that Councillor FitzGerald was substituting for Councillor Mrs Marshall.

**47. Notification of Visiting Members.**

There were no visiting Members.

**48. Disclosures by Members and Officers:**

There were no disclosures.

**49. 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.

**50. Minutes of the Meeting Held on 4 August 2009.**

**Resolved:** That the minutes of the meeting held on 4 August 2009 be agreed as a correct record and duly signed by the Chairman.

**51. Benefits Uptake in Maidstone Borough.**

The Head of Revenues and Benefits and Community Safety, Steve McGinnes, explained that while the level of unemployment in Maidstone Borough was relatively low, the increase in unemployment as a result of

the recession was proportionally significant with a rise of 130%. Maidstone was the fifth lowest borough in Kent for the proportion of the population unemployed. 10,000 families in the borough received housing and/or council tax benefit which would equate to a spend of approximately £42 million in 2009/10. The increase in benefits take up had led to an increase in work for the benefits team, the contact centre and the Gateway, which had seen a rise in footfall. Waiting times had increased because there was more work to process, and this led to further work as more people were contacting the Council to check on the status of their claim. Gateway staff had received training to allow them to deal with more queries to improve the Gateway waiting times. The position had now stabilised with the number of outstanding items of work in the benefits section at around 500 rather than 700 as had been the case recently. Claims took around 5 days longer to process than they had before the recession, however Maidstone was still a top performing authority. Customer satisfaction remained consistently high despite the additional waiting times. With regard to the contact centre and the Gateway, the waiting times for these were outside of the corporate response time and this was being monitored. Further training was being considered to extend the group of staff that could deal with benefits queries. A Councillor requested information on the proportion of Gateway enquiries that were related to benefits.

A lot of work had been undertaken to improve the take up of benefits and to join up benefits work more generally to avoid customers missing out on those benefits that they were entitled to. New software was being introduced that identified other benefits applicants were entitled to and a benefits calculator was available online so that residents could calculate their own entitlement to housing and council tax benefit. Information on benefits was also sent out with council tax bills. The Council was part of the Kent Benefits Partnership which promoted the take up of housing and council tax benefit. A Councillor asked for information on the level of use of the internet to apply for benefits.

The Benefits Hub was a new initiative whereby the Council would join with other partners to join up benefits services in order to provide a holistic benefits service. A multi-agency project team had been established to progress the project and there had been some success to date, for example training staff in the Gateway to deal with housing benefit, council tax benefit and pension credit enquiries. With regard to the pension credit service, if this was not delivered in the Gateway then there would be nowhere in the borough for residents to have their documents verified so this was very positive. A joint visiting team had been established with the Pension Service; staff had been cross-trained so that staff from either organisation could work on behalf of the other so that any member of staff that visited a resident was able to identify all of the benefits available.

The Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, Councillor Richard Ash, stated that Maidstone residents were receiving a first class benefits service. Additional funding had been received from the Department of Work and Pensions for two new staff members, which had addressed the

problems caused by the increased benefits uptake as a result of the recession.

A Councillor requested further information on the new members of staff. Mr McGinnes stated that the staff were full time and permanent, and both came from benefits backgrounds so would be able to begin working quickly. He would review the need to fill vacancies in the benefits team as they arose to ensure staffing levels were appropriate.

In response to a question on how customer satisfaction rates were established, Mr McGinnes stated that surveys were sent out with a random sample of benefits decision letters. He believed that the high satisfaction rates were due to how the benefits process was managed, with significant support throughout the process. Information was provided in plain English, and staff talked applicants through each stage of the process rather than relying on letters.

A Member referred to Benefit Fraud Investigators and Mr McGinnes explained that this service had been provided in partnership with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC) from April 2008. This was working well, with an increase in the number of cases successfully prosecuted. Decisions on prosecutions were made by Mr McGinnes, his equivalent at TWBC and the Fraud Manager. Approximately 60% of live benefit caseload related to MBC.

A Councillor asked who paid for training for benefits and Gateway staff and Mr McGinnes stated that training was delivered by the responsible authority, for example the Pension Service had delivered the pension credit training.

With regard to the Kent Benefits Partnership, Mr McGinnes stated that the Council contributed £7,000 a year to this and he believed that this was the best use of this money at this time as there needed to be someone actively speaking with community groups, for example. There would be an opportunity to review this soon, as revenues and benefits was one of the services being considered for joint working through the Mid Kent Improvement Partnership. This would bring new opportunities for addressing benefit take up as there could be a dedicated resource for this across the four authorities, which was not viable in only one authority.

A Councillor stated that the Citizen's Advice Bureau held outreach services in some of the rural areas of Maidstone which were helpful in ensuring residents in those areas had access to the same information as those in the town and urban areas. It was suggested that it would be useful to carry out similar work within the Benefits Service. Mr McGinnes stated that an assessment would be carried out within the next year to identify the needs of residents in terms of benefits services around the borough. This would be done by looking at various indicators, for example regarding deprivation and earning levels, to plot geographically where the key areas of need were, then the service could engage with those communities. Members agreed that it would be beneficial to consider whether an

outreach service could be provided to rural communities, possibly in connection with the Citizen's Advice Bureau.

A Member highlighted that Kent County Council had provided significant additional funding to CAB to assist it during the recession and it was queried how this had impacted on its work. It was agreed that both CAB and Mr McGinnes would be requested to provide a further update in four months to establish whether the increase in benefit uptake was continuing to stabilise.

**Resolved:** That

- a) Information on the percentage of queries at the Gateway that were related to benefits be provided to the Committee;
- b) Information on the level of usage of the internet to apply for benefits be provided;
- c) that access to the benefits service for rural communities be investigated as part of the work of the work plan for the benefit service; and
- d) The Citizen's Advice Bureau and the Head of Revenues and Benefits and Community Safety be requested to provide an update on benefit uptake in February 2010.

## **52. Future Work Programme.**

The Committee agreed that more information on how the Council was addressing the economic downturn was required from the Leader of the Council. Members agreed to invite the Leader to the next meeting, and to request written information from the Economic Development Manager and Town Centre Management on how the recession was affecting businesses.

The Acting Overview and Scrutiny Manager informed the Committee that the interviews with Councillors being undertaken as part of the Overview and Scrutiny Function Review were progressing well, with clear themes arising including the need to reconsider meeting formats, training requirements and the importance of the choice of topics for review.

With regard to the forward plan, several Members suggested that the procurement of an external printing contract would be an important issue for the Committee to consider. As the decision would be taken prior to the Committee's next meeting, it was agreed that the background documents for the decision would be requested from the Head of Business Improvement.

**Resolved:** That

- a) The Leader of the Council be invited to the October meeting to discuss the action that the Council was taking to address the impact of the recession;
- b) Information on the impact of the recession on local businesses be requested from the Economic

- Development Manager and Town Centre Management;  
and
- c) Background documents for the key decision on the procurement of an external printing contract be requested from the Head of Business Improvement.

**53. Duration of the Meeting.**

6:30 p.m. to 7:45 p.m.