MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

RECORD OF DECISION OF THE CABINET

Decision Made: 12 February 2014

REFRESH OF THE CORPORATE IMPROVEMENT PLAN 2014-17

Issue for Decision

To adopt the refreshed Corporate Improvement Plan for 2014-17 which details the Council's improvement journey in terms of the key improvement workstreams and the priority services and projects for improvement.

Decision Made

a) That the refreshed Corporate Improvement Plan 2014-17, attached as Appendix A to the report of the Head of Finance and Resources, be adopted;

b) That the recommendations made by the Strategic Leadership and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee arising from its consideration of the refresh of the Corporate Improvement Plan (as set out in Appendix B to the report of the Head of Finance and Resources) be noted; and

c) That arrangements be made for the Cabinet to receive six monthly progress reports on the Corporate Improvement Plan.

Reasons for Decision

The Council has set the priorities and outcomes for the Borough of Maidstone in its Strategic Plan. The Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) sets out what will be spent and where savings will be made. In order to deliver the priority outcomes and the savings required, a number of key pieces of work and projects will be carried out. These are detailed in the Corporate Improvement Plan 2014-17, which ensures the improvement work is aligned with the Strategic Plan and the MTFS and looks at the work required to 2017.

The Improvement Plan 2012-15 was first adopted in February 2012 and refreshed as the Improvement Plan 2013-16 in February 2013. Progress on the Improvement Plan 2013-16 was reported to Overview and Scrutiny with the Strategic Plan Performance Report in December 2013. Some key improvements implemented in the first 6 months of this year are:

- Launch of a new more customer focused website
- Embedding of the new ICT shared service
- Launch of the new waste contract
- Commercial waste service on target to achieve 150 customers in first 12 months of operation
- Business cases for Environmental Health and Planning Support agreed
- Transfer of Hazlitt Arts Centre to Parkwood Leisure

In this current refresh of the Plan, the title has been changed to Corporate Improvement Plan to reflect the need for input from across the Council to deliver the improvement work required.

The three objectives of the Corporate Improvement Plan shown below remain sound:

1. A reduction in net cost, through making savings or increased income
2. Improving or maintaining quality: ensuring we deliver excellent services, which means delivering what is promised to agreed standards
3. Identifying and responding to opportunities aligned with the Strategic Plan

However, the workstreams have been changed to reflect the growing need for the Council to become more self-sufficient and viable for the future through being more efficient and effective, bringing in additional income, using our assets wisely and helping our residents and customers to do more for themselves. The enablers have also been revised slightly to make them clearer and align better with the aims and strategic direction of the Council set out in the Strategic Plan and to include appropriate recommendations from the recent Corporate Peer Review. Therefore, the improvement workstreams (1-4) and enablers (5-8) areas are as follows:

1. Efficiency and effectiveness
2. Income generation
3. Asset management
4. Empowerment and self sufficiency
5. Organisational culture
6. Councillor assurance
7. Commissioning and procurement
8. Effective use of technology

The other main changes in the Corporate Improvement Plan 2014-17 from the previous version are:

- Maidstone Culture and Leisure, Bereavement Services and Environmental Services have been added to the list of priority services for improvement and ICT and the Hazlitt Arts Centre have been removed as the ICT shared service is now embedded and the Hazlitt services will now be delivered by Parkwood Leisure

- The major assets improvement project has been broadened to include considerations of long term options for Council accommodation in the future and future use of the Town Hall
- Cross-organisational collaboration has been removed from the improvement projects as arrangements like the Troubled Families joint programme are now in place
- Exploring Right to Bid has been added to the community asset transfer improvement project
- Corporate peer review has been removed as a priority improvement project as the review has been carried out and the recommendations have been reflected in this version of the Corporate Improvement Plan
- Information and knowledge management has been added as a priority project rather than an enabler because of the need to focus on the delivery of recommendations from the recently completed Information Management review
- Commercial property investment has been added as a priority project
- Digital inclusion and financial inclusion have been added as priority improvement projects to reflect the need for the Council to support its residents in becoming more self-sufficient
- Local flood plans has been added as a priority project following a recommendation from the Strategic Leadership and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee in the light of the flooding that has affected parts of the Borough since December 2013 (although in the meantime action is being taken in response to lessons learned)

The priority services and projects in the Corporate Improvement Plan 2014-17 are based on priorities in the Strategic Plan, our current knowledge of any external or internal opportunities and potential for improvement and/or reduction in net cost. The full list is as follows:

- Waste and Recycling
- Economic Development
- Housing
- Maidstone Culture and Leisure
- Customer Services
- Revenues and Benefits
- Planning
- Environmental Services
- Bereavement Services
- Finance
- Building Control
- Corporate Support
- Integrated Transport Strategy
- Major Assets Review
- Right to Bid and Community Asset Transfer
- Mid Kent Improvement Partnership Shared Services and Operational Model
- Information and Knowledge Management
- Commercial Property Investment
- Digital Inclusion

- Financial Inclusion
- Local Flood Plans

Compiling a Corporate Improvement Plan allows the key workstreams to be brought together and monitored. A working group made up of Officers responsible for each of the workstreams and enablers, the Chief Executive, the Director of Environment and Shared Services and the Leader make up a monitoring group to ensure the plan progresses and benefits are delivered:

- Leader - provides political leadership and Councillor assurance (as defined in the Improvement Plan)
- Chief Executive - accountable for delivery of Improvement Plan
- Head of Finance & Resources - responsible for efficiency and effectiveness and asset management workstreams and commissioning and procurement enabler
- Head of Commercial and Economic Development - responsible for income generation workstream
- Head of Housing and Communities - responsible for empowerment and self-sufficiency workstream
- Head of HR - responsible for organisational culture enabler
- Head of ICT - responsible for use of technology enabler
- Head of Policy and Communications - essential to ensure alignment to the Strategic Plan and corporate direction of the Council

Alternatives Considered and Why Rejected

The Cabinet could have decided not to adopt the refreshed Corporate Improvement Plan. This was not considered appropriate as the Corporate Improvement Plan is essential for allowing oversight of a number of different pieces of work across the organisation and is aligned with the Strategic Plan and MTFS.

The Cabinet could have decided to alter the Improvement Plan 2014-17 more fundamentally from the Plan for 2013-16. This was not considered appropriate as it was felt that the few changes already incorporated are sufficient to ensure the Improvement Plan is relevant for the next three years.

Background Papers

Improvement Plan 2012-15
Improvement Plan 2013-16

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 Policy and Communications by: **21 February 2014.**

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

RECORD OF DECISION OF THE CABINET

Decision Made: 12 February 2014

BUDGET MONITORING - THIRD QUARTER 2013/14

Issue for Decision

To consider the capital and revenue budget and expenditure figures for the third quarter of 2013/14.

To consider other financial matters with a material effect on the medium term financial strategy or the balance sheet.

Decision Made

a) That the details set out in the report of the Head of Finance and Resources relating to revenue, balances, the Collection Fund, capital, capital financing and treasury management be noted;

b) That £0.2m be set aside in order to sustain the proposed increase in staffing in the major planning applications team as set out in paragraph 1.4.8 (g) of the report of the Head of Finance and Resources;

c) That £50,000 of the projected under spend be utilised immediately on activity relating to the recent floods as set out in paragraph 1.4.9 (e) of the report of the Head of Finance and Resources; and

d) That the proposed criteria for the use of revenue under spends at year end as set out in paragraph 1.4.10 of the report of the Head of Finance and Resources be agreed and that the Officers be instructed to develop proposals for prioritisation by the Leader of the Council in March 2014.

Reasons for Decision

The Director of Regeneration and Communities is the Responsible Financial Officer, and has overall responsibility for budgetary control and financial management. However in practice day to day budgetary control is delegated to service managers, with assistance and advice from their director and the finance section. The report of the Head of Finance and Resources updates the current position with regard to both revenue and capital expenditure against the approved budgets, and also includes sections on Collection Fund performance and Treasury Management performance.

The report uses a number of terms that require definition and a glossary of terms is given in section 1.14.4 of the report. This is included at the request of the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services following the recent peer review.

<u>Revenue</u>

The budget used in the report of the Head of Finance and Resources is the revised estimate for 2013/14. Actual expenditure to December 2013 includes all major accruals for goods and services received but not paid for by the end of the quarter.

An analysis summarised by Portfolio of the full year budget, the profiled budget to December 2013 and expenditure to December 2013 is attached as Appendix A to the report. An indicative projected year end outturn figure is also shown.

Appendix A to the report shows actual spend is £867,383 (£116,085; Q2 2013/14) less than the budget at the end of the third quarter. A detailed analysis of the figures at cost centre level shows 102 out of a total of 232 cost centres are currently reporting actual spend less than budget. The projected outturn having regard to the proposals in the report is an under spend of approximately £584,000 after allowance for the normal carry forward procedures.

As part of a series of changes to the budget monitoring and reporting process the financial analysis in Appendix A to the report is based on direct expenditure only. This removes the influence of internal recharges and accounting adjustments upon the variance analysis.

Also shown at Appendix A to the report is a subjective analysis across all services. This identifies that within the net under spend £652,940 (£410,000; Q2 2013/14) relates to employee costs, due to continuing vacancy levels.

The third table at Appendix A to the report summarises the position specifically with regard to fees and charges income. At the end of the third quarter this income is £265,524 (£130,570; Q2 2013/14) above the target figure. It should be noted that within this sum a number of areas are reporting income below budget. Further details of service areas where there are major variations from budgeted fees and charges are set out below. It is forecast that the outturn for the year will show income in excess of budget in the region of £400,000.

Following an audit report earlier this year it was recommended that Cabinet should be updated on budget virements that have been actioned. Those undertaken in the third quarter total £78,900 (£251,000; Q2 2013/14) and are as follows:

a) Active Maidstone Awards - £15,000

b) Redundancy costs at the Museum - £18,900

c) Redundancy costs following a senior management restructure - £45,000

A number of service areas are reporting positive variances through significantly less spend or additional income than was budgeted for at the end of the second quarter. Brief details on these areas are given below:-

a) Leisure Services (Other Activities) is reporting a positive variance of £39,704 (£2,264; Q2 2013/14). This mainly relates to the budget for the 'Make Maidstone Smile' fund. The first request for funding from this budget yielded very little response, and as a consequence officers are currently reviewing the details of the fund with a view to re-launching it with a more positive response.

b) The Community Development budget is reporting a positive variance of £39,733 (£9,781; Q2 2013/14) which has arisen due to various under spends on a number of community based projects. The budget manager has been reviewing the position with regard to these schemes and it is anticipated that this variance will reduce by the end of the financial year.

c) There is a positive variance of £35,655 (£19,683; Q2 2013/14) on the Civic Occasions budget. This is funding set aside for repair and maintenance of war memorials, however it has not been possible to undertake the work within the current financial year and it has now been scheduled to take place early in the 2014/15 financial year and the funding will be returned to balances for use in 2014/15.

d) Unapportionable Central Overheads is showing a positive variance in relation to unused resources for redundancy costs. The current outturn projection suggests a small amount of this budget will be used before 31 March 2014 but the majority will be required in 2014/15 and a carry forward will be requested at year end.

e) The Learning & Development budget is showing a positive variance of £37,405 (£17,031; Q2 2013/14). This is due to an under spend on the central training budget, however there are plans in place to spend the majority of the remaining budget during the final quarter, so it is anticipated that this variance will be reduced by the end of the financial year.

f) There is a positive variance of £284,693 (£146,495; Q2 2013/14) from the Refuse and Recycling Service, which is due to the continuation of better than expected receipts from bulky domestic refuse collection service, wheeled bins, and green waste bin hire. As previously reported weekend freighter costs are expected to increase substantially as service demand changes. Contract costs are also forecast to increase in 2014/15 as there will be an uplift to the contract value above the inflation increase covered by the medium term financial strategy, this is based on actual increases in property/customer numbers.

g) Development Control applications are continuing to show increased income which has increased the positive variance that has previously been reported. This currently stands at £472,610 (£124,046; Q2 2013/14). This increase is in line with the expectations for increased applications in the second half of the year. To manage the increased workload the Head of Planning and Development intends to appoint additional planning staff to create a resource specifically to manage the major applications. In order to achieve this with some stability in the level of staffing it is proposed to set aside £0.2m of the additional income to provide 24 months funding for the increase in staffing so that fluctuations in income levels over the coming years can be managed.

A number of areas are showing significantly more spend or a shortfall in income than was actually budgeted at the end of the second quarter, and these are detailed below:-

a) The Homeless Temporary Accommodation budget continues to show expenditure greater than budget, with the variance now standing at £315,493 (£199,215; Q2 2013/14) which reflects the position reported in the first two quarters of this year. A project has now commenced that is targeting reductions in the cost of temporary accommodation and whilst this is not expected to reduce the pressure on this budget in the current financial year a property has now been purchased for use as temporary accommodation, and a further potential purchase has been identified and is being progressed. As these properties will not be operational until sometime in 2014/15 it is expected that the over spend for the final quarter is forecast to reach £400,000. However actions to control other housing service budgets mean that the service as a whole is predicted to report a £200,000 adverse variance at outturn.

b) The Procurement Section is under achieving its income target and this has created a variance of £39,574 (£31,462; Q2 2013/14). The service has successfully supported some of the major procurement exercises of recent years and does achieve a moderate level of external income mainly from the Council’s MKIP partners. As part of the work on the strategic plan and budget strategy for 2015/16 the service pressure will be reviewed.

c) The Hazlitt Arts Centre has a variance of £130,618 from delays to the commencement of the contract. This delay has meant that the budget strategy savings expected by 2013/14 have not been fully delivered. The Budget Strategy report assumes the final savings from this service will not occur until 2015/16, and this will allow for the slippage in the timing of the start of the contract.

d) There is a variance of £57,542 (£18,518; Q2 2013/14) on the Crematorium budget. Income is still over-achieving due to extra cremations caused by the temporary closure of other crematoria in the area. However, the indications are that this level of usage is now reducing to near normal levels. The cremators require a three yearly maintenance cycle and the major maintenance occurred this year. This is an unbudgeted cost that it is hoped will be provisioned through annual contributions in future years.

e) Following on from the recent floods the Council will be incurring significant unbudgeted expenditure from the various activities that were undertaken in the immediate aftermath of the incident and from the on-going clean-up activities. A claim will be submitted to the Government under the Bellwin Scheme, but the Council will be liable for the first £39,000 expenditure incurred, with 85% of the remaining spend claimed back. At this early stage it is not possible to quantify the likely total costs, but Members will be kept advised. The Council has an opportunity to engage with the National Flood Forum to support residents in the region and to support feasibility work on defences in some flood hit areas. This requires funding of £50,000 to be made available and this can be achieved from under spend in-year. Virement of £50,000 is proposed from central services budgets that are projected to under spend at outturn in order to implement these schemes as soon as possible.

A proposal has been identified for Cabinet to support the planning service by the provision of resources to ensure stability. Allowing for the continuation of the issues detailed as budget pressures above the projected outturn will produce an under spend in excess of £500,000. This projection is sufficiently robust at this time to enable consideration of the under spend in a similar way to previous years. As the Council faces significant further cuts it is proposed to use the eventual under spend to influence the future budget need. In considering the current activities of the Council and the impending revision to the strategic plan and budget strategy the following criteria are proposed:

a) Funding for the use of consultants or research in the development of the Strategic Plan and Budget Strategy 2015 – 2020;

b) Additional project management resources for activities such as information management and upcoming major projects;

c) Further capital investment in projects that are supported by the current programme and strategy;

d) Long payback (10+ years) invest to save proposals; and

e) Other short term budget pressures.

Through the budget strategy for 2013/14 savings and efficiencies were identified totalling £1.0m. These savings are being monitored corporately and there have been issues with the theatre, IT and the senior management restructure. As a result it is anticipated that the target will not be met in year. These issues have been incorporated into the figures set out in Appendix A to the report and built in to the forecast outturn. In each case the delivery of the required saving is delayed and the savings are expected to be delivered in 2014/15 so there is no long term effect upon the medium term financial strategy.

Balances

Balances as at 1 April 2013 were £12.6m. The current medium term financial strategy assumes balances of £5.0m by 31 March 2014 of which £2.8m remains unallocated. Following the introduction of local council tax support and the retention of business rates from 1 April 2013, enhanced monitoring of the Collection Fund has been put in place to provide adequate assurance around developments affecting the assumptions made in the current year's budget.

The major reason for the movement in balances during 2013/14 relates to the use of carry forwards approved by Cabinet in May 2013. In addition the balance at 31 March 2014 includes the use of the 2011/12 under spend of £0.83m.

The position set out above allows for the minimum level of balances of £2.3m, as previously agreed by Cabinet, to be maintained.

Collection Fund

Following the introduction of local council tax support and the retention of business rates from 1 April 2013, enhanced monitoring of the Collection Fund has been put in place to provide adequate assurance around developments affecting the assumptions made in the current year's budget.

The collection rates achieved at mid year, and the targets set, are shown below. The rates are given as a percentage of the debt targeted for collection in 2013/14. Quarter 2 figures are given in brackets.

	Target %	**Actual %**
Council Tax	87.0 (58.4)	86.7 (58.2)
NNDR	86.5 (60.1)	87.8 (61.1)

Council Tax Support – The actual collection rate is 0.3% below target. This represents the late collection of £240,000 from £83m.

The level of local council tax support recorded at mid-year shows a caseload of 10,471 (10,602; Q2 2013/14) claimants compared to the estimated caseload of 11,903 used to calculate the budget. For Maidstone Borough Council the support provided is £1.42m (£1.42m; Q2 2013/14) compared to an estimated support of £1.48m. This must however be matched to Government funding of £1.38m.

While there is a significant proportion of pensionable age claimants the overall reduction in claimants shows a positive correlation between reductions in those claiming job seekers allowance in the Borough and the reduction in caseload. As the year progresses, changes in caseload have a proportionately reduced effect on the full year cost.

Retained Business Rates – The current collectable business rates is £52.8m (£54.2m; Q2 2013/14) compared to an initial estimate of £54.9m a net reduction of £2.1m. This reduction is as a consequence of a number of factors, the major changes being:

a) A 22% (£0.4m) increase in small business rate relief granted during the year;

b) An increase in vacant business premises exemptions granted (£0.3m); and

c) Backdated refunds made following successful appeals (£1m).

The major risk from appeals has been provisioned and this remains adequate when compared to the level of change due to appeals decisions witnessed to date.

If current projections continue to year end the business rates account will be in deficit. Due to the Government's intention to reimburse the cost of extending the small business rates relief enhancements this will be partially covered by a Government grant and the year end shortfall attributable to this Council is estimated to be £12,700.

<u>Capital</u>

Attached as Appendix B to the report of the Head of Finance and Resources is a summary of the approved capital programme for 2013/14. This includes the initial capital programme for the financial year plus amounts carried forward from 2012/13 and amounts approved from the revenue under spend 2012/13. It also reflects the slippage that was identified in the monitoring report for the second quarter.

The table in Appendix B to the report gives the following detail:

Column	**Detail**
1.	Description of scheme, listed in portfolio order.
2.	Approved budget for 2013/14 after the adjustments detailed above.
3.	Actual spend to the end of December 2013.
4.	Balance of budget available for 2013/14.
5 – 7.	Quarterly analysis of expected spend for the remainder of 2013/14.
8.	Balance of budget that will slip into 2014/15.
9.	Budget no longer required.

Capital expenditure to the end of the third quarter of 2013/14 is shown as £2.98m. The budget for the year is £7.88m, although this includes £1.8m for the Acquisition of Commercial Assets for which no expenditure has been incurred to date.

The report for this quarter has identified a number of budgets that need to be treated as slippage into 2014/15. The most significant of these are £1.2m for the Acquisition of Commercial Assets, £0.10m for Play Area Improvements, £0.18m for Gypsy Site Improvements, £0.14m for Housing Grants and £0.27m for Support for Social Housing.

Capital Financing

The agreed capital programme 2013/14 to 2017/18, as approved by Council in March 2013, identifies sufficient resources to finance the 2013/14 programme.

Resources that can currently be confirmed are sufficient to fund the programme for the current year and are:

Funding Source:	£.m
Grants & Contributions	0.5
Capital Receipts	2.4
Prudential Borrowing	1.9
Revenue Support	8.0
	12.8

Treasury Management

The Council has adopted and incorporated into its Financial Regulations, the CIPFA Code of Practice on Treasury Management 2009 (Revised) in Local Authorities. This Code covers the principles and guidelines relating to borrowing and investment operations. In March 2013 the Council approved a Treasury Management Strategy for 2013/14 that was based on this Code. The strategy requires that Cabinet should be informed of Treasury Management activities quarterly as part of budget monitoring.

During the quarter ended 31 December 2013:

- There has been a sharp fall in inflation (CPI) to 2.1%.
- Unemployment approached the MPC's 7% threshold with a rate of 7.4%.
- House prices rose by 8.4% and 6.4% according to Halifax and Nationwide respectively.

The Council's Treasury Management Advisors, Capita Asset Services, provide the following forecast:

- Capita has revised its bank rate forecast with the first rise to 0.75% in Qtr.2 2016, previously Qtr.3.
- PWLB long term rates are expected to reach 5.2% by March 2017.

The Council held investments totalling £28.6m. A full list of investments held is given in Appendix C to the report of the Head of Finance and Resources. £23.6m of investments are in accounts which can be called upon immediately or for a short notice period.

Investment income is still below target with a balance of £0.174m compared to a budget of £0.187m. This is due to investment rates falling because financial institutions do not require additional funding as additional cash is being made available by Government to assist small and medium enterprises.

There has been no need for any borrowing within the third quarter of 2013/14.

Alternatives Considered and Why Rejected

The budget monitoring process could be left to Officers. The Constitution already requires Officers to report budget variances to the relevant Cabinet Member in specific circumstances. The absence of any such reports would then suggest that no specific items have been identified for consideration.

If such an approach were taken Cabinet Members would have a reduced financial awareness. This could restrict the Cabinet's ability to meet service requirements and achieve the Council's corporate objectives.

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 Policy and Communications by: **21 February 2014.**

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

RECORD OF DECISION OF THE CABINET

Decision Made: 12 February 2014

LICENSING PEER CHALLENGE

Issue for Decision

To agree the actions to be progressed following the recommendations made by the Regulatory Peer Challenge Team (focused on licensing).

Decision Made

a) That the contents of the report of the Peer Challenge Team, attached as Appendix A to the report of the Director of Regeneration and Communities, be noted;

b) That the action plan outlining the proposed approach for taking forward the Peer Team's suggestions, as set out in amended Appendix B to the report of the Director of Regeneration and Communities (circulated at the meeting), be agreed; and

c) That the actions to implement the recommendations should form part of the relevant lead Officers' service plans as appropriate.

Reasons for Decision

Along with Councils across the country, Maidstone Borough Council is experiencing unprecedented budgetary pressures as demands for frontline services from residents and businesses continue to grow.

Earlier this year, the Council invited the Local Government Association (LGA) to undertake a review looking at opportunities and challenges for licensing.

The Peer Challenge Framework

In response to removal of much of the previous performance framework for local government, such as the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA), the LGA developed a framework of self regulation / performance improvement called "Taking the Lead". The focus of the framework was for the local government sector to regulate and challenge its own performance.

A key part of this new framework is the opportunity for Councils to have a peer challenge, facilitated by the LGA, whereby a team of elected Members and senior Officers from other Councils come in and assess the performance of a Council in a particular area of focus in line with the priorities, outcomes and ambitions that are important locally.

Background and Focus of the Council's Peer Challenge

The Council's licensing function has undergone a period of transition, since the creation of the Licensing Partnership with two other local authorities (Sevenoaks and Tunbridge Wells) in 2011 and the Council undergoing wider change due to the development of a new set of Council priorities, a management restructure and budget reductions in 2012 and 2013.

The Council, therefore, agreed that the focus of the peer challenge should be to:

- Explore how licensing can more effectively support the Council's priorities;
- Review the role and effectiveness of the licensing function, to include the roles of the Cabinet Member and Licensing Committees;
- Examine the future capacity of licensing in light of anticipated future funding reductions.

The Challenge Team was with the Council from 31 October – 1 November 2013 with the following team:

- Paul Adams, Service Manager (Public Protection & Economic Growth), Luton Borough Council
- Councillor William Nunn, Breckland District Council
- Neil Shaw, Programme Manager, Local Government Association
- Mike Short, Senior Adviser, Local Government Association

During the challenge the Peer Team reviewed Council policies, performance and customer feedback and interviewed a wide range of people including Officers, elected Members and key stakeholders – including business and advisory partners. Using the information gathered the Challenge Team made a number of recommendations for improvement.

Feedback from the Peer Challenge Team

A copy of the full report of the Peer Challenge Team is attached as Appendix A to the report of the Director of Regeneration and Communities. This sets out achievements and strengths along with areas for consideration. For ease of reference, the findings are summarised below.

Better support for Council priorities:

Strengths –

- existing operational initiatives and projects make a contribution to Council and other agencies' priorities. For example:
    - Safer Socialising Award
    - Urban Blue initiative
    - Kent Community Alcohol Partnership
    - Working with fast food establishments to tackle excessive littering
    - Joint working with environmental health, community safety and police on operational activity

Areas for consideration –

- Members need to set clear licensing policy, with a strategic steer by the Cabinet (through a systemic review of all policies)

- Members need to have greater trust in licensing Officers to undertake their delegated role

- A 'single conversation' between the appropriate portfolio holders from the three Boroughs and the Licensing Partnership Manager

Improving the licensing function:

Strengths –

- function has emerged from the transition following the creation of the Licensing Partnership and is currently performing well

- feedback from partner agencies/business community praise the quality of the licensing service and commend frontline staff

- widespread agreement between senior Members and Officers of the need for future improvement

Areas for consideration –

- clarify line management responsibilities

- better support for the local economy by, for example, making it more straightforward to hold town centre events

- reviewing the delegations

- move to a single committee

Future capacity:

Strengths –

- £17,500 savings made by reapportioning partnership costs
- seeking to make more efficient use of existing wider resources by using non-licensing staff to undertake some visits to premises

Areas for consideration –

- potential to expand the partnership
- greater capacity and resilience if the current pool of licensing Officers across the three Boroughs can be used more flexibly
- reduce service standards in some areas

In addition, the Peer Challenge Team suggests that if the Licensing Partnership is to make a transformational change rather than incremental improvement, greater capacity could be freed up if the three Boroughs were prepared to harmonise their licensing policies and service standards. An additional step, highlighted in the report, might be the creation of a single strategic licensing board supported by the existing three operational licensing committees across the Boroughs. A further, more radical suggestion is to consider the creation of a single licensing committee across all three Boroughs.

<u>Suggested Next Steps</u>

The approach to following up on the recommendations made by the Peer Challenge Team is outlined in the action plan attached as Appendix B to the report of the Director of Regeneration and Communities as amended at the meeting to reflect updated start dates and deadlines.

The recommendations of the peer review have in the main been incorporated into the action plan. There are actions related to improving the efficiency and resilience within the Licensing Team and shared service; together with an action to review current licensing policies to ensure they support the Council’s key priorities; and an action to enable dialogue between the relevant Cabinet Members from each local authority to explore the potential for further alignment of policy and practice.

Alternatives Considered and Why Rejected

The Council could choose not to implement the recommendations in the report. However, this would lead to a number of improvements not being made.

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 Policy and Communications by: **21 February 2014.**