

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**MINUTES OF THE EXTERNAL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 15 JULY 2008**

PRESENT: Councillors Hotson (Chairman), Mrs Gibson, Mrs Hinder, Marchant, Mrs Parvin, Paterson, Vizzard and Williams.

APOLOGIES: Councillor Pollington.

19. Notification of Substitute Members

It was noted that Councillor Mrs Hinder was substituting for Councillor Pollington.

20. Notification of Visiting Members

It was noted that Councillor Ring was in attendance to be interviewed for Agenda Item 8, "Diverse Communities and Community Cohesion – Maidstone Borough Council".

21. Disclosures by Members and Officers

There were no disclosures.

22. Exempt Items

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

23. Minutes

Councillor Williams referred to Minute № 15, paragraph 9 and requested that it be clarified that the phrase "which would allow information about vulnerable children to be shared across agencies on a 'need to know' basis" was the officer's answer, rather than her question. The Senior Overview and Scrutiny Officer amended the minutes to read, "Mr Park explained that this would allow information...". Councillor Williams also requested that the accuracy of this statement be checked.

Resolved: That

- a) the minutes of the meeting held on 17 June 2008 be agreed as a correct record and duly signed by the Chairman subject to the addition of the words "Mr Park explained that this" at Minute № 15, paragraph 9; and
- b) The Community Development and Social Inclusion Manager check whether the statement,

“the Common Assessment Framework would allow information about vulnerable children to be shared across agencies on a ‘need to know’ basis” was correct.

24. Diverse Communities and Community Cohesion – Terms of Reference.

Resolved: That the Scoping Report for the Diverse Communities and Community Cohesion Review be agreed.

25. Diverse Communities and Community Cohesion – Maidstone Borough Council

The Cabinet Member for Community Services, Councillor Marion Ring, informed the Committee that the Corporate Equality Plan 2008-11 outlined what the Council was doing with regard to equality. Councillor Ring had visited Maidstone Mosque and was pleased to report that the elders at the Mosque felt they had a good relationship with the Council and the Police. She also intended to speak to community groups, for example the Greek and Polish community groups, in the near future, and she hoped to speak to travelling families to find out how they felt about the Council.

The Community Development and Social Inclusion Manager, Ian Park, highlighted a number of ways in which the Council worked to promote community cohesion and the integration of ethnic minorities:

- Maidstone Mela: this was the main event in Maidstone for the celebration of the different communities living and working in Maidstone.
- Maidstone Museum: The Museum participated in the Kent-wide Black History Week and it had held a Gypsy Exhibition.
- Ethnic Minority Advisory Group: this was a group including the Council, the Police and representatives of ethnic minority groups set up to look at incidents of racial crime and identify and deal with hotspots or patterns.
- Website: this offered a translation service.
- Interpretation and translation service: the Council subscribed to Language Line which provided an instant translation service over the telephone if a resident came to the Council and was unable to speak English. The Council did not automatically translate its documents into other languages which followed the advice of the Equalities Commission and the stated requirements of minority groups. Documents could still be translated upon request.
- Race Equality Scheme: this included a wide range of actions for the Council to implement with specified outcomes. The Chairman requested that a copy of this document be circulated to the Committee to inform the review and so that the Committee could have a worthwhile input into the document when it was revised.

A Councillor asked how many diverse communities existed in Maidstone. Mr Park highlighted that the term "diverse" usually encompassed six different strands of diversity, including ethnicity, age and sexual orientation. However, an individual's ethnicity was not necessarily the same thing as that person's identification with a minority community. Notwithstanding this, recognised ethnic minority communities in the Borough included a significant settled Gypsy population; communities from the Asian sub-continent including Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka; Eastern European economic migrants (including students); Polish; Greek; African; and Nepalese, amongst others.

A Councillor then asked how information could be found to establish how Maidstone's ethnic minority communities had changed. Mr Park stated that there was a national problem with a lack of data. Small amounts of information could be obtained from a variety of sources for example schools and GPs, but there was no central collection of data. A Councillor highlighted that employers such as Maidstone Housing Trust kept data on the ethnicity of its employees, though noted that the provision of this information by employees was voluntary.

The Chairman requested further information on the Ethnic Minority Advisory Group to inform the review, and then asked Mr Park whether the social inclusion budget was sufficient. Mr Park stated that the budget for social inclusion work was £33,660 but this covered a wide range of work, not just race issues. The budget was very tight. The most important thing that the Council could do in terms of social inclusion was to actively listen to the different communities in Maidstone and ensure their needs were taken into account in the Council's mainstream policies, strategies and action plans. Councillor Ring stated that she would be meeting with various ethnic minority community groups and she would like to refer them on to the Committee as part of this review. The Chairman agreed that this would be useful and encouraged all Members of the Committee to visit ethnic minority community groups and report back to the Committee to inform the review.

The Chairman stated that the information provided was extremely helpful for the review and thanked Councillor Ring and Mr Park for their attendance.

Resolved: That

- a) The Race Equality Scheme be distributed to all Members of the Committee;
- b) Information on the Ethnic Minority Advisory Group be provided as part of the Diverse Communities Review; and
- c) The information provided be used to inform the Diverse Communities Review.

26. Diverse Communities and Community Cohesion – MVB

The Chairman welcomed the Chief Executive Officer of MVB, Sue Towns Okorodudu, to the meeting and asked that she outline her views on diverse communities and community cohesion in Maidstone, in particular in relation to the voluntary and community sector.

Ms Towns Okorodudu stated that a major issue for the third sector in Maidstone was that a coordinated approach was required in the collection of data about which communities were here and where they were. It was necessary to engage people as citizens of Maidstone, rather than just as BME (black and minority ethnic) groups. It was vital to prevent marginalisation and to encourage input into local, regional and national agendas. MVB was also keen to promote volunteering amongst minority groups, as this was not currently part of the ethos of those from developing countries.

BME voluntary and community groups required funding to develop, reasonably priced accommodation from which to operate, training on how to run an organisation, help with marketing and publicity, and opportunities to network and share good practice. For example, the Nepalese Community Group had flourished since it had begun operating from a specific base in the Community Support Centre.

There were a number of examples of good practice in Maidstone and Kent, including the Mela, the Kent BME Network (linked to the North West Kent Racial Equality Council), and community development workers. The Kent Partners Compact included a Code of Practice on Equality and Diversity; Ms Towns Okorodudu would be working with the Community Development and Social Inclusion Manager to develop local action plans arising from this. Maidstone Gateway would offer an excellent opportunity to provide information and promote services to all sectors of the community. Maidstone Cultural Group met monthly and was successful in encouraging communities to share their festivals with food, dance, theatre and so on.

MVB had supported a variety of BME communities to date, including groups from India, Africa and Afghanistan. It had also facilitated a focus group to assist voluntary and community sector organisations in working with BME groups, and had produced a Directory of Communities of Faith in Maidstone.

Ms Towns Okorodudu made a number of recommendations to the Committee to improve the integration of ethnic minorities in Maidstone. It was suggested that a Community Development Worker from a major BME community group could be appointed to research and develop BME groups in Maidstone and to act as a conduit to statutory services. BME and faith groups should be

encouraged to join the Local Strategic Partnership. Also, voluntary and community sector groups funded by the Council should be expected to have robust Equality and Diversity Policies including actions to improve BME involvement. It was also suggested that MVB should source funding to facilitate a focus group for third sector organisations with a remit for community cohesion.

A Councillor asked Ms Towns Okorodudu where grants for community groups usually came from, and it was explained that sometimes Councillors' devolved budgets were used, and MVB had software to search for national or regional funding opportunities. The Council's Funding Officer also worked with MVB to locate funding.

The Chairman thanked Ms Towns Okorodudu for an extremely informative and useful presentation and highlighted the importance of her future involvement with the review.

The Committee then discussed potential future witnesses. The Senior Overview and Scrutiny Officer informed Members that Gurvinder Sandher, Chairman of the Mela Advisory Group, and Professor Ted Cattle, Chair of the Institute of Community Cohesion, had been invited to the August meeting, though responses to these invitations had not yet been received. Members agreed that the following witnesses would also be appropriate:

- The Manager of the Citizen's Advice Bureau;
- The Chief Housing Officer;
- Mid Kent Police;
- A representative of Maidstone's schools;
- Social Services.

A Councillor highlighted that it would be important in the review to highlight that public services, including housing and education, were provided in a fair and objective way, as some residents believed they were not provided equitably.

Resolved: That

- a) The evidence provided by the Chief Executive Officer at MVB be used to inform the Diverse Communities and Community Cohesion Review; and
- b) The Chief Executive of the Citizen's Advice Bureau, the Chief Housing Officer, Mid Kent Police, a representative of Maidstone's schools, and Social Services be invited to provide evidence for the Review.

27. Future Work Programme

The Committee discussed its Future Work Programme and agreed to receive an update on anti-social behaviour at its October meeting.

With regard to Local Children's Services Partnerships (LCSPs) and the lack of district representation on these, the Committee was keen that this topic should be pursued. The Senior Overview and Scrutiny Officer informed Members that a briefing on LCSPs would be provided for all Members on 17 September 2008, and the Committee therefore agreed to discuss the topic at its October meeting.

Resolved: That anti-social behaviour and Local Children's Services Partnerships be considered at the Committee's October meeting.

28. Duration of the Meeting

6:30 p.m. to 7:40 p.m.