

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW AND
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 1
JUNE 2010**

PRESENT: Councillor Harwood (Chairman)
Councillors Bradshaw, Butler, Lusty, Parr, Ross and
Mrs Wilson

1. The Committee to consider whether agenda items 1 - 8 and 10 should be web-cast.

It was noted that due to a technical error agenda item 10 could not be web-cast.

Resolved: That agenda items 1 – 8 be web-cast.

2. Apologies.

It was noted the Councillor Hinder had given his apologies for the meeting.

3. Notification of Substitute Members.

It was noted the Councillor Butler was substituting for Councillor Hinder.

4. Notification of Visiting Members.

There were no visiting Members.

5. a) Election of Chairman b) Election of Vice-Chairman

Resolved: That
a) Councillor Harwood be elected Chairman for the Municipal Year 2010/11; and
b) Councillor Lusty be elected Vice-Chairman for the Municipal Year 2010/11.

6. Disclosures by Members and Officers:

There were no disclosures.

7. To consider whether any items should be taken in private because of the possible disclosure of exempt information.

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

8. Minutes of the Meeting held on 6 April 2010.

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 6 April 2010 be agreed as a correct record and duly signed by the Chairman.

9. 2010-11 Work Programme Workshop.

The Committee held a Work Programme Workshop to discuss key service issues with senior officers and to consider a number of potential topics for the Committee's 2010-11 Work Programme. The Chairman thanked the officers for attending and asked them to briefly outline their service area and to discuss key issues with Members. The discussion highlighted the following:

Customer Services

- The Gateway had proved a successful service in partnership with Kent County Council (KCC). It had provided more customer services to the public and had enabled more detailed holistic advice to be delivered. However, this had meant that wait times had increased;
- There had been some issues with regard to trying to secure regular sessions with partners such as with KCC's Occupational Therapists. Some partners who had provided their services on an ad-hoc basis in the Gateway had felt that they did not have enough custom to justify their attendance, but officers felt that a regular spot would lead to more custom. It was difficult for the customer services team to refer customers to partners in the gateway when they were only present on an ad-hoc basis;
- The Customer Services Manager felt that there was a need for more voluntary organisations to provide services in the Gateway;
- The Committee was concerned that the facilities for staff were insufficient;
- The customers services team aspired to have a more in-depth benefit service, beyond housing and council tax benefit;
- They had achieved 90% customer satisfaction and aimed to answer 95% of all calls received;
- In response to a question, Members were informed that they were able to report on the number of calls by each service, but were not able to break it down to individual issues within the service;

Revenues and Benefits

- The Revenues and Benefits service had maintained good performance levels and had achieved 93-95% customer satisfaction;
- The Revenues and Benefits service had been identified as an option for a shared service with other local authorities through the Mid Kent Improvement Partnership. Business Transformation had recently reviewed the service and it was anticipated that their findings would inform partnership arrangements;
- The Committee was concerned that some of the most vulnerable people may not be aware of all benefits they were entitled to. The Revenues and Benefits Manager informed the Committee that they were trialling new technology that would provide a benefit health for all customers claiming housing or council tax benefit to let them

know what other benefits they may be entitled to and how to apply for them. Furthermore, the Benefit's Visiting Officers had been cross trained with the Pension Service's Visiting Officers to enable each to identify eligibility and complete application forms with customers for each other service's benefits. The Council also worked with the Kent Benefit Partnership to promote benefit take up across Maidstone and Kent;

- The administration of Housing and Council Tax Benefit was governed by regulations, however the Council had discretion in how it awarded Discretionary Housing Benefit;

Procurement, Property and Asset Management

- Gas, Water and Electricity consumption was monitored in the Council's buildings to inform schemes to reduce consumption. However, further reductions would be more difficult and required investment. The Council was exploring opportunities for use of photovoltaic panels;
- Problems with the bio-mass system at Maidstone House continued. Earlier issues had been resolved but it was currently out of use as the prevailing wind had blown the fumes into the fresh air inlet to the Gateway. Members were advised that it was the responsibility of the Landlord to resolve this problem, but that they have had difficulties with their contractors;
- Developing shared procurement with other districts had had limited success, as only Maidstone Council had a dedicated procurement department in the Mid Kent Improvement Partnership authorities. However, as the other local authorities had recently identified lead procurement officers it was anticipated that progress should significantly improve;

Communications

- The Council sought to do all its design work in house and they had started working closely with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council;
- The marketing department encouraged officers to request their input to ensure consistency in the Council's communications. Members agreed this was particularly important and asked officers to let them know if they had problems in making sure other departments used their services;
- The Communications department relationship with the media had significantly improved and regular articles regarding the Council's services featured in the local press;

Information Technology

- IT had been involved in all the Council's partnership arrangements to ensure the consolidation of software packages;
- The IT Manager informed the Committee that he felt more use could be made of the Geographical Information Service (GIS). It had been used successfully by Waste Services to re-route their rounds and this had achieved savings;
- The Council provided 100 virtual servers on 4 physical servers, this had reduced demand for office space and air conditioning. Further

advancements in Green IT were being investigated by the Council and an in-depth Green IT Policy was being produced; and

- In response to a question regarding what could be improved, the IT Manager advised the Committee that he considered more work could be done with regard to how their work was prioritised.

The meeting adjourned from 8.03 to 8.18 to allow the Committee to view the information stands and discuss issues in more depth with the officers present.

The Committee considered the following topics as potential review items:

The Gateway

This could include:

- Resident awareness of the services provided in the gateway;
- Provision for rural residents;
- Value for money and use of space;
- Staffing (including external staffing)
- Facilities for staff;
- The provision and range of services available and attracting new services (this could include interviews with Kent County Council Partners and Citizen Advice Bureau regarding their experiences);

Members felt that it was timely to review the Gateway provision as it had been in operation since January 2009. Furthermore, the Committee agreed that it may be useful to visit the Gateway as a Committee;

Council Services

This could include:

- How the Council's welfare and benefits services were communicated and marketed to residents to ensure that it was effectively 'Serving the Borough' including consideration of how to promote benefit take up;
- Customer complaints and the Council's response to these;
- Consideration of the practice of authorities with superb service delivery reputations amongst their local populations and identify how they attained that reputation, including consideration of Councils in affluent and less affluent areas;

The Committee agreed to undertake a major review of Council Customer Services and agreed to incorporate the review of the Gateway in to this. The Committee noted existing work programme commitments and agreed that working groups to report back on particular aspects of the review may be required. The Committee agreed it was important to interview a wide range of experts and agreed to suggest possible witnesses to the Overview and Scrutiny Officer.

Resolved: That the Committee conduct a major review of the Council's Customer Services.

10. Future Work Programme and Forward Plan of Key Decisions.

The Committee considered its future work programme and agreed to receive written vision statements from the Leader and the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services at its next meeting rather than inviting them for interview to set out their priorities for 2010/11. Members considered it more prudent to invite them for interview as and when issues arose and to receive a mid year progress report. The Committee noted that the Democratic Services Manager had been due to be interviewed by Members at its meeting on 6 April 2010 regarding consultation with Councillors on Council decisions but had unfortunately given his apologies due to sickness. The interview had therefore been rescheduled for its meeting on 6 July 2010. Members agreed that in addition to this topic, the Democratic Services Manager also respond to questions regarding the 2010 election at this meeting. Members agreed that it would be particularly useful for the Democratic Services Manager to provide the Committee with a written report detailing his experience of the election and the lessons learnt. Specific issues to be addressed in the report included: suitability and accessibility of Detling Show Ground for the count; parking; delivery of the boxes; refreshments; and issues of concern.

The Committee noted that given the reduction in membership numbers of Scrutiny Committees, the Independents had not received a seat allocation on any of the Scrutiny Committees. The Committee agreed to refer this matter to the Co-ordinating Committee for consideration.

Resolved: That

- a) The Forward Plan be noted;
- b) The interview with the Leader and the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services be removed from its 6 July 2010 work programme and be replaced with written vision statements;
- c) The Democratic Services Manager submit a written statement regarding the 2010 election and be interviewed at its meeting on 6 July 2010 regarding consultation with Councillors on Council decisions and the election; and
- d) The seat allocation of the Scrutiny Committees be referred to the Co-ordinating Scrutiny Committee.