

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**MINUTES OF THE REGENERATION & ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 27 NOVEMBER 2012**

PRESENT: Councillor Burton (Chairman)
Councillors Cox, Cuming, Black, Mrs Joy, Ross,
Springett, Newton and Paterson

44. Apologies.

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Beerling.

45. Notification of Substitute Members.

It was noted that Councillor Mrs Joy was substituting for Councillor Beerling.

46. Notification of Visiting Members.

Councillor Paine attended as a visiting member with an interest in item 8 Core Strategy Programme. Councillors Nelson-Gracie, Vizzard, Parvin and Mrs Parvin attended as visiting members with an interest in item 9 Visitor Information Centre Review Update. Councillor English attended as a visiting member with an interest in items 8 and 9.

47. Disclosures by Members and Officers:

There were no disclosures.

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

It was agreed that all items be taken in public as proposed.

49. Minutes of the meetings held on 25 September 2012

Resolved: That the minutes of the meetings held on 25 September 2012 be approved as a correct record of the meeting.

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

Resolved: That all items on the agenda be webcast.

51. Core Strategy Programme

The Committee considered the report on the Core Strategy Programme. It was highlighted to the Committee that there was a related document on the Council's website which had already been considered by Cabinet, Members were advised of the cut off date to call-in the decision. The Committee discussed officer attendance at Scrutiny and it was agreed that the Chair would write to the Chief Executive to highlight the Committee's concerns. The Chair welcomed the Councillor Paine, Cabinet Member for Transport, Planning and Development to the meeting.

The Committee put it to Councillor Paine that the Strategic Housing Land Area Assessment (SHLAA) should be reviewed rather than embarking on a new process, Councillor Paine said he would raise this issue with officers. The Committee was informed that some of the sites had since been developed and new sites may be available, this was supported by the new growth figures which indicated that more sites were needed. One of the issues with past SHLAA was a lack of understanding of the document's purpose and that work would need to be done on informing people how the system works. Cllr Paine stressed the need to base the SHLAA on current evidence as did not look likely that our projections were correct.

The Committee queried if there was to be a new Strategic Economic Development Land Availability Assessment as well as a new SHLAA. Cllr Paine confirmed that this was the case and a new Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) to be done in house. This was due to the current SHMA only going as far as the district boundary when the new framework for planning policy guidance was clear that we need to go beyond district boundaries. The Chairman thanked Councillor Paine and the committee agreed to note the report.

Resolved that:

- a) The report be noted; and
- b) The Chairman would write to the Chief Executive highlighting concerns around Officer attendance at Scrutiny Committee Meetings.

52. Visitor Information Centre Review Update

The Chairman welcomed to the meeting, Neil Harris, Democratic Services Manager, Steve Goulette, Assistant Director of Environmental and Regulatory Services, and Eric Hotson, Cabinet Member for Corporate Services to the meeting.

Mr Harris informed the Committee that he had been tasked with maximising income at the Town Hall, outlining that the building was currently mostly used by members in the evening for civic functions with some limited daytime use as an additional meeting facility for the Council.

Members noted that there were also a small number of businesses that hired the town hall for Annual General Meetings (AGM's).

Mr Harris said that to provide a commercial option the town hall would need to be available for hire between 8:30am and 17:00pm. It was noted that the facilities available were good, with microphones, internet access and large screens. The Committee raised the issue of car parking, concerned that people would not use a conference centre without this facility. The Committee was informed that discussions had been held with the parking manager and that spaces in one of the town centre car parks could be included as part of the hire.

The issue of security was also raised by the Committee, concerned about the decor and historic artefacts stored at the Town Hall. Members were informed that liability insurance was in place and although it would be unfortunate if the decor was damaged there had been no problems in the past in repairing or restoring parts of the building when necessary. It was noted that the trophy cabinets were individually alarmed but if the decision was made to pursue external hiring of the Town Hall that security would be increased and that there would always be someone available to supervise whatever event was happening.

The Committee was curious on how the letting of the Town Hall could work in conjunction with events happening at Jubilee Square and ensuring availability of the hall for council meetings. Mr Harris informed the Committee that he was expecting bookings to be made at least six months in advance and that the primary function of the Town Hall would be for Council and Civic functions. The Committee considered the marketing of facility would be key to success, and that it was unlikely that the costs of the Town Hall would be covered through such a venture but that it could increase income. Councillor Hotson confirmed that the aim was to enhance usage of the Town Hall and not to close it.

The Committee asked about the financial implications of moving the Visitor Information Centre (ViC) back to Town Hall and was informed that it would cost at least £168,000 in the first year to bring it back. This included £117,000 for staff and £51,000 to re-fit the space.

Members were made aware of the actions that had preceded Volunteer Action Maidstone being in the old ViC area and expressed reservations over the general appearance of the area, they took on board that as the agreement was not formal, that there was no incentive for VAM to invest in the downstairs area where the ViC desk had previously been located. It was suggest that a more holistic approach to Visitor Information should be adopted, with a broader look at what Maidstone had to offer. One member suggested that there could be an opportunity for the Town hall to provide an element of Visitor Information through volunteers.

Resolved: That the discussion is noted as part of the Review of the Visitor Information Centre Review.

53. Future Work Programme

The future work programme and list of forthcoming decisions was considered by the Committee. The Performance & Scrutiny Officer reminded the Committee that they were due to meet again to interview Councillor Greer, Cabinet Member for Economic and Commercial Development and Brian Morgan, Assistant Director of Regeneration & Cultural Services on 6 December 2012. The Committee debated the raising of the Visitor Information Centre and the Town Hall at full Council, it was noted that the topic fell within two portfolio holders, making a holistic approach difficult. The Committee agreed to hold off on making any recommendations ahead of interviewing Councillor Greer. The Committee noted that this was currently in the diary as an informal meeting and it was agreed that this meeting would be formalised and agendas sent out accordingly.

The Committee was informed that in January the draft Economic Development Strategy was scheduled to be considered by the Committee.

Resolved: That the future work programme be noted and that the informal meeting scheduled for 6 December become a formal meeting.