

## **Maidstone Borough Council**

### **Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**Tuesday 5 August 2008**

#### **Leader of the Council: Plans and Priorities for 2008-09**

**Report of:** Senior Overview and Scrutiny Officer

#### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee is responsible for holding to account those Cabinet Members whose portfolios fall within the remit of the Committee.
- 1.2 The key Cabinet Members whose portfolios relate to the Committee are the Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services.

#### **2. Leader of the Council**

- 2.1 The areas of the Leader's portfolio that are relevant to the Committee are as follows:
  - **Policy Development –**
    - To oversee and co-ordinate the development of all policy framework documents and to ensure that they interrelate and reflect agreed Council priorities.
  - **Budget –**
    - To take responsibility (in collaboration with the rest of the Cabinet) for drawing up initial proposals for the Council's budget ensuring that corporate priorities are matched by appropriate financial resources.
  - **Performance Management -**
    - To establish, implement and monitor the Council's Performance Management System and have overall responsibility for data quality.
  - **Value for Money –**
    - To ensure that the Council achieves Value for Money in its services.
  - **Delivery within Portfolios -**

- To ensure that the Cabinet Members are delivering priorities within their own portfolio structures.

- **Special Projects –**

- Taking responsibility for certain corporate special projects as advised by the Cabinet.

2.2 The Leader has also provided a written statement outlining his priorities for the year. This is attached at Appendix A for Members' information.

### **3. Recommendation**

3.1 The areas of the Leader's portfolio that are relevant to the Committee are outlined at section 2.1. Members are recommended to consider these, and ask questions of the Leader with regard to his plans and priorities for the year for these areas.

3.2 Furthermore, Members are recommended to make recommendations to the Leader with regard to these plans and priorities.

3.3 Members are reminded that "Quality Recommendations" are those that adhere to the following categories:

- Recommendations that affect and make a difference to local people;
- Recommendations that result in a change in policy that improves services;
- Recommendations that identify savings and maintain/improve service quality; or
- Recommendations that objectively identify a solution.

## **LEADER'S PRIORITIES & PLANS 2008/09**

### *1. Introduction - Strategic Approach and Themes*

I take as the starting point for my cabinet's approach to the next year the 6 themes that the council has already adopted in its strategic plan namely:

- A healthy environment
- Sustainable Communities
- Prosperity
- Lifelong learning
- Quality Living
- Quality Decent Homes that People can afford

These are themes that the previous Conservative administration under Eric Hotson pursued and ones that the current Conservative administration will continue.

These themes cannot be achieved in isolation from one another and must be pulled together. We cannot have prosperity without the requisite skills set in our communities, and we cannot have sustainable communities without prosperity. Equally, we cannot have quality living without prosperity and a healthy environment. All these areas are required to be delivered and acted upon in order to achieve a vibrant, prosperous, dynamic and quality driven town and borough.

In addition, we cannot achieve this alone and we must work with effective partners, be they specific groupings dealing with specific tasks (such as Locate in Kent) or neighbouring local authorities and our own County Council. To this end, we must build effective partnership working and not partnership working for its own 'tick box' sake. The vehicle for this is the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP).

However, in order to begin one must have a starting point and that starting point must be economic prosperity – quality jobs and economic skills sets are the lynchpin, which will help deliver the rest of the themes and priorities.

Statistics demonstrate all too clearly that failure to engender the right environment for prosperity - whether it be for individuals or businesses or indeed towns - leads to lack of health, poor quality living, poor environment, poor housing and rising crime.

The council has accepted, cross party, the need for growth point status – now we must balance this acceptance of housing numbers with business generation and up skilling of the indigenous workforce.

### 2. Achieving Economic Prosperity

Maidstone has a distinct comparative advantage to most other towns in Kent with our retail offering and this must be maintained. However, in order to achieve *prosperity* and reduce outward flows of commuters to London and elsewhere we must become a beacon of opportunity to other tertiary businesses that can provide a higher Gross Value Added(GVA) to the borough.

This will be achieved by the following:

- Encouraging Iconic economic projects into the borough, such as the Kent Clinic and associated ancillary services.
- Continuing to welcome into the borough outside businesses that will add value and raise average wages in the borough, such as Eclipse Park.
- Using the LSP and County Council to investigate and action plans for the skilling of the workforce and improvement to the statutory provision of education in the borough.
- Engendering an environment where indigenous small businesses can grow and foster a long term ability to survive and remain resilient in a challenging economic environment through support of small business 'incubator' units.
- Working closely with Kent Invicta Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses to deepen encourage better links between businesses in the borough.
- Enhance the importance and activity of Maidstone's Economic Forum and to widen its membership to ensure greater participation from the wider business community and use this as a vehicle to deliver a Core Strategy that will balance up the housing numbers accepted by the council
- Develop the economic aspects of the Core Strategy, in conjunction with partners and business forums and wider consultations, in a sensitive and pragmatic manner for economic development.
- Ensure that the emerging Core Strategy accepts and lays down policies for the correct balancing of housing numbers and business growth.
- An acceptance that the borough council and its partners cannot 'buck the market' but can create an environment where the market will wish to operate.

Whilst I am clear that economic prosperity is the engine room for the delivery of the council's other priorities we must protect the nature and environment of our town and borough. ***Economic Prosperity strategies that do not protect and secure the rural and environmental charm and character of the borough will lead to the reverse of what we are trying to achieve.***

Emphasis, through the Core Strategy, the planning system and widening of Area Character Assessments, will be given to ensuring we maintain our historic reputation that comes with our market town, our status as the County

Town, and the beauty of the surrounding countryside. Equally though we need an economy where people can continue to live and enjoy what Maidstone as a borough has to offer.

### 3. Transport

Transportation has an affect on how the borough will flourish and remain attractive for living in and accessing.

We have direct influence only over one tool for tackling congestion and that is Park & Ride. All other aspects of transport and road provision are with Kent County Council and the Highways Agency.

Park & Ride is still heavily subsidised by the council and for the long term survival of the scheme this cannot be allowed to continue. However, I am clear that Park & Ride is and will be a central feature for tackling congestion in the town and borough.

We will therefore:

*Begin a 'Master Planning' exercise for the development of a strategic approach to the long term provision of Park & Ride; developing a programmed implementation of sites, on a business case approach, to cater for projected growth in population, housing and car usage over the life-cycle of Growth Point status. This will bring to an end the ad-hoc approach that historically has been taken to Park & Ride. It will also assist in reducing and ultimately eliminating the heavy subsidisation of the past. This will ensure its long-term survival and viability.*

### 4. External Affairs & Joint Working

In the preamble to this document, I mentioned that it was not possible for the council to work in isolation and will need to embrace and work with other key effective partners. The principal forum for this will be the Local Strategic partnership and work has already started in turning this into a more robust thematically focused group and I will continue to build upon this as its importance increases over time as it becomes the likely vehicle for government funding. The LSP is central in assisting the borough council on working towards the six themes it has outlined. We cannot, by ourselves, achieve our aims and objectives.

We are currently seeking agreement to joint working practices with Swale, Tunbridge Wells and Ashford Boroughs but the overriding priority for me is to agree only where clear benefits can be accrued by Maidstone Borough without detriment to current provision of services - then there is merit in joint working.

### 5. Provision of Council Core Services and Finance

I am clear that despite the governments emphasis on council's being 'Place Shapers' the public expect the provision of certain core services at a level that they deem acceptable and appropriate.

The new waste collection regime will continue to be rolled out and I am adamant that the maintenance of weekly collection of residual waste and the fortnightly collection of recyclables currently remains the most appropriate system when balancing the need for increased recycling rates with reputational integrity of the council.

Cost savings can be made once the roll out has been completed and I am certain that the additional financial burden resulting from this new system as opposed to the so-called 'Alternate weekly Collection' method needs to be mitigated where possible. This includes considering the possibility of Saturday collections and, perhaps, joint working initiatives. Savings need to be made and will be made where appropriate.

The Conservative administration, in the face of real cuts in grants from central government, is well aware of the need to maintain council tax rates at a comparatively low level. I am clear that the council, as before, must pursue a policy of value for money in everything we do, balancing this with the need to provide core services at a level deemed acceptable by the public. Savings to the detriment of core services is not acceptable and savings must be sought through better working practice and joint working where it can be proved there are real service and financial benefits from doing so.

### Conclusion

The worst evil that can confront any authority is to preside over a declining town and borough, with increasing housing numbers and population, for therein lays an ever-declining circle of an inability to deliver on the other priorities that the council has set itself along with the human misery that results from declining economic prosperity.

*Therefore, the 'golden thread' of this administration is to deliver, with our partners and through the Local Strategic Partnership, an agenda of quality economic development, a proper transport strategy through Park & Ride and provision of quality jobs and skills. Only this can ensure that the themes of affordable housing, quality living and a healthy environment, together with tackling deprivation, can be delivered.*