

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY 24 JUNE
2020**

Present: Councillors Mrs Blackmore, M Burton, Chappell-Tay, Clark, Cox (Chairman), English, Mrs Gooch, Joy, McKay, Mortimer, Newton, Perry, Purle, Round and Springett

Also Present: Councillors Janetta and Tom Sams

174. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received for Councillor Harvey.

175. NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

It was noted that Councillor Joy was present as a substitute for Councillor Harvey.

176. URGENT ITEMS

It was agreed that Item 18 – Council Led Garden Community Update would be taken before Item 13 – Maidstone Borough Council Response to Covid-10 Public Health Emergency.

177. NOTIFICATION OF VISITING MEMBERS

It was noted that Councillors Janetta and Tom Sams were present as Visiting Members for Item 18 – Council-Led Garden Community Update.

178. DISCLOSURES BY MEMBERS AND OFFICERS

There were no disclosures by Members or Officers.

179. DISCLOSURES OF LOBBYING

All Councillors were lobbied on Item 18 – Council-Led Garden Community Update.

180. EXEMPT ITEMS

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

181. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 29 APRIL 2020

RESOLVED: That the minutes be agreed as an accurate record of the meeting and signed at a later date.

182. PRESENTATION OF PETITIONS

There were no petitions.

183. QUESTIONS AND ANSWER SESSION FOR MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

There were five questions from members of the public.

Question from Mr Steve Heeley to the Chairman of the Policy and Resources Committee

'The Planning Inspector issued his final report on the Kent Minerals Site Plan on 23rd April 2020. His recommendation for adoption of this plan sees Chapel Farm identified as the only proposed soft sand quarry in Kent for the next 20 to 30 years. For those that don't know, Chapel Farm is an 88-acre site in the centre of the biggest landowner's holding in your Heathlands development. Why is this recent development or constraint not mentioned in the agenda item 18 officer's report?'

The Chairman responded to the Question.

Mr Steve Heeley asked the following supplementary question:

'What wasn't in the previous report was that the planning inspector said that the Chapel Farm site had to be sequential to the Burleigh Farm site in Charing, which pushes the timescales by between 10 and 15 years before extraction at Chapel Farm in Lenham can begin. This is another setback for a project that is already beset with enough problems, the site for the proposed quarry is the single biggest parcel of land in your scheme and the fact that this site is now potentially sterilised until 2050 before we can starting building houses, means that this is another question mark on how deliverable the scheme is. How much longer is this project going to continue for?'

The Chairman responded to the supplementary question.

Question from Ms Kate Hammond to the Chairman of the Policy and Resources Committee

'At your last meeting on 29th April, you told this committee that you had spoken and had met with Ashford Borough Council about more ambitious housing proposals in relation to the Heathlands project and the M20 corridor. Ashford Council appear to be unaware of any conversations on this matter. Can you confirm who it was that was spoken to, when that conversation took place and where the notes are recorded?'

The Chairman responded to the question.

Ms Kate Hammond asked the following supplementary question:

'Can I ask why no minutes were taken of the meeting?'

The Chairman responded to the supplementary question.

Question from Ms Sally King to the Chairman of the Policy and Resources Committee

'Can the Committee confirm what meetings officers and/or members have had with Highways England regarding a proposed new motorway junction at Lenham Heath since the 29th April?'

The Chairman responded to the question.

Question from Ms Gail Duff to the Chairman of the Policy and Resources Committee

'How will the chairman ensure that members of this committee will be given all the facts on the Heathlands project, in order for them to make future informed decisions?'

The Chairman responded to the question.

Councillor McKay, Leader of the Labour Group, responded to the question.

Question from Mr Richard Proctor to the Chairman of the Policy and Resources Committee

'The initial financial model for the Heathlands Garden Community barely came close to breaking even and certainly did not reflect all the necessary contingencies and detail to pass deliverability and viability tests. Is the revised masterplan being cut down with critical infrastructure removed at the expense of the Council's widely publicised vision and true Garden Community principles?'

The Chairman responded to the question.

Councillor McKay, Leader of the Labour Group, responded to the question.

The full responses were recorded on the webcast and were made available to view on the Maidstone Borough Council Website.

To access the webcast recording, please use the below link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUZ1mtwZZ7M>

184. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO THE CHAIRMAN

There were no questions from Members to the Chairman.

185. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

RESOLVED: That the Committee Work Programme is noted.

186. COUNCIL-LED GARDEN COMMUNITY UPDATE

The Director of Regeneration and Place introduced the report as an update on the progress of the Council-Led Garden Community known as Heathlands, since April 2020.

It was noted that the Local Planning Authority (LPA) had advised that the Heathlands proposal was one of four garden communities that would be considered in further detail; with additional information submitted to the LPA for those purposes. This included a draft second stage landscape led master plan and a safeguarded area for a potential motorway junction. Three further land parcels had been brought forward by an independent developer as shown in the table within the report. The financial model noted by the Committee in September 2019 had been updated in draft and included within the submission and would be presented to the Committee in July 2020. A technical briefing for the Committee would take place on 20 July 2020.

The Director of Regeneration and Place confirmed that Homes England would continue to share the promotional cost of the project with the potential for an investment role to be undertaken. It was confirmed that this was the only area in the borough for which Homes England had made this offer.

A meeting had been arranged for the 26 June 2020 with the Parish council and Save Our Heathlands Group in order that future community engagement and public consultation could be discussed. Any ideas resulting from the meeting would be brought to the Committee for consideration. It was noted that the potential for the proposal to feature in the next stage of the local plan review depended on sustained progress over the summer.

Councillors Tom and Janetta Sams addressed the Committee as Visiting Members to ask that support for the project be withdrawn. Specific reference was made to the Council's ability to deliver services due to the financial impacts of Covid-19 alongside the financial cost of the proposal. Additional points raised included the effects on climate change through increased motor vehicle usage, lack of local employment opportunities and the need for greater transparency to allow greater community engagement.

It was noted that part of the debate held would be of greater relevance to the Strategic Planning and Infrastructure Committee rather than this Committee. Several Members expressed the wish to be provided with

more detail in the future updates provided to the Committee in order that greater transparency would be achieved.

During the debate it was noted that Garden Communities elsewhere had not been as successful as originally hoped. It was felt that the offer made by Homes England as noted would provide assurance that the Heathlands proposal, should progress continue, would be successful.

In response to questions the Director of Regeneration and Place confirmed that a meeting would occur between the Council and Homes England to discuss the proposal of shared promotional costs. It was confirmed that the requirements of the memorandum as previously agreed would be met through a report to the Committee.

RESOLVED: That the content of the report be noted.

187. MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL RESPONSE TO COVID19 PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY

The Chief Executive introduced the report and acknowledged the efforts of key workers across a multitude of services in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The importance of the organisations that had provided support to local residents and businesses was noted, which included the Parish Councils, Chamber of Commerce and numerous voluntary organisations. The Chief Executive thanked the Council's staff members for their efforts over recent months.

The report highlighted the actions taken by the Council in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, to respond to new and increased demands. It was noted that the Council's relationships with residents, business, Parish Councils and various other organisations had been strengthened due to the cooperation shown in recent months.

The Small Business Grant Fund and the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Fund scheme was initiated in April 2020 with 89% of the businesses eligible for £10k grants having submitted applications with over £17million distributed in response. Of the businesses eligible for the £25k grant scheme, 85% submitted applications with over £10million distributed in response. A total of £28.5million in funding was provided by Central Government, with £27.3 million distributed which totalled 96%. The Council was the best performing district within Kent and twenty-second nationally in the distribution of £10k and £25k grants.

The Discretionary Grant Scheme was launched in May 2020, with the Council provided with £1.4million in funding from Central Government. Over 300 applications were received, with over £1million distributed to 228 businesses. To allow for further applications being received, the Council applied for additional funding and were provided with an additional £890k.

The Committee wished to express their thanks to the Key Workers, Voluntary Organisations and persons, Parish Councils and the Council's staff members.

RESOLVED: That the content of the report be noted.

188. MAIDSTONE COUNCIL'S APPROACH TO RECOVERY FROM THE COVID19 PANDEMIC

The Chief Executive introduced the report on the Council's approach to recovery and drew attention to the importance of an evidence-based approach in tailoring those plans. The objectives and approach to recovery were outlined within paragraphs 2.9 and 2.10 of the report.

The Chief Executive confirmed that the possible resurgence of Covid-19 in either local or national form would be a significant risk to the Council's recovery approach. The Strategic Plan would be harder to achieve in the short term and potentially long term, with housing, economic growth and healthy life expectancies likely to be affected. It was noted that there would be an opportunity for elements which included green topics, climate change and business transformation to be examined. The Council's financial stability would be re-examined, and a comprehensive report would be provided to the Committee in July 2020 on the Medium-Term Financial Strategy.

With regard to recovery, the High-Street had been reopened and the hospitality industry was to follow. A politically balanced Member Consultative Forum had been created, to encourage shared communication between officers and politicians, which met on a weekly basis.

RESOLVED: That

1. The context for Covid-19 recovery be noted; and
2. The objectives for Covid-19 recovery for Maidstone be agreed.

Note: Councillor English exited the meeting during the debate on this item.

189. FOURTH QUARTER BUDGET & PERFORMANCE MONITORING

The Director of Finance and Business Improvement introduced the report which summarised the position of the 2019/20 financial year. It was noted that there had been a surplus in the budgets of the Committee and the Communities, Housing and Environment Committee; both of which were offset by the deficits shown for the Strategic Planning and Infrastructure and Economic Regeneration and Leisure Committees.

The Director of Finance confirmed that Appendix 4 included an update to the Council's current financial position, in accordance with the information submitted to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

(MHCLG) for May 2020. A significant overspend would likely arise in the next financial year and future years.

Appendix 1 detailed the position of the schemes arising from the Business Rates Retention Pilot. It was requested that any decision regarding the unspent funds allocated for the schemes be deferred until the 21 July 2020 meeting of the Committee, in order that a report on the current 2020/21 financial position and strategic response could be provided to the Committee before any decision is taken. The Committee was asked to approve the three cases of Business Rate write-offs shown within the Appendix that the Council had not been able to recover.

The Equalities and Corporate Policy Officer noted that of the three strategic indicators reported to the Committee, one had achieved its target, one was within 10% of the target and that a fourth quarter figure for the percentage of land and highways with acceptable litter was not presented as this was measured three times a year as per Defra guidance.

It was noted that there were five indicators reported by exception to the Committee, of which four were categorised under the strategic priority of 'Thriving Place'. The impact of Covid-19 was felt early with a reduction in visitors to Maidstone, which affected the High Street, Museum and Leisure Centre in particular. Of the seven strategic indicators in the annual outturn, two had achieved the target set, one had achieved within 10% of the target, one was awaiting data and two were reported by exception.

RESOLVED: That

1. The Revenue position as at the end of Quarter 4 be noted;
2. The Capital position and slippage at the end of Quarter 4 be noted (Appendix 1);
3. The Summary of Performance for Quarter 4 for Key Performance Indicators be noted (Appendix 2);
4. The write-off of uncollectable business rates totalling £37, 153.22 be approved (Appendix 3);
5. The Covid-19 Financial Update be noted (Appendix 4); and
6. In light of the projected impact of Covid-19, a decision on the uncommitted Business Rates Retention Scheme allocations as set out in Appendix 1, page 22, is deferred pending a further report to this Committee next month on the 2020/21 position.

190. KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS 2020-21

The Equalities and Corporate Policy Officer introduced the report and confirmed that the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) 2020-21 for all Service Committees were shown in Appendix 1. The KPIs had been agreed

by all service committees except the Communities, Housing and Environment Committee as the Committee had not yet considered their draft KPIs.

The Equalities and Corporate Policy Officer confirmed that the Committee had last year identified seven strategic indicators, three of which were reported on a quarterly basis and four on an annual basis. The report set out the changes to indicators and set out the seven indicators for 2020-21.

It was noted that the Economic Regeneration and Leisure Committee had requested a quarterly update on unemployment figures within Maidstone and that the Strategic Planning and Infrastructure Committee wished to be regularly updated on the planning enforcement workload figures.

RESOLVED: That the draft Key Performance Indicators for 2020-21, attached as Appendix 1 be agreed.

191. RISK MANAGEMENT UPDATE

The Director of Finance and Business Improvement introduced the report which would have been presented to the Committee in March, however this meeting was cancelled due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. It was confirmed that risks related to Major Emergency with national/internal impact and Resurgence of Covid-19 had been added to the framework as new risks. The existing risk management framework would continue to be used, with the current situation reflected in the update report and attached appendices.

Particular attention was drawn to the fact that the probability and impact of the risks shown had been updated if necessary, with a focus on financial restrictions and the threat to retail and leisure sectors; both of which had increased substantially due to the pandemic.

The Director of Finance and Business Improvement informed the Committee that the Institute of Fiscal Studies had published a report on the risks that had arisen to local authorities as a result of Covid-19. It was noted that District Councils were at increased financial risk due to the dependence on local income in supporting services, with the Institute having ranked the Council in the middle section of District Councils at risk.

In response to questions the Director of Finance and Business Improvement confirmed that the Council may be expected to use part of the reserves held to mitigate the effects of Covid-19, however clear guidance had not yet been given.

It was felt that there should be an increase from the annual reporting of Risk Management to the Committee, due to additional risks outlined during the discussion.

RESOLVED: That

1. The risk information as set out in Appendix 1 be noted; and
2. A Risk Management Update report be provided to the committee on a quarterly basis until otherwise requested.

192. DURATION OF MEETING

6.30 p.m. to 8.32 p.m.