

Maidstone Borough Council

Regeneration and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 8 April 2008

Interview with Cabinet Member for Regeneration

Report of: Overview and Scrutiny Officer

1. Introduction

- 1.1 At the meeting of the Regeneration and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 12 June 2007, Members interviewed the Cabinet Member for Regeneration with regard to his priorities for the Municipal Year 2007/08. Members also considered a written statement by the Cabinet Member at this meeting, which is attached at Appendix A to this report.
- 1.2 The relevant extract from the minutes of the 12 June meeting is below:

“The Chairman welcomed the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Councillor Clive English, and the Cabinet Member for Environment, Councillor Tony Harwood, to the meeting, and asked them to give a brief statement elaborating on the written statements that they had provided to the Committee.

Councillor English explained that there were several clear issues within his portfolio that would be significant to whoever held his Cabinet post. The Local Development Framework (LDF) and supporting policies were very important as it was felt that the current local plan was, in some ways, not fit for purpose. There were also a number of issues regarding housing, and though work had started on these, this work needed to be accelerated.

Councillor Harwood emphasised that the transportation agenda needed to be tackled, as this was currently out-dated and needed to be forward looking to support future growth. It was felt that infrastructure was not currently keeping pace with urban or rural development. Councillor Harwood would be working with Kent County Council (KCC) officers to look at these issues, and to deliver innovative transport solutions. It was also possible that the whole urban area of Maidstone could be declared an Air Quality Management Area by the autumn, which could result in government intervention. It was suggested that problems such as this could be used to drive forward a 21st Century transport system. Councillor Harwood also stated that he felt it was important to work with scrutiny on policy development.

Both Cabinet Members emphasised that they were not following their own visions, rather, Cabinet was following the Council’s 20/20 Vision. The

basis of this was that the Borough needed to be a pleasant place to live and work.

A Member referred to Councillor English's vision statement, asking for clarification on the suggestion that "the LDF represents both a significant opportunity for the Borough and a major risk". Councillor English explained that the worst risk was that if the Core Strategy was found to be unsatisfactory, the work would have to be re-done, which would be expensive and would leave the Council with an out-of-date planning framework. A lesser risk was that of the inspectors finding the policies to be inadequate. If this was the case, new planning policies could be imposed on the Council. This was important because the planning policies adopted in the LDF would influence the type, quality and quantity of development in the Borough, including housing, employment, infrastructure and green spaces. It was felt that a failure of previous planning documents had been the lack of promotion and development of green and blue spaces, and these needed to be integrated with development in the future. It was noted that Section 106 (s106) monies had been collected for recreational spaces, and these spaces now needed to be delivered. The final Core Strategy and LDF would need the support of an overwhelming majority of the Council and the public in order to be successful.

A Councillor pointed out that the Cabinet Member for Environment had objected to Maidstone's bid for Growth Point Status, and asked how this would impact upon the LDF. Councillor Harwood explained that he would continue to argue for his views, including the need to ensure that growth was as sustainable as possible, which would require a very complex and sophisticated LDF document. The LDF was also the only tool that the Council had to ensure that transport would support growth in the area, because responsibility for highways policy was with KCC and Government.

In response to a question, Councillor Harwood explained that as the Council did not have responsibility for highways, he would need to lobby for improvements to roads and pathways in the Borough. For example, developments along Barker Road and the riverside should have funded a pedestrian route on the Broadway, as this was currently dangerous, but the scheme had yet to be delivered. There was also an issue around building at a high density without leaving sufficient room for adequate road and footway infra-structure. This would need to be tackled through the LDF.

A Councillor asked what the timetable was for the production of Supplementary Planning Policies. Councillor English explained that there were a number of these that the Council could produce, and these would take a significant amount of time. The key policies were the Local Allocations Development Plan Document and the Area Character Assessments. S106 policies were also important, and officers had been instructed to build a database that parish, borough and county councillors had access to in order to monitor the implementation of s106 agreements.

In response to questions on reducing the carbon footprint of new developments, Councillor English explained that guidance for this was overdue, and it was difficult to enforce low carbon emissions in new developments under current planning policies. It was stated that the new planning policies being developed by the Council under the LDF would be as robust as possible to ensure that the Council met its carbon footprint target. Councillor Harwood explained that his submission to the Core Strategy Consultation had suggested that the Council should aim for an excellent, rather than just good, EcoHomes standard. The Council currently had the power to ensure that social housing met a higher eco standard than private developments. Councillor Harwood had also recommended that the Council should follow the approach of the London Borough of Merton, which states that all new non residential developments above a threshold of 1,000sqm will be expected to incorporate renewable energy production equipment to provide at least 10% of predicted energy requirements.

A Councillor asked whether s106 agreements applied to local registered social landlords (RSLs) in the same way as they applied to private developers. Councillor English confirmed that the Council would seek s106s, where relevant, from RSLs in the same ways as it would seek them from others. It was also suggested that the 'threshold' approach may not be appropriate, and officers were looking into whether s106s should be linked to the number of properties being developed. There was also an issue around maintenance of what was already available in terms of public space. Both Cabinet Members would be working to encourage public utility providers and others that managed public spaces to maintain those spaces in an appropriate way. For example, a protocol was being drawn up with Maidstone Housing Trust and other RSLs regarding the maintenance of street trees. It was noted that more social infrastructure was needed in areas of deprivation but a lack of space in many of those areas made this difficult.

A Councillor asked if a breakdown was available of the social needs of those on the waiting list for social housing. Councillor English explained that housing policy was based on the Housing Needs Survey, but pointed out that availability of housing was not the only issue – the condition of housing was also important. It was also important to ensure that the type and mix of housing in the Borough met the social needs of residents. It was noted that a Traveller Needs Survey would take place over the coming year.

A Councillor asked how the Cabinet Member for Environment intended to manage the issue of parking restrictions and on-street waiting in rural areas. Councillor Harwood explained that the Council had been operating under the County of Kent Act, which was not considered to be effective enforcement legislation. Canterbury City Council had begun to operate under the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984, and this had worked effectively. The benefit of this legislation was that the Council's staff and contractors could enforce it. A pilot was likely to take place in Park Wood.

In terms of public transport, Councillor Harwood explained that Park and Ride cost the Council a significant amount, so Park and Ride sites had to be located where they were most needed. For example, the A229 was the busiest commuter route into Maidstone, but had no Park and Ride site. Officers were looking into possible sites for this route. There was also a need to get KCC involved, as it did not contribute at current to Park and Ride in Maidstone Borough. Councillor English emphasised that the Cabinet saw transport as a key issue that needed to be resolved, as the congestion and pollution in Maidstone was reaching a high level. Councillor Harwood pointed out that solutions would be tough to deliver quickly, but measures in the Core Strategy and LDF could ensure future delivery.

A Member raised concerns that putting economic development policy in a different portfolio to liaison with the business community would cause difficulties, as these areas strongly impacted upon each other. Councillor English stated that he felt that it was useful to have a range of expertise to draw on, and he was working closely with Councillor Daley to ensure that they did not contradict each other. In terms of economic development and the skills agenda, Councillor English pointed out that difficulties were caused in that high value economic development was often related to the presence of further and higher education institutions. Maidstone needed to build on areas of the economy where there was already strong performance, for example, the media. It was important to seek the development of training facilities, and also develop employment opportunities for local people to prevent the skills drain.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Members for attending.”

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 Members are recommended to consider the statement made by the Cabinet Member for Regeneration at the beginning of the year and ask questions with regard to progress that has been made on those issues highlighted as priorities.