

# **MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

## **CORPORATE SERVICES POLICY ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

### **MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON MONDAY 5 FEBRUARY 2024**

#### **Attendees:**

<b>Committee Members:</b>	<b>Councillors Bartlett (Chairman), Cannon, Conyard, Mrs Gooch, Harper, S Thompson and Webb</b>
<b>Cabinet Members:</b>	<b>Councillor Perry, Cabinet Member for Corporate Services</b>

81. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Hinder.

82. **NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

There were no Substitute Members present.

83. **URGENT ITEMS**

There were no urgent items.

84. **NOTIFICATION OF VISITING MEMBERS**

There were no Visiting Members.

85. **DISCLOSURES BY MEMBERS AND OFFICERS**

There were no disclosures by Members or Officers.

86. **DISCLOSURES OF LOBBYING**

There were no disclosures of lobbying.

87. **EXEMPT ITEMS**

**RESOLVED:** That all items be taken in public, unless any Member of the Committee wished to discuss Item 13 – Exempt Appendix to Item 12 – Shared Revenues and Benefits Service, in which case the Committee would enter into closed session due to the possible disclosure of exempt information, for the reason/s specified having applied the public interest test.

88. **MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 17 JANUARY 2024**

**RESOLVED:** That the Minutes of the meeting held on 17 January 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed.

89. **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.

90. BIODIVERSITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE ACTION PLAN UPDATE

The Cabinet Member for Corporate Services introduced the item and stated that progress had been made on the Council's carbon footprint and that it was implementing its action plan better than other Local Authorities in the country. It was emphasised that more work was needed on decarbonising the Council's footprint, which included decarbonising Maidstone House. The Biodiversity and Climate Change Manager further stated the report included updates on net zero housing, net zero transport, solar panel projects, tree planting and the Rural England Prosperity Fund.

The Committee welcomed the report and the updated Biodiversity and Climate Change action plan. Concerns were expressed by the Committee that some of the targets in the Action Plan would not be met by 2030 and that national change was required to make a wider impact to biodiversity and climate change. During the discussion, the importance of the priorities in point 2.4 of the report was emphasised, with a request made that to the Cabinet that a further action plan on the items be presented to the Committee by September 2024.

During the discussion reference was made to the following:

- The increase in road traffic and the slow progress of the Transportation Net Zero Commitment and Electric Vehicle (EV) Strategy;
- A proposed Energy Officer role would be a beneficial addition to the Biodiversity and Climate Change team, and clarified that the role had been budgeted for;
- Bid submissions for the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme, including to retrofit Maidstone House; and

In response to questions The Head of Insight, Communities and Governance stated that:

- The Council had not received any timescale for responses to bids for the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme;
- There were schemes in the Biodiversity and Climate Change Action Plan that would likely not be completed by 2030, but that the Council was prioritising those that could be achieved by that deadline. It was stressed that Government targets for some actions were to be completed by 2050; and
- There was a typographical mistake regarding Action 7.2 on the Biodiversity and Climate Change Action Plan and that the Council's Carbon Footprint Dashboard had been set up and was online.

In response to further questions, The Biodiversity and Climate Change Manager stated that:

- The proposed Energy Officer role would collaborate with other councils on renewable energy projects, apply for funding grants and lead energy awareness campaigns; and
- The Council was working in collaboration with housing associations on installing insulation to improve their energy efficiency, and had recently acquired a new software which located hotspots in properties and identified insulation upgrades.

**RESOLVED to RECOMMEND to CABINET:** That

1. The strategic considerations for tackling net zero borough wide and action plan updates shown at Appendix 1 of the report, be noted; and
2. An action plan for the items listed in paragraph 2.4 of the report be submitted to the relevant policy advisory committees by September 2024.

91. **MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2024 TO 2029 - FUNDING SETTLEMENT AND FINAL SAVING PROPOSALS**

The Cabinet Member for Corporate Services introduced the report and stated that the budget proposals for 2024/25 presented a balanced budget with a surplus of £92,000. The report recommendations were outlined, including an increase in council tax of 3%. There was also a 3% increase in core spending power in the Local Government Finance Settlement.

Two additional recommendations were outlined by the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, to extend the repayment date for the loan to Kent Savers from 2027 to 2032 and to utilise the £92,000 budget surplus for financial inclusion. This included £59,000 to employ a welfare officer and a dashboard for tracking low income families, and £33,000 to fund at least an additional issue of the Council magazine, Borough Insight, per annum.

The Committee welcomed the financial security of the proposed budget but stressed that there would be challenges in setting a balanced budget in subsequent years. In considering the additional proposal to fund a further issue of the Borough Insight Magazine, some Members felt that the funding could be used for other purposes. Overall, it was agreed that the magazine was an effective way of communicating with residents and should be funded where possible.

In response to questions the Director of Finance, Resources and Business Improvement stated that:

- The £59,000 funding allocated to financial inclusion in the additional recommendation included a digital tracker which allowed the Council to identify families at risk of financial vulnerability;
- It was proposed that monies would be transferred from the £27 million net revenue expenditure to the Housing Investment Fund and financial inclusion;
- The Council had saved more than anticipated, giving a budget surplus of £92,000, which was able to be spent in 2024/25, but there would be a budget gap in 2025/26; and

- The expected income for bereavement services was predicted to decrease from £984,000 to £941,000 unlike other services which were increasing.

In response to further questions the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services stated that the £198,000 of unringfenced government grant was proposed to fund financial inclusion which included services such as community food larders.

**RESOLVED to RECOMMEND to CABINET:** That

1. The outcomes of consideration of budget proposals by the Policy Advisory Committees be noted;
2. The Budget Growth and Savings Proposals set out in Appendix A of the report, be agreed;
3. £198,000 of the unringfenced government grant described in paragraphs 2.5 and 2.6 of the report be used for one-off support to financial inclusion and food larder services, be agreed, and that the call on on-off funding for financial inclusion by £59,000 is reduced in recommendation 15, be noted;
4. The maximum use is of made of other residual one-off funding from other relevant council budgets to further sustain financial inclusion and food larder services, be agreed, and the position to be kept under review so that the Council can respond to changes in circumstances and future funding opportunities;
5. The balance of the unringfenced government grant described in paragraphs 2.5 and 2.6 of the report be transferred to the Housing Investment Fund, to be used to subsidise the Council's Affordable Housing programme, be agreed;
6. The updated Strategic Revenue Projection set out in Appendix B of the report, be agreed;
7. A £8.46 annual increase in Band D Council Tax for 2024/25 be recommended to Council;
8. The Revised Estimates for 2023/24 and the Budget Estimates for 2024/25 set out in Appendix C of the report be recommended to Council;
9. The Capital Programme set out in Appendix D of the report be recommended to Council;
10. The Treasury Management Strategy, Investment Strategy and Capital Strategy set out in Appendix E of the report be recommended to Council;
11. The projected level of General Fund balances in Appendix F of the report exceeds the agreed minimum level of £4 million, be noted;
12. The updated Medium Term Financial Strategy set out in Appendix G, be agreed;

13. The appropriate matters for decision to set a balanced budget for 2024/25 and the necessary level of Council Tax in accordance with the Local Government Finance Act 1992 and the Localism Act 2011 including the decisions made above, be recommended to Council;
14. The measures in the Regeneration and Levelling-up Act to reduce the period before charging a Council Tax premium on empty property from two years to one and to charge a Council Tax premium on second homes, be recommended to Council to be implemented from 1 April 2025;
15. It utilises the £92,000 budget surplus referenced in paragraph 2.34 for financial inclusion (Welfare Officer and dashboard for tracking low income families - £59,000) and at least one issue per annum of Borough Insight (£33,000);
16. An amendment to the repayment date for the loan to Kent Savers referenced on Page 97 from 2027 to 2032, be noted; and
17. The Finance Officers be thanked for their work on the budget.

92. SHARED REVENUES AND BENEFITS SERVICE - CONSIDERATION OF EXPANSION

The Cabinet Member introduced the report and stated that the report proposed to recommend Swale Borough Council (SBC) to join the Mid Kent Revenues and Benefits partnership, which included Maidstone Borough Council (MBC) and Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC). It was emphasised that there were significant financial benefits to the proposal and that Swale Borough Council had already agreed to the expansion.

In response to a question the Revenues and Benefits Manager confirmed that Sevenoaks District Council (SDC) and Dartford Borough Council (DBC) used the same computer software as the partnership, and that the authorities could potentially join the Service in the future.

**RESOLVED to RECOMMEND to CABINET:**

1. To agree to expand the Mid Kent Revenues and Benefits partnership to include Swale Borough Council; and
2. That delegation be awarded to the Director of Finance, Resources and Business Improvement to make the appropriate arrangements in line with the business case and sign the shared service collaboration agreement.

93. EXEMPT APPENDIX TO ITEM 12 - SHARED REVENUES AND BENEFITS SERVICE - CONSIDERATION OF EXPANSION

**RESOLVED:** That the item be considered alongside Item 12 – Shared Revenues and Benefits Service – Consideration of expansion.

94. DURATION OF MEETING

6.30 p.m. to 8:08 p.m.