

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

Strategic Leadership and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 8 JULY 2014

Present: Councillor Mrs Gooch (Chairman), and
Councillors Black, Butler, Edwards-Daem, Mrs Grigg,
Long, Mrs Parvin, Pickett and Mrs Stockell

Also Present: Councillor McKay

19. **APOLOGIES**

There were no apologies.

20. **THE COMMITTEE TO CONSIDER WHETHER ALL ITEMS ON THE AGENDA
SHOULD BE WEBCAST**

RESOLVED: That all items on the agenda be webcast.

21. **NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

There were no Substitute Members.

22. **NOTIFICATION OF VISITING MEMBERS/WITNESSES**

Councillor McKay indicated his wish to speak as a Visiting Member on
agenda item 11 - Local Council Tax Discount Scheme.

23. **DISCLOSURES BY MEMBERS AND OFFICERS**

There were no disclosures by Members or Officers.

24. **EXEMPT ITEMS**

RESOLVED: That the items on the agenda be taken in public as
proposed.

25. **MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 10 JUNE 2014**

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 10 June 2014 be
approved as a correct record and signed.

26. **COMPLAINTS REPORT QUARTER 4 2013/2014**

Angela Woodhouse, Head of Policy and Communications, presented the
Quarter 4 Complaints Report to the Committee. The report also included

details of compliments received by the Council during the last quarter. It was noted that:

- In Quarter 4 there had been a decrease in complaints and an increase in the number responded to within the required time limit.
- Complaints regarding Environmental Services had decreased compared to the same time last year, whereas complaints regarding Parking had risen.
- There had been a decrease in the number of complaints that were taken to Stage 2.

In response to questions the Committee was advised that:

- As almost every resident in the Borough received a waste collection it was understandable that Environmental Service should receive a proportionally greater number of complaints than other services.
- With regard to the out of hour telephone service, calls would be transferred to a partner borough out of office hours in an emergency, and that it was unlikely that this would affect the number of complaints logged as these tend to be received by email.
- The Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service, Stephen McGinnes advised that there had been no changes within that service that would affect the number of complaints raised.
- Since the Planning Support Service had become a Shared Service the contact centre had been handling three times the usual number of calls, and IT had been involved in the improvement of system delivery to accommodate this increase. However any change in the number or nature of complaints raised would be reported on in Quarter 1 and 2.

Members wished it to be noted that it was felt that community engagement with parishes should be undertaken to advise on any future service changes.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Council's performance in relation to Complaints be noted,
- (b) That Compliments received by teams and Officers within the Council be noted; and
- (c) That an update on complaints received and action taken in relation to the Planning Service Shared Services be reported to the next meeting of the Committee, and that the following witnesses be

invited to attend and speak on the item: Mid Kent Planning Support Manager Ryan O'Connell, a representative of IT and the Leader of the Council.

27. ANNUAL REVIEW OF COMPLAINTS 2013/2014

The Committee was asked to consider the report of the Head of Policy and Communications, Angela Woodhouse, regarding the Council's performance in dealing with complaints during the 2013-14 financial year. It was noted that:

- There had been a rise in complaints, but the trend was focused on issues that had occurred in services that had undergone change, and followed a trend of a general increase in complaints across other Local Authorities.
- Customers who took matters to Stage 2 complaints felt that the issues expressed had not been comprehensively dealt with at Stage 1. In order to rectify this, training had been undertaken by key Officers to improve Stage 1 responses, and it was proposed that Customer Care training would be rolled out across the organisation.

In response to questions by Members the Head of Policy and Communications informed the Committee that:

- Development Management made decisions which were not well received by some residents and which resulted in complaints regardless of the manner in which the customer was handled.
- A Customer Feedback Survey was issued to those who had made a complaint to confirm that the issue had been resolved to the Customer's satisfaction. This was in order to maintain an accurate account of performance, rather than assuming that a complainant who did not raise a Stage 2 complaint was satisfied with the result of the Stage 1 complaint.

RESOLVED:

- a) That the Council's performance in dealing with complaints during 2013/14 be noted, in particular:
 - i) The high number of complaints received by Environmental Services;
 - ii) The low satisfaction rate with complaint handling for Development Management;
 - iii) The high percentage of complaints that were found to be justified at stage 2;

- iv) The 'lessons learned' as a result of complaints; and
- b) That the issues highlighted by the Committee each quarter be recorded and highlighted in next year's Annual Review of Complaints report.

28. DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENTS

The Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Services, Stephen McGinnes, presented the future policy for the award of Discretionary Housing Payments. Liz Norris, the Officer responsible for the team who award the Discretionary Housing Payments, was also in attendance to speak on the Report.

It was noted that:

- From April 2013 the Government increased the level of funding for discretionary housing payments in order for councils to help residents affected by welfare reform and more specifically, the new size restriction for social housing and cap on overall benefit levels. The budget available to Maidstone BC increased from £126,000 in 2012/13 to £247,000 in 2013/14 and £257,000 in 2014/15.

In response to questions the Committee was advised that:

- There was no effect on Maidstone BC budget as, although there was the option to top the fund up, there had been no need to do so.
- Liz Norris' team worked closely with the Housing Department to prevent homelessness through the use of the Discretionary Housing Payment. Generally applicants were asked to demonstrate or to take action to improve their situation, such as finding work or contacting relevant agencies for help, and that under these circumstances the duration of assistance could range up to 6 months.
- The Discretionary Housing Payment team work closely with the Housing Department which allowed some threats of homelessness to be prevented by the Payment, when used to clear small amounts of rent arrears, or to make up the difference between the amount of Housing Benefit awarded and the rent charged for a property.
- The intention was that the money was non-recoverable as awarded in exceptional financial situations.

RESOLVED: That the Cabinet Member be recommended to approve the proposed Policy for the award of Discretionary Housing Payments.

29. LOCAL COUNCIL TAX DISCOUNT SCHEME

The Head of Revenue and Benefits Shared Service, Mr Stephen McGinnes, presented the Local Council Tax Discount Scheme Report. The Committee was asked to consider how it wished to be involved in the development of the scheme, and to note the timetable of the schemes approval and statutory requirements to consult on any changes before final approval by 31 January 2015.

It was noted that:

- Maidstone Borough Council had made a three year agreement with Kent County Council, Kent Fire Brigade and Kent Police.
- That pensioners were protected from the changes with changes applying to working age claimants only.
- That earlier consultation had received a high number of respondents, which supported the scheme approved by the council.

In response to questions by Members the Committee heard that:

- There would be an opportunity to implement changes to the 2015 scheme, but to implement large scale change could jeopardise the agreement with the other Kent organisations.
- The agreement made between the Kent agencies and Borough Councils was to find other solutions to provide a discount on Council Tax other than providing 100% Local Council Tax Discount, as that would result in a loss of income to Kent County Council.
- Across Kent those of pensionable age retain 100% discount but those of working age must contribute 18.5% towards their Council Tax bill. Through altering existing Council Tax deduction schemes, the contribution amount was reduced to 13% for those who were eligible.
- Of those who were affected by the 13% contribution change there had been a 75% collection rate, with the Council continuing to collect the remaining 25% arrears into the next year.
- The Discretionary Housing Payment as discussed previously would not be available for Local Council Tax arrears as it would only be used for housing related costs; however a separate report was proposed to consider a similar discretionary fund for Local Council Tax related issues.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the timetable for the approval of the scheme and the statutory requirement to consult on the scheme before final approval be noted; and
- (b) That the Committee be involved in the development of the Local Council Tax Discount Scheme, and the development of options for Council Tax Support in 2015, through a meeting of a working group arranged to take place on Thursday 17 July with a view to report back to the August meeting of the Committee.

30. THE USE OF REVENUE UNDER SPEND - UPDATE

The Committee considered a report by the Head of Finance and Resources on the progress of schemes that received funding from the revenue underspend in 2011/12 and 2012/13.

It was noted that:

- Of the £1.38 Million awarded for schemes, £973,000 had been spent, with £415,000 carried forward.
- The report did not provide additional information on those schemes that were due to commence in the current financial year.
- There had been progress across most schemes, and there was one scheme where a more suitable use of money arose and the reallocation of this was agreed.

In response to questions from Members the Head of Finance and Resources explained that the Constitution set out a process whereby ordinary budget underspend were carried forward by request for one year. If the money was not then used it could not be requested to carry forward into a second year. The same approach had been applied to the schemes under consideration.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted;
- (b) That future reports to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the use of revenue underspend be grouped by subject matter; and
- (c) That in view of the financial calendar an update be provided to the January meeting of the Committee.

31. DRAFT FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME AND SCRAIP UPDATE

The Committee considered the draft future work programme and information update provided by the Chairman.

Special thanks were given by the Committee to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council for their hospitality in hosting the Joint Special Strategic Leadership and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee. For the benefit of those who were not present at the Special Meeting, the Chairman explained that the subjects of governance and communication were important to Members, and that a Joint MKIP Scrutiny Working Party with representatives from each partner authority had been proposed to discuss these subjects.

RESOLVED:

- a) That Councillor Mrs Gooch and Councillor Black be appointed as Maidstone's representatives on the Joint MKIP Scrutiny Working Party; and
- b) That the future work programme be agreed subject to the inclusion of the revenue underspend update grouped by subject matter in January, and the inclusion of the following additional items for the next meeting of the Committee: Planning Support Shared Service – Complaints Report and Local Council Tax Discount Scheme – Options for Consultation.

32. DURATION OF MEETING

18:32 to 20:34