

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COMMUNITIES, HOUSING AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 5 JANUARY 2021

Present: Councillors M Burton, Joy, Khadka, Mortimer,
Mrs Robertson, D Rose, M Rose and Young

Also Present: Councillors McKay and Perry

105. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Powell.

106. NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

There were no Substitute Members.

107. URGENT ITEMS

There were no urgent items.

108. NOTIFICATION OF VISITING MEMBERS

Councillor Perry was present as a Visiting Member for Item 16 – Maidstone Borough Council Owned G&T Sites Investment Proposal.

Councillor McKay was present as a Visiting Member for Item 17 – Heather House and Pavilion Building Update.

109. DISCLOSURES BY MEMBERS AND OFFICERS

There were no disclosures by Members or Officers.

110. DISCLOSURES OF LOBBYING

Councillor M Rose had been lobbied on Item 12 – Committee Work Programme.

Councillor M Burton had been lobbied on Item 16 – Maidstone Borough Council Owned G&T Sites Investment Proposal, Item 18 – Fees and Charges, and Item 19 – Medium Term Financial Strategy and Budget Proposals.

Councillors M Burton, Mortimer, Mrs Robertson and D Rose had been lobbied on Item 17 – Heather House and Pavilion Building Update.

111. EXEMPT ITEMS

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

112. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 1 DECEMBER 2020

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 1 December 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed at a later date.

113. PRESENTATION OF PETITIONS

There were no petitions.

114. QUESTIONS AND ANSWER SESSION FOR MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

There were no questions from members of the public.

115. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO THE CHAIRMAN

There was one question from Members to the Chairman.

Question from Councillor Vizzard to the Chairman of Communities, Housing and Environment Committee

'Maidstone Dawn Patrol Rotary Club has been involved with providing some community projects for a local women's refuge. We are also now aware that for men suffering from domestic violence there are emergency arrangements in place with local hotels. This has caused us to become interested in what provisions are being made for housing and other support when these women and men need to move on to more permanent accommodation. We are involved in lobbying our MPs for support. We note that central financial support is provided to tier one councils, in Maidstone's case KCC. MBC is the housing provider but does not receive the finance direct but is reliant on KCC to distribute.

What housing priority is given or could be given to victims of domestic violence and abuse in Maidstone? Secondly, how well is the system of KCC funding tier two councils working for Maidstone, and to what extent is that funding meeting the known need locally?'

The Chairman responded to the question.

Councillor Vizzard asked the following supplementary question:

'If any of the people who have suffered domestic abuse wish to move out of the area, have we got reciprocal arrangements with the councils in other areas to assist the victims of domestic abuse to move?'

The Chairman agreed to provide a written response to the supplementary question.

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

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

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fg48Des4YGw>

116. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

It was confirmed that lobbying letters sent to KCC and the UK Government regarding the sale of fireworks would be circulated to the Committee once sent.

In response to questions, the Director of Regeneration and Place confirmed that the funding necessary for the Local Nature Reserves would be included in the draft budget proposals which would be presented to the Policy and Resources Committee on 20 January 2021, with the Committee to be updated.

A request was made to schedule two briefings in the near future; on waste and recycling and the Council's housing portfolio.

RESOLVED: That the Committee Work Programme be noted.

117. REPORTS OF OUTSIDE BODIES

There were no reports of Outside Bodies.

118. WASTE SERVICES UPDATE

The report was introduced by the Waste Manager and updates to the waste collection contract were outlined.

The introduction of electronic payments for garden waste had resulted in a significant decrease in administrative work and increased data accuracy, which led to a more reliable service. It was confirmed that the paper payment system remained available, the six complaints received regarding the electronic system having been resolved.

Revised routes had been implemented for garden waste rounds, resulting in a reduced number of missed bins and a reduction in road mileage. Biffa had purchased new, larger vehicles which had improved capacity while reducing the service's environmental impact. A nine percent increase in the number of households using the service since 2013 was highlighted.

The Committee expressed their thanks to Waste Services and Biffa staff.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

119. MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL PLACEMENT POLICY

The Housing and Inclusion Manager introduced the report and outlined the Placement Policy attached at Appendix 1 to the report, which would provide a framework and guidance for Officers within the Housing Advice Service, and transparency for applicants regarding the decision-making process. It was noted that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government expected Local Authorities to implement a placement policy.

There had been a significant increase in homeless approaches to the Council, seeking suitable and affordable accommodation in both the private rental sector and for temporary accommodation. Demand was from the local area as well as other local authorities looking for placements in Maidstone.

The difficulty in finding suitable, affordable properties for large families was highlighted; of the 30 households placed into long-term private rental accommodation within the last two years, 20% were for four-bedroom properties. A substantial percentage of applications were from families fleeing domestic violence.

In response to questions, it was confirmed that the Equalities Officer would partake in the 12-month review to assess whether any unintended consequences of the policy had occurred, including any negative impacts on particular groups. It was requested that information on property refusals be included.

Following the 12-month review, the Committee would be updated.

RESOLVED: That

1. The Placement Policy be endorsed; and
2. The policy be reviewed after 12 months to ensure no unintended detriment is being caused to any specific groups of people, as set out in the Equalities Impact Assessment.

120. MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL OWNED G&T SITES INVESTMENT PROPOSAL

The Housing Development Officer introduced the report, outlining the proposed investment and schedule of work for two Gypsy and Traveller Sites, located at Water Lane and Stilebridge. The identified areas for improvement were the amenity blocks, electricity and water supply to individual plots, road surfaces, communal lighting and signage.

It was noted that the ongoing tender process was guided by the tender requirements and delivering value for money, rather than the £1 million budgeted. The final cost of the project would be provided later this year.

RESOLVED: That

1. The planned works at Water Lane and Stilebridge mobile home sites be agreed; and
2. The Director of Regeneration and Place be given delegated authority to enter into the necessary contracts and other agreements to enable works to take place.

121. HEATHER HOUSE AND PAVILION BUILDING UPDATE

The Housing Delivery Manager introduced the report, highlighting the updated designs of both the community centre and residential elements. Following the second pre-application meeting with the Planning team, the number of residential dwellings proposed had decreased from 12 to 11, with three 4-bed houses replacing three of the 3-bed houses. This was to lower the density of the development and increase the range of houses in line with the Local Plan Policy. In order for the rugby clubs to continue using the building, the design had been updated to include additional changing room facilities and increased storage. The updated design increased the budget shortfall from £234,476 to £399,029. This could be reduced to £299,029 if the Council's bid to the Land Release Fund was successful, which would be confirmed in February 2021.

Concerns were expressed that further information was required due to the increased funding shortfall and that the designs focussed on the promotion of the rugby clubs' use of the building rather than as a community centre facility. As such, the Committee considered whether it was appropriate to defer the item. However, it was noted that further information would be provided as the scheme progressed.

It was confirmed that the additional facilities proposed would enable the rugby clubs to continue using the building, rather than the rugby clubs being the primary users. It was explained that the rugby clubs have a high profile locally, and their presence at the centre had a positive impact on the community which it was important to maintain.

In response to questions, the Housing Delivery Manager confirmed that the Stones Community Trust were aware of the designs proposed and continued to express an interest in managing the facility.

RESOLVED: That the Policy and Resources Committee be recommended to accept the enlarged and enhanced scheme, in line with option 3.3 of the report, with an increased funding gap of a further £0.25 million, and approve at risk expenditure of £200,000 to make a detailed planning application for the scheme, but that the construction project should not commence until the increased funding gap has been bridged.

122. FEES AND CHARGES 2021-22

The Head of Finance introduced the report, and highlighted the changes made since the item was deferred on 1 December 2020. These included freezing charges for burial rights, adult cremations and containers for cremated remains, and a reduction of the increases previously proposed for interment fees and plot rental charges for the Memorial Hall and Gardens of Remembrance.

Some of the proposed increases had been retained where required to offset the increased cost of service provision.

RESOLVED: That

1. The proposed discretionary fees and charges set out in Appendix 1 to the report be agreed; and
2. The expected statutory fees and charges set out in Appendix 1 to the report be noted.

123. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY AND BUDGET PROPOSALS

The Director of Finance and Business Improvement introduced the report and referenced the Medium Term Financial Strategy presented to the Committee on 1 December 2020, whereby the financial implications and budget gap caused by Covid-19 were outlined.

As a result of the Local Government Finance Settlement and the Chancellor's Spending Review, the Council's budget gap had been reduced from £2.4 million to £1.6 million but remained significant. Proposed savings focussed on business transformation and protecting frontline services, totalling £0.7 million for this Committee.

The commitment to capital investment would continue and interest rates remained low. The proposed capital programme was expected to be worth over £80m over the next five years.

RESOLVED: That

1. The revenue budget proposals for services within the remit of this Committee, as set out in Appendix A to the report, be agreed for submission to Policy and Resources Committee; and
2. The capital budget proposals for services within the remit of this Committee, as set out in Appendix B to the report, be agreed for submission to Policy and Resources Committee.

124. DURATION OF MEETING

6.30 p.m. to 9.10 p.m.