

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COMMUNITIES, HOUSING AND ENVIRONMENT POLICY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 15 NOVEMBER 2022

Attendees:

Committee Members:	Councillors McKenna (Chairman), Brindle, English, Fort, Newton, Rose and Young
Lead Members:	Councillor David Burton (Leader of the Council) Councillor Lottie Parfitt-Reid (Lead Member for Communications and Public Engagement) Councillor Martin Round (Lead Member for Environmental Services) Councillor Simon Webb (Lead Member for Housing and Health)
Visiting Members:	Councillors Jeffery and Munford

54. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies of absence were received by Councillors Bartlett, Khadka and R Webb.

55. NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Councillor English was present as a Substitute Member for Councillor Khadka.

56. URGENT ITEMS

There was one urgent item, which was Item 19 – Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2022-23 and was published as part of an amended agenda on Friday 11 November 2022. The item would be considered after Item 12 – Forward Plan Relating to the Committees terms of reference, to allow the Committee to consider the agenda items relating to the Council’s finances together.

There were three urgent updates to Item 16 – Rural England Prosperity Fund, they were appendices A, B and C and were made available on Thursday 10 November and relate to the Committees consideration of the item.

57. CHANGE TO THE ORDER OF BUSINESS

The Chairman stated that Item 18 – Biodiversity and Climate Change Action Plan Update would be presented before Item 15 – Fleet Replacement Programme, due to the related subject matter.

58. NOTIFICATION OF VISITING MEMBERS

Councillors Jeffery and Munford were in attendance as Visiting Members for Item 18 – Biodiversity and Climate Change Action Plan Update.

59. DISCLOSURES BY MEMBERS AND OFFICERS

There were no disclosures by Members and Officers.

60. DISCLOSURES OF LOBBYING

There were no disclosures of lobbying.

61. EXEMPT ITEMS

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

62. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 11 OCTOBER 2022

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting held on 11 October 2022 be approved as a correct record and signed.

63. PRESENTATION OF PETITIONS

There were no petitions.

64. QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION FROM LOCAL RESIDENTS

There were no questions from local residents.

65. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO THE CHAIRMAN

There were no questions from Members.

66. FORWARD PLAN RELATING TO THE COMMITTEE'S TERMS OF REFERENCE

RESOLVED: That the Forward Plan relating to the Committee's Terms of Reference be noted.

67. COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME 2023-24

The Lead Member for Communities and Public Engagement introduced the report and highlighted that the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) had been amended to an income banded scheme in 2021. The CTRS provided a maximum support level of 80% to working age claimants and was consistent with other Mid-Kent Authorities. It was advisable for the scheme to be operational for two years before any changes were made.

The Lead Member for Communities and Public Engagement stated that as part of the due diligence to the scheme's review, consideration was given to both reducing and increasing the assistance available through the scheme. The latter would reduce the amount available overall to those residents, which could have unforeseen affects. Given the Councils' ongoing financial pressures, it was recommended that the scheme remain unchanged for 2023-2024.

The Committee supported the proposed recommendation, given the financial pressures being experienced by the Council.

RESOLVED: That the Executive be recommended to recommend to Council that no changes be made to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme for the year 2023/24.

68. FINANCIAL UPDATE & PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT

The Lead Member for Environmental Services introduced the report and stated that the Council's Housing Service was under increasing pressure. The Lead Member for Housing and Health explained that whilst additional opportunities to progress the 1,000 Affordable Homes Programme were being identified, the Council's existing temporary accommodation (TA) was in high demand with many families unable to move from TA into permanent accommodation. In response, the Council had sourced external TA which had caused a budget deficit to the service. A report would be presented to the Committee in December 2022 on the 1,000 Affordable Homes Programme.

The Head of Finance stated that the Council was expected to achieve a balanced budget for the 2022/23 financial year, due to a combination of delayed expenditure and increased financial recovery within other areas of the Council. There was an underspend against the capital programme, with further opportunities for the 1,000 Affordable Homes Programme to be identified.

During the discussion, the importance of addressing and improving housing provision for the Gypsy & Traveller Community and the overall progression of the 1,000 Affordable Homes Programme, was highlighted.

RESOLVED: That

1. The Revenue position as at the end of Quarter 2 for 2022/23, including the actions being taken or proposed to improve the position, where significant variances have been identified, be noted;
2. The Capital position at the end of Quarter 2 be noted; and
3. The Performance position as at Quarter 2 for 2022/23, including the actions being taken or proposed to improve the position, where significant issues have been identified, be noted.

69. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2023 - 2028

The Lead Member for Environmental Services introduced the report and referenced the importance of the Local Government Finance Settlement which would be announced on 17 November 2022.

The Head of Finance referenced the timeline associated with updating the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), with the Committee requested to recommend that the proposed MTFS be approved by the Executive. If approved, detailed proposals would be presented to the Committee in January 2023. Particular attention was drawn to the five scenarios contained within the MTFS attached at appendix 1 to the report, with the fifth scenario having been produced to reflect the possibility of increase inflation over a longer time period, with local government funding likely to be impacted.

The Head of Finance stated that a £2.5 million budget gap had been forecast for across 2023/24 and a £10 million budget gap across 2024/45.

The Leader of the Council highlighted the uncertainty surrounding the increase in inflation and the length of time until its reduction.

RESOLVED: That

1. The issues and risks associated with updating the Medium Term Financial Strategic are noted; and
2. The Executive be recommended to approve the Medium-Term Financial Strategy and the proposed approach outlined to development of an updated Medium-Term Financial Strategy for 2023/24 – 2027/28 and a budget for 2023/24 be approved.

70. BIODIVERSITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE ACTION PLAN UPDATE

The Leader of the Council introduced the report and referenced the updated provided at the Committee's previous meeting. Specific attention was drawn to point 2.7 of the report, which outlined the proposed annual review process for the actions within the Biodiversity and Climate Change Action Plan to be separated into those within the Council's direct control and those it can influence. The actions would be aligned to the relevant Lead Member on the Executive and presented to the respective Policy Advisory Committees as part of the annual review process.

The Leader of the Council stated that the proposed approach would be manageable and would ensure that the actions were effectively monitored. Member input into each annual review would be maximised through aligning the actions to the relevant Lead Member, particularly given that the full Council had declared a Biodiversity and Climate Change Emergency. The importance of considering Biodiversity and Climate Change when making decisions was emphasised, alongside some of the plans' achievements including the recent 'Go Green Information Centre'.

The Committee expressed support for the proposed annual review process to increase Member involvement in plan's review.

RESOLVED: That

1. The Committee notes the progress made towards delivery of the Biodiversity and Climate Change Action Plan.
2. The timeline for delivering against the targets contained within the Biodiversity and Climate Change Action Plan, and responsible Lead Members on the Executive and Officers be identified.

Note: Councillor English left the meeting during the item's introduction between 6.45 p.m. to 6.56 p.m.

71. FLEET REPLACEMENT PROGRAMME

The Lead Member for Environmental Services introduced the report and stated that the Fleet Replacement Programme outlined how the fleet for street cleaning, grounds maintenance and commercial waste service collections were replaced.

There were 54 vehicles in total with a value of £1.2 million. The vehicles were replaced every 5-7 years, dependent upon their running costs, reliability and mileage with the required funding agreed by the Council as part of its capital programme.

The Lead Member for Environmental Services referenced the Green Fleet Strategy, which acts as a mechanism for managers to determine which vehicles to purchase, with the use of electric vehicles supported provided that they were able to meet the business' need. Five electric vehicles would be purchased in 2023 for street cleansing and grounds maintenance. The introduction of telematics to improve the service's delivery was referenced.

The Committee expressed support for the programme, particularly the Green Replacement Strategy and the efforts made to increase the number of electric vehicles. In response to questions, the Lead Member for Environmental Services stated that further opportunities to increase the use of electric vehicles and other technological improvements had been and would continue to be discussed with the relevant officers. The Public Realm Operations Manager confirmed that purchasing electric vehicles was significantly more expensive than standard vehicles. The Committee were advised to contact the Officer if they wished to suggest a suitable, more efficient vehicle, with the team's working practices able to be changed to suit such a vehicle if required.

RESOLVED: That

1. The contents of the report relating to the Fleet Replacement Programme and planned vehicle purchases be noted; and
2. The Green Fleet Strategy contained within Appendix 1 be noted.

72. RURAL ENGLAND PROSPERITY FUND INVESTMENT PLAN

The Leader of the Council introduced the report and stated that the Rural England Prosperity Fund Investment Plan was an extension to the UK Shared Prosperity Funding allocated to the Council earlier this year. Over £500,000 had been allocated for dispersal within the borough's rural communities.

The Leader of the Council emphasised the difficulties in deploying the funding, given the short timescale for the investment plan's submission alongside there being no readily available schemes to implement. The approach proposed was to invite grant applications from rural community services that aimed to support and improve the provision of environmentally friendly energy systems, such as the use of solar panels and electric power batteries. The local economy could be positively impacted through local businesses fitting the facilities required, alongside increasing the local knowledge of green energy solutions.

The Committee were asked to consider the cap level per grant, which could be set at £50,000 per submission. Suitable proposals requiring funding below and above that level could also be considered.

In response to questions, the Director of Strategy, Insight & Governance confirmed that the definition of a rural area for the scheme was in accordance with the Office of National Statistics' definition. The funding had to be allocated between April 2023 to May 2025, with 25% and 75% of the funding allocated

respectively across 2023-24 and 2024-25. It was hoped that the funding could be distributed from February 2023, with further information to be provided to the Council's Members and Parish Councils once available. The Rural Fund Scoring Matrix attached at appendix 2 to the report was highlighted, as the Council had to be confident in a scheme's delivery in allocating the funding, which they had to demonstrate to Central Government.

Several Members of the Committee referenced the report's consideration by the Economic Regeneration and Leisure Committee earlier in November 2022, with the £50,000 cap level felt appropriate provided that proposals above and below that amount were considered flexibly on their merits.

The Committee expressed support for the proposed intervention plan as it would lead to improvements within the rural areas of the borough. It was suggested that a directory of green solution providers should be provided to assist in the submission of the funding bids and completion of any approved works. The interest already expressed from Parish Councils in particular was noted.

RESOLVED: That the Leader be recommended to approve the Investment Plan for the Rural England Prosperity Fund, subject to the Committee's comments, and then submitted to Government by the Director of Strategy, Insight and Governance.

73. COUNCIL FIRE & BUILDING SAFETY POLICY

The Lead Member for Housing and Health introduced the report and stated that the draft Council Fire and Building Policy attached at appendix 1 to the report was a technical document, intended for use by the Council's Housing Service.

The Committee expressed support for the draft policy.

RESOLVED: That the Executive be recommended to approve the Fire and Building Safety Policy attached as Appendix 1 to the report.

74. DURATION

6:30 p.m. until 7:56 p.m.