

**MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW AND  
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 1 JULY  
2008**

**PRESENT:** Councillors Mrs Stockell (Chairman), Bradshaw, Hotson, Marshall, Mortimer, Parr and Mrs Wilson.

**APOLOGIES:** Councillors Horne and Mrs Marshall.

**18. Web-Casting**

**Resolved:** That all items on the agenda be web-cast.

**19. Notification of Substitute Members**

There were no substitute Members.

**20. Notification of Visiting Members**

It was noted that Councillor Ash was a visiting Member in attendance to be interviewed for Agenda Item 10, Cabinet Member for Corporate Services: Plans and Priorities for 2008-09.

**21. Disclosures by Members and Officers**

All Councillors declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 9, Whole Council Elections, by virtue of their positions as elected Councillors.

**22. Exempt Items**

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

**23. Minutes**

A Councillor asked about the review of Overview and Scrutiny resources that had been agreed at the meeting on 20 May 2008. The Senior Overview and Scrutiny Officer confirmed that the Overview and Scrutiny Partnership Manager was undertaking this review and would be meeting with the Committee Chairmen shortly as part of this work.

**Resolved:** That the minutes of the meetings held on 20 May 2008 and 2 June 2008 be agreed as correct records and signed by the Chairman.

**24. Mid-Kent Improvement Partnership**

The Director of Change and Support Services, David Edwards, explained that the Mid-Kent Improvement Partnership (MKIP) was a

proposal for Ashford, Maidstone, Swale and Tunbridge Wells Borough Councils to work together and seek opportunities for joint or shared services. This built on existing partnership working arrangements between the councils, for example in Audit and Overview and Scrutiny, but was not mutually exclusive – each council could still enter into partnerships with local authorities that were not part of the MKIP. The MKIP would aim to improve the quality and resilience of services while delivering efficiency savings. The MKIP would have a Management Board consisting of the Leaders and Chief Executives of the four councils which would meet quarterly and be responsible for agreeing joint projects to be taken forward. The Management Board would be chaired on an annual rolling basis; this year the Leader of Ashford Borough Council would chair it, with Maidstone taking the chair next year. Each council would retain its own decision-making processes, with each MKIP project requiring agreement from both the MKIP management board and the appropriate decision-makers at the relevant councils. Each council would contribute 30p per head of population to a fund to facilitate MKIP projects; this equated to a £42,840 contribution by Maidstone Borough Council. It had been proposed that the Council would also be the Accountable Body for the MKIP and the Corporate Finance team would deal with the financial issues such as the payment of invoices.

Several Councillors stated that, while they felt the project to be the way forward for the Council, they could not scrutinise the proposals fully as they had not received the late papers. These had been sent by e-mail and several Councillors were having IT difficulties following the office move. It was agreed that efforts would be made in the future to ensure that all Councillors received the papers well ahead of meetings.

A Councillor stated that the project seemed very ambitious and questioned whether enough resources were available. Mr Edwards responded that he hoped the MKIP would achieve some early wins and if necessary further resources would be built into the programme in the future, subject to agreement by the authorities. The funding from all four councils would assist in taking projects forward. The project was not in isolation from other conversations that had been ongoing with regard to new ways of working and as such was not viewed as over-ambitious. It would be vital to have good management structures in place to ensure that partnerships were effective. The arrangement would need to be monitored on a regular basis.

A Member asked how the MKIP would link with other local and regional organisations and partnerships. Mr Edwards explained that the Kent Commitment was about improving two-tier working and meeting efficiency targets and the MKIP would contribute to this overall objective. Some partnership working was taking place with Kent County Council, for example the Gateway and a possible cross-county contact centre. The MKIP could also help to deliver

some Local Area Agreement targets, dependent on the services selected. There were currently no proposals to combine borough-level Local Strategic Partnerships, as had happened in East Kent, however, these were important as closer working with other partners was likely to happen in the future. MKIP's role in regional working, for example its links with the Government Office for the South East, had not been explored in any detail.

A Councillor highlighted that the proposed contribution of 30p per head per year for four years would equate to a £170,000 revenue contribution by Maidstone Borough Council. It was queried how this money would be spent and at what point it would be reviewed. Mr Edwards explained that the money could be used to obtain advice on models of partnership working, as had happened before entering the learning and development partnership with Tunbridge Wells. A Programme Manager for the MKIP was also a possibility. Any business case put to the Management Board would need to show the expected return on investment. For example the Invest to Save programme provided a good model for this, and information obtained through the Price Book exercise, which compared the cost and quality of a number of local authority services, was also useful. The Management Board would be meeting in September to produce a schedule of proposed initiatives and Members requested that this document be brought to the Committee. Members also highlighted the importance of being clear about how the spending of the money would be monitored and requested quarterly updates to the Committee to ensure that this took place.

In response to a Councillor's concerns, Mr Edwards reassured the Committee that the MKIP Management Board had not been operational for long and the papers now being considered by the Committee had only been drawn up towards the end of May.

A Councillor highlighted that all of the authorities involved in the MKIP had different cultures and characteristics, and therefore reasonable timescales would need to be imposed and adhered to in order to ensure projects moved forward appropriately. It was also highlighted that the level of service was as important as savings in partnerships and they should only be entered into if the quality of the service remained the same or improved.

The Committee thanked Mr Edwards for his attendance and wished him luck in the forthcoming work on the MKIP.

**Resolved: That:**

- a) it be recommended to the Cabinet that the recommendations in the report of the Chief Executive be agreed subject to the inclusion of the following:

- i. in view of the differing cultures and characteristics of the authorities involved in the Mid-Kent Improvement Partnership, a reasonable timescale for projects should be implemented and adhered to, with this Committee being informed of any slippage;
  - ii. assurance be given that in all proposed projects, service is as important as savings; and
  - iii. there is a clear understanding of how the Mid-Kent Improvement Partnership fund would be spent and how that spend is monitored.
- b) the Committee receives a quarterly report on the spend of the Mid-Kent Improvement Partnership fund; and
- c) A costed timetable of proposed projects be provided to the Committee following the September meeting of the management board.

## **25. Whole Council Elections**

The Democratic Services Manager, Neil Harris, explained that he was in attendance to seek the Committee's views on a possible move to whole council elections. The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 stated that the Council was required to take "reasonable steps to consult such persons that it thinks appropriate on the proposed change before it passes any resolution". No guidance had been issued on this and it was therefore up to the Council to decide who to consult and how. A resolution to change to whole council elections had to be passed at a special meeting of full Council by a two thirds majority and this had to take place by 31 December 2010 for implementation in 2011. It was felt appropriate to consult all electors in the Borough on this potential change and a number of options for this were set out in the agenda papers. Writing to all electors individually would cost around £27,000. However, a leaflet could be included with the Electoral Registration forms that would be sent to all households in August and this would cost £704, with an online survey for those registering electronically costing a further £500. A number of political, voter, administrative and financial advantages and disadvantages were set out in the agenda papers for consideration; these would need to be relayed to residents as part of the consultation. In terms of finance, while whole council elections were likely to result in more by-elections, overall there would be a saving of between £90,000 and £100,000 over a four year period by moving to whole council elections. The Electoral Commission and the Councillors Commission both recommended a move to whole council elections.

Members of the Committee raised a number of concerns over the proposed changes and consultation:

- The cost of consultation, including the officer time involved in preparing and analysing the consultation;
- Whether a change was in the best interests of the electorate;
- Whether the changes would achieve a two thirds majority in full Council, because this was currently unlikely and it was unwise to consult if a change was already unlikely;
- Lack of evidence with regard to the advantages and disadvantages of whole Council elections, and consequently a lack of evidence to present to the electorate;
- Whether the Government would accept the proposed consultation using a leaflet with electoral registration forms.

Members proposed that a full investigation should be carried out by the Committee to establish evidence-based arguments to ensure that Councillors and the public were fully informed. This review should include an analysis of financial implications and a consideration of how a change would impact upon independent councillors and minority parties. Other councils would also need to be consulted to see how a change from elections by thirds to whole council elections had impacted upon them.

Mr Harris stated that he would be happy to assist the Scrutiny Team and the Committee in carrying out this review, and highlighted that provided the resolution to change to whole council elections was made by 31 December 2010, the timetable was not an issue.

**Resolved: That**

- a) An in-depth scrutiny review of whole council elections be undertaken; and
- b) Communities and Local Government and the Electoral Commission be asked to confirm whether a flyer sent with Electoral Registration forms would be deemed sufficient consultation.

**26. Cabinet Member for Corporate Services: Plans and Priorities for 2008-09**

The Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, Councillor Richard Ash, informed Members that the recent introduction of WiMax wireless internet in the town centre had received national press coverage and could potentially help to manage the CCTV operation. It could also result in £40,000 savings as the Council would no longer need to rent optical fibre cables from BT to connect the CCTV cameras to.

Councillor Ash stated that a recent exercise in the Chequers Centre now meant that 1400 residents had signed up to e-billing or e-citizen. A Councillor asked whether discounts could be offered to

encourage people to sign up to e-billing. The Director of Change and Support Services, David Edwards, explained that there had been a prize draw for those who had registered in a certain time period. E-citizen was considered as more important than just e-billing at this time because it allowed the Council to more effectively communicate with residents.

A Councillor asked whether the Council would look to work with the Mid-Kent Improvement Partnership on IT issues, as Ashford had a better planning webpages than Maidstone. Councillor Ash agreed that this was an area that should be looked at.

It was pointed out that this was a good time to consider purchasing land and property as prices were falling. Councillor Ash stated that this had not been discussed with officers yet, and Members highlighted that it was important not to miss out on an opportunity that could be financially beneficial.

With regard to the Cabinet Member's proposed review of corporate assets, a Councillor asked what the timescale for this was. Councillor Ash stated that it had already begun but there was no timetabled end date. The Head of Business Improvement was currently compiling a new, more detailed asset register. The Councillor emphasised that it was important to know what the Council owned and what it wished to acquire, particularly in light of falling prices. Another Councillor highlighted that some land in Coxheath was owned by the Council but was not on the current asset register. The Cabinet Member was therefore recommended to contact all parish councils to establish whether they held land owned by the Borough Council.

A Councillor requested that the Cabinet Member review the amount of documents sent to Councillors in hard copy, as many of these were available online or by e-mail and the duplication was unnecessary.

With regard to the new offices, Councillor Ash stated that he had visited the offices several times to speak with officers to ensure that any problems were being rectified. The contact centre had moved successfully, and the Gateway would be opened in October.

A Councillor stated that they believed that there had been some problems in the legal department for 2-3 years, and asked that this be investigated, particularly as it was potentially impacting upon planning enforcement. Mr Edwards stated that some joint work with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council was being considered on sharing senior management. Joint working would also increase capacity, particularly for dealing with peaks in workloads as legal work could be more effectively distributed.

A Councillor referred to risk management and asked that the Committee be informed if there were areas that needed more work.

The Councillor highlighted that there were risk management issues that were wider than those outlined in the strategic risk register.

**Resolved: That**

- a) An end-date for the review of corporate assets be provided to the Committee;
- b) The current opportunities for the purchase of land and buildings be investigated;
- c) The Cabinet Member review the guidelines for sending hard copies of documents to Councillors; and
- d) The Cabinet Member take a decision in the near future as to the future working arrangements of the Legal Department.

**27. Work Programming 2008-09**

The Senior Overview and Scrutiny Officer outlined the work programme suggestions that had been received for the Committee and highlighted that any reviews would need to be conducted alongside those issues that the Committee was required to look at, such as the budget, the strategic plan and performance monitoring.

A Councillor stated that, with regard to partnership working with Kent County Council, the County Council had appeared unwilling to work in partnership with Maidstone Borough Council. A definitive statement was required from KCC as to whether it was willing to work with the Borough Council, and in what ways. Members agreed that it would be useful to speak with the Leader or Chief Executive of KCC with regard to this.

The Committee agreed that the review of whole council elections, as agreed earlier in the meeting, should be conducted by the Committee as a whole. Partnership working should be an on-going review, and enhanced two-tier working and unitary status would be monitored as part of this. A review of the speed of Council decision-making would be undertaken by a working group.

**Resolved: That**

- a) A review of partnership working be on-going throughout the year;
- b) The Leader and Chief Executive of Kent County Council be invited to a meeting of the Committee to discuss partnership working between the authorities; and
- c) A working group be established to consider the speed of Council decision-making.

**28. Duration of the Meeting**

6:30 p.m. to 8:55 p.m.