

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**MINUTES OF THE LEISURE AND PROSPERITY OVERVIEW
AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY
25 JANUARY 2011**

PRESENT: Councillor Paine (Chairman)
Councillors Burton, Mrs Hinder, Mrs Joy, Pickett and
Mrs Smith

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 Nelson-Gracie, Mrs Gibson and Councillor Malcolm Greer, Cabinet Member for Regeneration.

11. Notification of Substitute Members

It was noted that Councillor Mrs Hinder was substituting for Councillor Mrs Gibson, and that Councillor Clive English was substituting for Mrs Joy from 7.30pm.

12. Notification of Visiting Members

It was noted that Councillors Verrall and English were visiting Members, interested in agenda item 8.

13. Disclosures by Members and Officers:

There were no disclosures.

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 Meeting Held on 13 and 23 December 2010

Resolved: That the minutes of the meetings held on 13 and 23 December 2010 be agreed as a correct record and duly signed by the Chairman.

16. Rural Economy

The Chairman welcomed David Edwards, Director of Change, Planning and the Environment, Rob Jarman, Head of Development Management and Michael Thornton, Head of Spatial Planning to the meeting, and invited them to present the information to the Committee.

Mr Edwards summarised that the rural economy was very important to the borough as 30 percent of businesses were within the rural areas, representing a key contribution to the whole borough's economy. Mr Edwards told the Committee that the Council had been working closely with Members to establish priorities that enabled continued growth of economy across the borough. This included work on the core strategy, and the potential scope for business development over the next 15 years. Mr Edwards informed the Committee that the Localism agenda is still in the early stages, and more information should form in the next 6-9 months. Mr Edwards explained that Mr Jarman and Mr Thornton were there to present more information on the Bill.

Mr Thornton commented that the scrutiny report covered the topic well. The Committee was informed that the Localism agenda would abolish some previous planning policies, and gave an example of the regional tier between district and national policies that would no longer exist. He explained that in its place the Localism agenda created Neighbourhood Development Plans (NDP) in addition to the Local Development Framework (LDF) that was currently in place. The new NDPs will allow local communities to put forward plans to develop their areas providing they agree with the LDF. Mr Thornton informed the Committee that NDPs would be approved by a referendum of local residents only, it would not include the businesses within that area. This could potentially create tension between the communities, regardless of how helpful the NDP process is intended to be for rural economies.

Mr Thornton stated that there were several questions of the practicality of the changes proposed by the Bill. Examples included; social housing reforms having an 'affordable rent' and the community having the 'right to buy' assets. He highlighted that there would also be changes to enforcement powers, as the current 27 planning policy statements were being condensed into one. Mr Thornton summarised that the Planning Policy Statements (PPS) that would most affect the rural economy were PPS7, sustainable development in rural areas, PPS4, sustainable economic growth and PPS22, renewable energy. There were concerns that important details within these could be lost when merged.

Mr Jarman highlighted that with regard to the rural economy and agriculture the approach had changed to be more business like and commercial with supermarkets in Kent driving the standard and prices of goods. He reminded the Committee that if Kent suppliers could not meet those standards, supermarkets would simply look elsewhere. He believed that this would be regardless of the public becoming more interested in where their food originates from. The Council would need to be mindful of this when receiving planning applications for things such as polytunnels.

Mr Jarman stated that within planning they were noticing change, for example the recent approval of the first wind turbine in Maidstone and the application they had received for a solar panel park, which would set a trend for similar applications to come in the future. It was noted that more applications for live-work units had been received.

Mr Jarman informed the Committee that it was very hard to get retail business into villages, as the businesses often require a lot of residential properties and a viable transport system already in place.

Mr Jarman stated that in his opinion the rural communities were well positioned to embrace the changes proposed in the Localism Bill, as it would allow Parishes to come together as a group and have a say on developments such as office parks or residential estates. However, if residential plans proceeded without the need of planning permission, it raised concerns on the conditions of the build and types of material used. It was hoped that these would be addressed and become clearer in time.

Mr Jarman informed the Committee that there were fundamental changes to planning enforcement, but the localism agenda was giving the rural economy an opportunity to grow. The Committee stated that with opportunity also comes risk, and the needs of rural economies had to be managed carefully in the LDF.

In answer to a question, Mr Jarman informed the Committee that the Core Strategy had to ensure there was a balanced community in relation to development. The Committee highlighted that this should include issues surrounding where and why a business should be situated in the rural areas, and cover local employment as well as transport factors. Mr Thornton informed the Committee that the phrase 'general conformity with strategic policies' would make it difficult for communities to go against road and transport policies, and therefore they would need to be careful when ascertaining where they want rural growth. Mr Edwards stated that where there are no Parishes to take forward opportunities presented by the Localism Bill community groups would need to emerge.

The Committee asked how the broadband connectivity in the rural areas could be improved. Mr Edwards informed the Committee that he has already asked the Head of IT to investigate how we as a Council can support this to progress forward, and Mr Jarman added that this was vital as part of keeping Maidstone an attractive place to live and work.

The Committee enquired if there was anything on either the Localism Bill or the Neighbourhood Action Programme that would remove the evidence burden for sustainability appraisals which was perceived to be a hindrance. Mr Thornton advised the Committee that as the localism agenda was still at early stages, it was difficult to conclude its involvement, however it did appear that legislation would not be light with regards to NDPs. The Committee agreed that the legislation should not be light, yet it should also be deliverable for local neighbourhoods as it was argued that the cost of producing the evidence required to support parish plans meant that very few Parish Councils were able to adopt them; these parish plans are seen as a 'model' to base the new Neighbourhood Action

Plans on. The Committee suggested that it be put in writing to the Department for Communities and Local Government that issues surrounding the unachievable evidence threshold for sustainability appraisals needs to be addressed.

In answer to a question Mr Jarman informed the Committee that consideration would need to be focussed on what type of tourism was welcomed in the rural area, as some can be damaging. He suggested that information from those communities was sought in order to establish what they will embrace and continue themselves in the future.

The Committee enquired if we were doing enough as a local authority in terms of planning for the future of rural economies. Mr Edwards stated that there would always be opportunities to improve and the core strategy recognised the rural economies in the borough. Mr Jarman concluded that more improvements could take place in planning , for example giving more support to applications for things such as wind turbines and polytunnels , with an emphasis on the right things, in the right place for the rural economy.

Resolved: That the officers be thanked for the information and it be recommended that:

- a) The borough's employment profile be researched as part of the rural economy review;
- b) The broadband speed and connectivity within rural areas be improved and supported as part of the physical infrastructure; and
- c) A letter to the Department for Communities and Local Government be written requesting that the evidence threshold for sustainability appraisals (and other evidence-bases within Neighbourhood Action Plans) are set at levels which are proportionate, affordable and deliverable - so that parish councils and neighbourhood groups can make the most of these new powers under the Localism Bill.

17. Future Work Programme

The Committee considered the future work programme, and noted the joint Local Development Document AdGroup (LDDAG) and Leisure and Prosperity meeting scheduled for 21 February 2011. The Chairman highlighted that a new Forward Plan had been circulated since the agenda was created. The Committee expressed disappointment that the original work programme had not been adhered to.

The Chairman informed the Committee that as part of the rural economy review, a Rural Business Survey could be undertaken by Members. An example survey was circulated and it was agreed that Members would use this to survey local businesses and return their results to the Overview and Scrutiny Officer by the end of March 2011.

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer informed the Committee that as a witness was scheduled for 26 April 2011, the rural economy review report would not be presented to the Committee for approval before the end of the municipal year. The Committee considered whether to ask for a written response instead of interviewing the final witness or allow the Chairman and Vice-Chairman to agree the final report. It was agreed that the witness should be interviewed as planned.

Resolved: That:

- a) The work programme be noted; and
- b) The rural economy review be circulated to the Committee following the April meeting prior to approval from the Chairman and Vice-Chairman for submission to Cabinet.

18. Duration of meeting

6.30pm to 8.18pm.