

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW AND
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 5 AUGUST
2008**

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

APOLOGIES: Councillor Hotson.

29. Web-Casting

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

30. Notification of Substitute Members

It was noted that Councillor Williams was substituting for Councillor Hotson.

31. Notification of Visiting Members

It was noted that Councillor Garland was a visiting Member in attendance to be interviewed for Agenda Item 8, Leader of the Council: Plans and Priorities for 2008-09.

32. Disclosures by Members and Officers

There were no disclosures.

33. Exempt Items

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

34. Election of Vice-Chairman

The Committee agreed that, due to the resignation of Councillor Horne as a Committee member and Vice-Chairman of the Committee, the election of a vice-chairman should be taken as an urgent agenda item.

Resolved: That Councillor Butler be elected Vice-Chairman of the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the remainder of the Municipal Year 2008-09.

35. Minutes

A Councillor referred to Minute Nº 25, paragraph 2, bullet points 3 and 4, and requested that these be amended to read "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; *this was due to* lack of evidence...".

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 1 July 2008 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman subject to the addition of the words "this was due to" at the end of Minute № 25, paragraph 2, bullet point 3.

36. Leader of the Council: Plans and Priorities 2008-09

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Chris Garland, stated that the driving force for the Council in the coming years would be economic prosperity; this would be fundamental in ensuring the Council met its other corporate priorities. The Council needed to ensure that there was the right environment for prosperity. This would include the political will and drive to deliver prosperity and attract new businesses. Councillor Garland's other priorities were:

- Improving the skills of the Borough's workforce through lobbying Kent County Council (KCC) and using external organisations;
- Ensuring Maidstone was attractive to businesses and ensuring these jobs went to Maidstone residents;
- Park and Ride: there had previously been an ad-hoc approach to park and ride in the Borough, however the Cabinet Member for Environment was now producing a park and ride strategy which would be available by the end of the year. This was important in view of the emerging Local Development Framework (LDF) and Growth Point Status. Park and Ride was a vital tool to tackle congestion, which would otherwise deter businesses and visitors.
- Joint working was needed to help deliver the Council's priorities and the new thematic approach to the Local Strategic Partnership was key to this; and
- The environment was a vital part of ensuring the Borough's attractiveness to businesses, visitors and residents and was therefore key to achieving economic prosperity.

The Committee then questioned the Leader on his plans.

Transport

- The Cabinet was working with rail companies to improve rail services for the town as this would help to ease congestion.
- The Cabinet Member for Environment was liaising with KCC and the Highways Agency to seek transport solutions for the Borough.
- Due to Maidstone's projected growth over the next 20 years, it was vital to ensure that the Council's approach to park and ride was correct. Ideally, park and ride would eventually be

self-financing but in the short to medium term the Council would need to subsidise it.

- The 'Master Planning' exercise for the development of a strategic approach to the long term provision of park and ride was being undertaken by the Cabinet Member for Environment along with officers. The project brief for the exercise was to ensure that the new park and ride sites would be appropriate to the housing land allocations in the LDF and were large enough for at least 1000 parking spaces at each site. The exercise would also consider where visitors to the Borough could access park and ride sites, and would address all variations of park and ride.

Economic Development

- The South East Plan stated that 129,000 m² of employment land needed to be provided in the Borough, although due to Growth Point Status this was likely to increase. Land allocations for this would need to be agreed by Full Council as part of the LDF. The Leader would provide more details as they arose.
- The Council needed to work with its partners to establish what skills employers required in the workforce. A key problem in Maidstone was that fewer pupils achieved A*-C grades at GCSE than in comparable districts and KCC needed to be lobbied about this. Previously unavailable statistics on the performance of the Borough's schools had now been obtained.
- The Leader was working to bring employers into schools to educate pupils about business.
- Currently, 60% of Maidstone residents of working age commuted out of the Borough. This needed to be reduced, and the average wage for Maidstone-based jobs needed to increase in order for the town to be sustainable.
- Figures were being produced on how many new jobs would be needed to allow for the projected growth in the population of the Borough. The process for establishing these figures could be explained in detail by officers.
- While it was acknowledged that a range of jobs was needed to provide for a mixed workforce, the Leader emphasised that it was important not to underestimate people's aspirations when presented with opportunities.
- The Cabinet Member for Regeneration and the Economic Development Manager were working to forge closer links with the Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce and the Maidstone Economic Forum. The Leader was keen to see the membership of the Maidstone Economic Forum widen to include a variety of businesses.

Capital Projects

- The Council was receiving significant funding as part of its Growth Point Status and the Cabinet Member for Regeneration was now pursuing capital projects as part of this. In Councillor Garland's opinion, many capital projects had been delayed for too long. He intended to take these forward and cited the example of the All Saints Link Road.
- The Leader believed that if the Council contributed some of its capital resources to major projects its partners would also move forward on those projects.
- Aside from the All Saints Link Road, other key capital projects that the Leader wished to progress were the regeneration of the river front and the redevelopment of Upper Stone Street.
- The Leader confirmed that he was prepared to use Compulsory Purchase Order powers in order to deliver projects if this was necessary.

Local Development Framework (LDF)

- The LDF was currently on hold due to the Kent International Gateway (KIG) planning application; this was expected to be considered by the Planning Committee in the Autumn. Despite this, a number of sections of the LDF, for example the Green Spaces Strategy and the Gypsy and Traveller Policy, could still be taken forward. It was vital to look forward where possible as the full LDF, including land allocations, would not be agreed for 2 or 3 years.

Economic Conditions

- The Leader agreed that the credit crunch was likely to have a short term impact on his vision for the Borough, for example houses were unlikely to be built at the same rate as they had been previously. This meant that the Council was unlikely to meet its housing targets for the next 1-2 years. Despite this, it was important to proceed with the long-term vision beyond the credit crunch.

Other

- KCC had a similar vision to the Council and was a valuable partner. In response to concerns that KCC might be obstructive in providing information, the Leader confirmed he would be prepared to use the Freedom of Information Act to obtain information if necessary.
- The Leader confirmed that the new recycling scheme would be rolled out across the entire Borough.

Resolved: That the Leader of the Council's plans and priorities for 2008-09 be noted.

37. Draft Budget Strategy 2009-10 Onwards

The Chief Finance Officer, Derek Williamson, gave a presentation to the Committee on the Draft Budget Strategy 2009-10 Onwards (attached at [Appendix A](#)). Key points arising from the presentation included:

- The economic downturn meant that fees, charges and capital receipts were all major risks for the coming year; and
- The capital programme now needed reviewing, as this was due to be funded from capital receipts and approximately £7 million of the planned £12.2 million capital receipts was now at risk.

A planned capital receipt highlighted in the presentation was from Hayle Place. A Councillor stated that under the original agreement, the Council was supposed to receive payment for this when planning permission had been granted, which had now happened. Clarification was requested on whether this was still the case or whether payment was now dependent on the sale of Hayle Place.

A Councillor referred to an English Heritage report that had indicated that some of Maidstone's listed buildings, including those maintained by the Council, were in bad condition. The Leader was therefore requested to consider the use of the Large Buildings Maintenance Fund to address this.

In response to a question on the rollout of the waste and recycling scheme, the Leader stated that because the new bins had not been purchased in one load, there were now issues with bin shortages and price increases. However, the rollout of the scheme would continue, although it could be delayed.

A Councillor sought assurance that politically sensitive projects in the capital programme, for example the Leisure Centre, would not continue to be delayed. The Leader stated that the Leisure Centre was currently being pump primed by the Council and money was also being sought from the private sector.

With regard to balances, Mr Williamson explained that the budget strategy required that the level of unallocated balances be maintained at a minimum of 10% of the Council's revenue spend. If balances were to go below this, full Council would need to be informed. Mr Williamson was also under statutory responsibility to report to full Council when it considered the budget if he believed balances were approaching an unacceptable level.

A Councillor highlighted that in the Medium Term Financial Strategy, one way in which capital programmes were prioritised was according to 'local priorities'. It was clarified that this referred to the corporate priorities. The Leader then stated that residents were consulted on revenue spend and the revenue budget therefore reflected residents' priorities.

A Councillor highlighted that the review of corporate assets was not due to be completed until March 2009 and suggested that in the current economic climate, it would be advisable to bring this date forward. The Leader agreed that this should be considered.

A Member asked whether the Council would need to borrow money in the future. Mr Williamson confirmed that this would need to be considered in the future, though this could be sooner if capital receipts were not achieved and the capital programme was not reduced accordingly. It was highlighted that borrowing was acceptable if the investment of borrowed money was justifiable.

A number of other points were covered during the meeting:

- A report on the funding of the disabled travel scheme would go to Cabinet in August. This would recommend that additional investment income this year should go into balances and £150,000 of this should be allocated to funding concessionary fares for the next 2 years;
- There was currently no evidence that the economic downturn had caused an increase in homelessness spend;
- Revenue funds could be used to support the capital programme, but capital funds could not be used for revenue expenditure;
- The Council's pension contributions were fixed for three years by an actuarial review;
- The Council had a locally agreed pay deal and had therefore not been affected by recent strikes over local government pay. It was important that the Council had a pay structure that attracted and retained staff; and
- If the economic downturn resulted in an increase in uptake of benefits, the issues for the Council would be in terms of capacity, performance and reputation. Benefits were reimbursed 100% by the Government.

The Chairman thanked the Leader and Mr Williamson for their attendance and for an informative presentation.

Resolved: That

- a) Confirmation be sought on whether the capital receipt from Hayle Place was due upon sale of the land or confirmation of planning permission;
- b) The Leader consider the use of the Large Buildings Maintenance Fund in light of the recent English Heritage report on listed buildings in the Borough; and
- c) The review of corporate assets be brought forward in light of the current economic climate.

38. Nominations to “Speed of Council Decision-Making” Working Group

The Committee agreed that more information was needed before this working group was established to ensure the review was worthwhile. It was agreed that the parish council that made the original suggestion for the review should be approached for more information. Members also agreed that all parish councils in the Borough should be approached via the Kent Association of Parish Councils to establish whether they had evidenced experience of delays in Council decision-making.

Resolved: That

- a) The Parish Council that proposed a review of the speed of Council decision-making be asked for further information on its concerns; and
- b) The Kent Association of Parish Councils be requested to ask all Parish Councils in the Borough for evidenced experience of delays in Council decision-making, if this was available.

39. Future Work Programme

The Senior Overview and Scrutiny Officer informed Members that in response to a call for evidence by the Communities and Local Government Select Committee, a scrutiny working group would be established to consider the balance of power between central and local government. This would take place in August as the deadline for evidence was in September. Group leaders would be approached for nominations to this working group.

A workshop to consider the Strategic Plan would be held on 1 September 2008; all Scrutiny members had received invitations to this and responses were required as soon as possible.

The review of scrutiny resources had now been discussed by the Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee and would therefore be brought to the Committee on 2 September.

The Electoral Commission had been invited to the 2 September meeting as part of the review of Whole Council Elections. If they could not attend, Members agreed it would be constructive to interview managers of the Council’s service partnerships and to receive an update on the Overview and Scrutiny Partnerships Report.

Resolved: That the Future Work Programme be noted.

40. Duration of the Meeting

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