

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

ECONOMIC REGENERATION AND LEISURE COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 15 SEPTEMBER 2020

Present: Councillors Bartlett, Brindle, Cox, Mrs Gooch, Harper (Chairman), Hinder, Mortimer and Webb

Also Present: Councillor Round

136. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Blackmore, Fort and Lewins.

137. NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

The following Substitute Members were present:

- Councillor Brindle for Councillor Blackmore
- Councillor Mortimer for Councillor Lewins

138. URGENT ITEMS

Whilst not an urgent item, the Committee were informed that Item 15 – First Quarter Financial Update would be presented before Item 14 – Review of the Economic Development Strategy.

139. NOTIFICATION OF VISITING MEMBERS

Councillor Round was present as a Visiting Member for Item 15 – Review of the Economic Development Strategy.

140. DISCLOSURES BY MEMBERS AND OFFICERS

There were no disclosures by Members or Officers.

141. DISCLOSURES OF LOBBYING

There were no disclosures of lobbying.

142. EXEMPT ITEMS

RESOLVED: That all items be taken in public as proposed.

143. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 14 JULY 2020

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 14 July 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed at a later date.

144. PRESENTATION OF PETITIONS

There were no petitions.

145. QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION FOR MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

There were no questions from members of the public.

146. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO THE CHAIRMAN

There were no questions from Members to the Chairman.

147. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development highlighted that as further consultation needed to take place, the draft Economic Development Strategy would now be presented to the Committee in November 2020, rather than October.

The full Economic Development Strategy would then be presented to the Committee in February 2021.

RESOLVED: That the Committee Work Programme be noted.

148. REPORTS OF OUTSIDE BODIES

There were no reports of Outside Bodies.

149. FIRST QUARTER FINANCIAL UPDATE

The Head of Finance introduced the report and informed the Committee that the forecast overspend had increased since publication, from just under £700k to just over £1million. This was to provide updated information, in line with the figures submitted by the Council each month to central government. The variance was greater than experienced in previous years due to the Coronavirus pandemic.

The overspend was attributed in the main to Maidstone Leisure Centre, the Museum, the Hazlitt Theatre and Mote Park Café. The Museum had a projected adverse variance of £127k, the Hazlitt's adverse variance was £142k and the variance for Mote Park Café totalled £60k. A variance cost of £500k had been set aside for the Leisure Centre which was currently the subject of ongoing negotiations with Serco, as the Change of Law contract clause had been invoked which allowed the company to claim their losses from the Council.

The Head of Finance emphasised that the figures presented were based on the information available to the Council at the time and that these were still the subject of uncertainty. The Council was assessing the amount of loss that could be recovered through the government's Sales, Fees and Charges Scheme. It was noted that any residual shortfall at the end of the financial year would be met from the general fund balance.

The capital expenditure for the first quarter was minimal due to the lockdown period, however the Mote Park Dam works had begun with the proposed Visitor Centre on hold.

The Policy and Information Manager informed the Committee that four of the five targeted indicators had not achieved the quarter one target. These indicators had been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, lockdown period and social distancing requirements. The number of visitors to visitmaidstone.com reflected interest in Mote and Cobtree Parks and a newly created webpage on home food deliveries in the local area. The percentage of unemployed individuals in Maidstone in receipt of out-of-work benefits had risen significantly.

In response to questions, the Head of Finance confirmed that the Adventure Zone was run by Serco and was included in the Council's negotiations. The Adventure Zone had now reopened. The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development confirmed that the planning permission received for the Mote Park Café and Estate Services Building would be tendered out to the market to discover the price level contractors would likely demand.

The Committee expressed their thanks to the Officers involved for their work.

RESOLVED: That

1. The Revenue position as at the end of Quarter 1 for 2020/21, including the actions being taken or proposed to improve the position, where significant variances have been identified, be noted;
2. The Capital position at the end of Quarter 1 be noted; and
3. The Performance position as at Quarter 1 for 2020/21, including the actions being taken or proposed to improve the position, where significant issues have been identified, be noted.

150. REVIEW OF THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

The Regeneration and Economic Development Manager introduced the report and noted that the Interim Summary Document shown in Appendix 1 to the report was a live document and subject to change whilst the Economic Development Strategy (EDS) was under review. The document was produced following a series of virtual consultation events held over the summer with Members, Officers and Businesses.

The proposed public consultation process would be advertised through the Council's social media, be made available on the Council's website and circulated via the Economic Development Local Business Database. The Communications Team would be involved in contacting Parish Councils for their responses as part of the public consultation process.

Ms Lucie Bailey, the Economics Director of Lichfields Planning and Development Consultancy, provided Members with a presentation on the Interim Summary Document. Ms Bailey confirmed that the document was based on the initial findings of various consultations and was presented to the Committee to encourage discussion and feedback before a full draft EDS would be created. The development of the enabling actions that would later be presented to the Committee would focus on the first five-year period of the strategy.

Ms Bailey referenced the many growth opportunities within the strategic context, and the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT Analysis) which were both shown within Appendix 1 to the report. The existing EDS was adopted by the Council in 2014, with the revised EDS scheduled to have an end-year of 2037 to coincide with the new Local Plan period and encourage consistency across corporate priorities.

Specific attention was drawn to the overarching proposition, five principles and the enabling factors for each principle that had been drafted. It was noted that further one-to-one consultations were ongoing with stakeholders and that a draft EDS would be presented to the Committee in November 2020.

During the debate there was particular support for the first priority – 'Open for Business'. In discussing the priorities, the importance of the low carbon economy and where it would fit into the strategy were questioned, alongside the importance of maintaining and encouraging skilled labour within the local economy. The link between employment and health and wellbeing and the importance of physical and technological infrastructure were highlighted.

The Regeneration and Economic Development Manager invited the Committee to submit further comments on the Interim Summary Document over the next two weeks, after which the one-to-one consultations would begin.

RESOLVED: That

1. The Interim Summary Documents, shown in Appendix 2 to the report, and Strategy's Programme moving forward, be noted;
2. The proposed public consultation programme for the revision of the Economic Development Strategy, be approved; and

Note: Councillor Harper exited the meeting at 7.45 p.m. during consideration of this item at which time Councillor Mrs Gooch was duly elected as Chairman for the remainder of the meeting.

151. DURATION OF MEETING

6.30 p.m. – 8.03 p.m.