MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

Strategic Leadership and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON MONDAY 23 FEBRUARY 2015

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

Also Present: Councillors Mrs Blackmore,
McLoughlin and Sargeant

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

RESOLVED: That all items on the agenda be webcast.

113. APOLOGIES

It was noted that apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Thomas Long.

114. NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

There were no Substitute Members.

115. NOTIFICATION OF VISITING MEMBERS

It was noted that Councillor Mrs Blackmore was in attendance as a witness to item 9 – MKIP Planning Support.

Councillors McLoughlin and Sargeant were in attendance as observers.

116. DISCLOSURES BY MEMBERS AND OFFICERS

There were no disclosures by Members or Officers.

117. TO CONSIDER WHETHER ANY ITEMS SHOULD BE TAKEN IN PRIVATE BECAUSE OF THE POSSIBLE DISCLOSURE OF EXEMPT INFORMATION

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

118. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 6 JANUARY 2015

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting held on 6 January be agreed as a correct record and signed.

119. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 12 JANUARY 2015

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting held on the 12 January 2015 be agreed as a correct record and signed.

120. MKIP PLANNING SUPPORT

The Chairman, Councillor Mrs Gooch, welcomed the Swale Borough Council Scrutiny Committee and the Tunbridge Wells Overview and Scrutiny Committee to Maidstone for a co-located meeting of the three Committees.

The Chairman informed the Committees that nationally a great many councils were involved in sharing services, and that central Government had strongly encouraged local Councils to share services and staff. The MKIP constituent authorities were early adopters of the shared service agenda. The function of scrutiny was to objectively challenge policy development and decision making, in order to provide constructive reflection in the name of public accountability. As such the purpose of the meeting was to provide reassurance to residents and the public that lessons had been learned and improvements made.

(a) Project Implementation Review

The Committee welcomed the Head of Mid Kent Audit Partnership, Rich Clarke, who presented a report into the Planning Support Project Implementation Review. Mr Clarke outlined the three major issues identified in the report:

1.   Not employing a recognised project methodology

The project did not fully employ the project methodologies that had been well developed in-house by the MKIP authorities, nor did it fully employ formally recognised techniques such as PRINCE II. This resulted in the lack of a clear detailed project plan until late on in the process, inconsistent assignment of roles and responsibilities, and non-creation or monitoring of a project risk register. This lack of resilience made the project vulnerable to issues as they arose, and prevented the anticipation and mitigation of future problems.

2.   Not fully establishing the project's scope and complexity

The implementation of the Planning Support Shared Service required the physical relocation of staff, the procurement and use of a new software package, combining the services under a single manager without extensive experience in planning support management, and the simultaneous delivery of another shared service which put pressure on the availability of resources.

The approach to the shared service was novel. It split an existing service into two separate components, without a consistent understanding across

the three authorities as to where the divide began and ended. This also required a complete reorganisation of business processes.

The software element of the project was understood to be separate, even though it became clear from the outset that ICT related matters were of importance to the implementation of the total project.

3. Attempting delivery within existing resources

This increased pressure on key individuals, and led to projects being delivered without the required level of expertise or time needed.

Mr Clarke noted that the three authorities had enthusiastically taken on board the findings of the report and had each committed to making improvements accordingly.

The Chairman of the meeting, Councillor Gooch, invited Members to comment upon the report.

-   Councillor Henderson (SBC) asked for clarification as to how the IT issues arose across the three authorities. Mr Clarke explained that only one of the three, Tunbridge Wells BC, had used the IDOX software before but in an earlier version. Swale and Maidstone BC had not used IDOX before. Furthermore the software included GIS (geographic information system) elements which were brand new to IDOX, and this introduced further complexity.

-   Councillor Ash (MBC) asked if Mr Clarke had been surprised to find that minutes had not been taken during the project board's meetings. Mr Clarke confirmed that this was the case, and that no minutes had been taken at any of the meetings. This meant that Mr Clarke's research for the report had focussed on recollections after the event.

-   Councillor Rankin (TWBC) raised the fact that IT systems had been central to the implementation of the Planning Support Shared Service, and asked whether there had been IT representation on the project board. Mr Clarke responded that the Head of ICT was invited to sit on the project board but did not attend. No IT representatives attended until the February 2014, and up until this point IT information had been fed back to the board through a third party.

-   Councillor Bowen (SBC) asked whether there was defined responsibility at project board level. Mr Clarke confirmed that there was clear methodology defining who should be on the board, and that the focus of his work with Officers was on refreshing project management methods. It was noted that project methodology in respect of who should sit on the board was generally dependent on the scope or ambition of any project, and each project would be assessed on that basis.

- Councillor Gooch (MBC) requested clarification as to why the scope of the Audit report excluded the business case stage. Mr Clarke stated that the business case had not been considered germane to the brief, which was to review the implementation of the Planning Support Shared Service, and therefore took its starting point at the decision of Cabinet.

- Councillor Booth (SBC) requested confirmation as to whether an appropriate risk assessment had been carried out in the initial stages, to which Mr Clarke replied that no effective assessment or register of risk was undertaken.

(b) Planning Support Implementation

The Committee considered the response provided by the MKIP Board which outlined how they had commissioned the review of the implementation of Planning Support Shared Service, and welcomed unequivocally the findings of the review. The Board apologised to everyone who had been affected by the delays and provided assurance that they were working hard to address the situation. Attention was drawn to the fact that the vast majority of services delivered in partnership were working well, delivering savings and improved resilience during a period in which grant funding from central Government had been cut by more than 40%. However lessons would be learnt from this exercise.

Discussion was opened up to Members by the Chairman Councillor Gooch.

- In response to a question from Councillor Truelove (SBC) Councillor Jukes, Leader of the Council (TWBC) and MKIP Board Member stressed that the Board took ultimate responsibility and ownership for strategic oversight. Councillor Bowles, Leader of the Council (SBC) and MKIP Board Member, endorsed Councillor Jukes' statement and elaborated to describe how the MKIP Board was a corporate entity and as such all Members shared responsibility.

- Councillor Henderson (SBC) enquired as to whether it was the Board's understanding that comprehensive improvements were being implemented. Abdool Kara, Chief Executive (SBC) and MKIP Board Member acknowledged that each authority adhered individually to good project management methodologies but had not employed a single approach across all three. He therefore stated that the suggestions made by Mr Clarke in his report clarified the basic requirements of project management and would provide a shared base for the three authorities going forward. Mr Kara described how the experience of the Planning Support Shared Service had instilled a deep awareness of risk within the Board, and that future projects would not be progressed without fundamental project management requirements being met.

- Councillor Hills (TWBC) queried whether early involvement of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees could have helped to mitigate issues. Councillor Blackmore, Leader of the Council (MBC) and MKIP

Board member confirmed that each authority held Member Briefings on the Planning Support Shared Service prior to launch, and that the schedule of decisions was available to Members and the public in the forward plan. Councillor Bowles (SBC) advised the Committees that all planning related decisions had been received by each authority's Cabinet which was open to all Members to attend and speak at, and that Members could call-in decisions where they deemed it necessary. Councillor Hills (TWBC) asked whether consideration of the strategic decision making stages and member briefings at that level would have revealed the operational issues that were occurring within the service. Councillor Bowen (SBC) stressed the importance of communication between the Cabinet, MKIP Board and the Overview and Scrutiny Committees. Councillor Blackmore (MBC) put forward that the tripartite meetings between the scrutiny committees of the three authorities, as was undertaken that evening, was a beneficial process which addressed the need for greater communication.

(c) Update on the latest position

Sandra Fryer, the Interim Head of Planning Support Services, advised Members that on arrival in post work was undertaken to reaffirm the shared service board and operations team, and to foster a new staff culture. It was found that there was more training to be rolled out with staff, and that IT systems required more technical support. Operational targets, accuracy and local team performance were all reviewed.

Members heard that:

- There had been an increase in positive customer feedback, and a mystery shopper process undertaken at Swale had recorded an improvement.

- Consultee agencies had welcomed the movement of services online in electronic format due to the improvement in accessibility.

- The service was working broadly within budget although the scale of savings had been reduced.

- There had been a significant upward trend in planning performance, with IT systems working well and relocated teams settling into their new environments, but additionally there had been a steep increase in volume of planning applications received which had impacted on timescales. This aside, the service was running at a steady pace.

- Of the 12 strategic indicators 9 were able to be reproduced, and full performance statistics would be circulated to Members.

The Chairman, Councillor Gooch, invited comments from Members:

- Councillor Booth (SBC) sought confirmation as to whether there had been a 'plan B' in place should the Planning Support Shared Service suffer difficulties.

  Mr Benson (TWBC) described how the previous successes in the implementation of MKIP services may have meant that issues had not been fully conceived of or foreseen, and as a result, no fallback position had been provided for.

  Alison Broom, Chief Executive (MBC) and MKIP Board Member, expressed on behalf of the Planning Support Shared Service host authority that Maidstone took responsibility and accountability as lead on the splitting of the Planning services. It was noted that the recipients of the planning service had felt positively about the long term goal of the Planning Support Shared Service, and the accessibility it would afford. Mrs Broom stated that financial information could be circulated to Members. Councillor Bowles (SBC) reiterated the corporate identity of the MKIP Board and that accountability was shared among all Members of the Board.

The Chairman gave thanks to Mr Clarke, Mrs Fryer, Councillor Blackmore, Alison Broom, Councillor Bowles, Abdool Kara, Councillor Jukes and William Benson, who left the meeting at 8.57 p.m.

112. NEXT STEPS

After the members of the MKIP Board had departed, members of the three Committees considered what further action was necessary at this stage, based upon the responses they had just received and the evidence before them.

- Councillor Butler (MBC) felt that committee members required more detailed information about the financial consequences of the numerous difficulties which the joint Planning Support service had suffered since its launch. The Chairman acknowledged that this was important further evidence, which she asked be circulated to all committee members as soon as this was available;

- Councillor Booth (SBC) voiced his dissatisfaction with the responses the committees had heard at the meeting. He proposed that a further more detailed examination of the situation was required, which considered was best undertaken by a Joint Task and Finish Group;

- Councillor Booth (SBC) acknowledged that Swale Borough Council's all out elections on 7 May meant that the Task and Finish Group was faced with a dilemma; either it was required to complete its work before the election or delay the start of its work until mid-May; when the newly appointed Overview and Scrutiny Committee was in place. This was seconded by Councillor Henderson (SBC);

- Councillor Gooch (MBC) sought clarification over exactly what the Task and Finish Group was being tasked to undertake. Councillor Woodward endorsed this view, adding that it was vital that the scope of the Task and Finish Group was determined first, before any work could begin;

- Councillor Henderson (SBC) felt that there were two distinct functions for the Task and Finish Group: an element of 'looking back' and identifying why and how the project had been so poorly managed. This, he felt would help to identify and frame a set of recommendations for the MKIP Board to apply to any subsequent MKIP project. The second function was to look at the future of the Planning Support service and determine what remaining operational activities were required to be implemented (e.g. land charges, GIS mapping, a paperless system, problems of accuracy etc). Councillor Henderson also felt that the financial performance of the service should be a factor that the Task and Finish Group should consider.

- Committee members discussed whether these elements would be beneficial, with Councillor Hills (TWBC) preferring an approach which focused on frequent, detailed and reliable reports being presented back from the Planning Support Project Board which could demonstrate whether the actions now being followed were delivering the service. Councillor Gooch (MBC) also felt it would be helpful to determine what 'normality' looked like. The evidence the Interim Head of Planning Support Services had offered to provide would be vital in helping the three committees in their next stages;

- Councillor Rankin (TWBC) endorsed the view that there was little benefit in looking back. At this stage, Councillor Rankin felt there were three Overview and Scrutiny tasks (i) the need to be satisfied that the MKIP Board's response was the right one, (ii) the need to have a detailed performance update; and (iii) the opportunity to examine what operational efficiencies are being led by the interim Head of Planning Support Services. On this basis, the work of the Task and Finish Group could be delayed until June.

- Councillor Booth (SBC) reiterated his concerns and urged that further Overview and Scrutiny action be taken. Councillor Rankin (TWBC) stressed that it had to be the 'parent committees' that established the terms of reference for the Task and Finish Group, not for the group itself to undertake this.

- Councillor Booth (SBC), based on the clarification of member discussions, proposed that (i) a task and finish group be formed in early May; (ii) that in the intervening period, each separate Overview and Scrutiny Committee decide what outstanding concerns they have; (iii) post-election the three Committees delegate responsibility to their Chair and Vice Chairs to nominate representatives and agree the terms of reference.

Members agreed that a Joint Task and Finish Group could look to the future and establish confidence in the Planning Support Shared Service through the monitoring of its progress.

RESOLVED:

1. That the consideration of the reports and appendices by the joint Overview and Scrutiny Committees of Maidstone, Swale and Tunbridge Wells be noted, including:

   a. The Audit Report on MKIP Planning Support Implementation;

   b. The response of the MKIP Board to the Audit report; and

   c. The issues raised by each.

2. That in the next Municipal Year, the three newly formed Scrutiny or Policy and Resources Committees of Maidstone, Swale and Tunbridge Wells should delegate responsibility to their Chairman and Vice-Chairman to nominate two representatives to join a Joint Task and Finish Group and agree the terms of reference of this Group for further examination of the performance and financial information of the MKIP Planning Support Shared Service and project methodology for future MKIP Shared Services.

113. DURATION OF MEETING

7.03 p.m. to 9.47 p.m.