

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL EXTERNAL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON MONDAY 24 NOVEMBER 2008**

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

APOLOGIES: Councillors Mrs Gibson, Paterson and Pollington.

59. Notification of Substitute Members

It was noted that Councillor Warner had been scheduled to substitute for Councillor Paterson but had subsequently had to give his apologies.

60. Notification of Visiting Members

There were no visiting Members.

61. Disclosures by Members and Officers

There were no disclosures.

62. Exempt Items

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

63. Diverse Communities Review: Citizen's Advice Bureau

The Chairman welcomed the Chief Executive of Maidstone Citizen's Advice Bureau, Bonny Malhotra, to the meeting. It was highlighted that Mr Malhotra had been due to attend the Committee's meeting on 19 August 2008 but due to an administrative error within the Council this meeting had been cancelled at short notice. The Chairman apologised to Mr Malhotra on behalf of the Committee and thanked him for agreeing to attend this later meeting.

Mr Malhotra gave a presentation and report to the Committee (attached at [Appendix A](#) and [Appendix B](#) respectively) outlining the history of Maidstone Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) and its key roles, funding streams and expenditure. Maidstone Borough Council now provided 61% of the Bureau's funding. Statistics showed that the number of clients approaching the Bureau in 2008-09 had increased from 2007-08. The CAB had a Polish advisor who was a valuable resource in light of increasing numbers of Polish clients. The Vice-Chair of the CAB also worked with the Polish community.

Mr Malhotra then answered questions from the Committee, with the following key points arising:

- The CAB had recently become actively involved with the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) and had been consulted on the Sustainable Community Strategy. However, requests to be involved in the drafting of the Kent Agreement 2 had not been responded to;
- Mr Malhotra attended the Minority Ethnic Action Group run by Mid Kent Police;
- The CAB had an equalities sub-group to assess the service that the CAB provided to diverse communities, but it was noted that it was difficult to engage some groups, for example the Muslim community;
- One of the ways in which the CAB tried to influence policy was by writing to Members of Parliament (MPs). A recent example of an issue they had raised with MPs was with regard to concerns with the new Habitual Residence Test. Members of the Portuguese community who had previously been employed now had to take the test to apply for benefits. If they failed the test, they would not be eligible for benefits, despite having been resident in the UK for as long as 16 years. This was an issue that would apply to any European citizen working in the UK;
- The CAB had a good relationship with the Council and Mr Malhotra was on a number of steering groups, including the Housing Sounding Board. He was in regular contact with the Community Development and Social Inclusion Manager, though this was generally on individual issues rather than over-arching policy;
- Training to become a CAB volunteer usually took one day a week for 6-8 months. However, this could be adapted to suit individual needs and Mr Malhotra was looking to develop a programme to allow people to volunteer during evenings and at weekends to encourage involvement from a wider range of residents; and
- Initial advice given to clients was generalist and given on the same day, however for specialist debt advice there was currently a 4-6 week waiting list. Further funding to alleviate this situation was being sought externally.

Members also discussed access to CAB services and highlighted that the CAB had previously gone out into the community. Mr Malhotra explained that the CAB had previously received funding from the Community Fund to run a 3-year outreach project but this proved unsustainable when the funding ended. Surgeries were currently held in Parkwood, Shepway and Lenham which were funded by the Primary Care Trust, Maidstone Housing Trust and Lenham Parish Council respectively. Discussions were taking place with Headcorn Parish Council about developing a surgery there. It was difficult to run surgeries with volunteers due to the limited hours that they worked, and the CAB had to be careful that the surgeries did not

weaken the services offered by the main CAB office. The CAB had recently started offering home visits for those clients unable to visit the main office. In response to a question, Mr Malhotra confirmed that the CAB regularly contacted parish councils with posters and leaflets to advertise their services and to investigate possible outreach services. Councillors discussed that rural surgeries would be beneficial for migrant workers and gypsies and travellers.

The Chairman requested that Mr Malhotra meet with the Council's Community Development and Social Inclusion Manager, Ian Park, to discuss the Council's approach to community cohesion and ethnic minorities. With regard to the Diverse Communities Review, Members agreed that it would be useful for Mr Park to attend the 16 December 2008 meeting to assist in drawing together the evidence gathered so far.

Resolved: That

- a) The Community Development and Social Inclusion Manager meet with the Chief Executive of Maidstone Citizen's Advice Bureau to discuss the Council's policies in relation to community cohesion and ethnic minorities;
- b) The Community Development and Social Inclusion Manager be invited to the Committee's informal meeting on 16 December 2008 to assist in evaluating the information gathered for the Diverse Communities Review; and
- c) The information provided by the Chief Executive of the Citizen's Advice Bureau be considered as part of the Diverse Communities Review.

64. Sustainable Community Strategy: Vision and Objectives

The Chairman introduced the Community Planning Co-ordinator, Jim Boot, and the Community Planning Officer, Victoria King, to the Committee and requested that an update on the Sustainable Community Strategy be provided.

Mr Boot explained that the Council's Community Strategy, 'Maidstone Matters', adopted in 2003 and revised in 2005, had made significant achievements. These included the introduction of community wardens and improved support for carers. The 2006 Communities and Local Government White Paper, 'Strong and Prosperous Communities', introduced the idea of a 'Sustainable Community Strategy' (SCS) which would be more outcome-focussed than the original community strategies. Following the publication of the White Paper, Maidstone's Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) had been redeveloped and made fit for purpose with the help of a consultant.

In order to develop the SCS, parish plans were analysed, focus groups were held and Police and Communities Together (PACT) groups were approached to identify community priorities. A consultation exercise entitled 'Stick Up for Maidstone' was held in the Chequers Mall, the County Show and at community group meetings to establish what people thought about Maidstone. Over 800 responses to this had been received. Mr Boot highlighted that a significant amount of consultation was undertaken by the Council and its partners and so this had reduced the need for specialist consultation for the SCS. Instead, a wide range of consultations were analysed to get a broad view of community priorities. A consultant had also been commissioned to analyse the plans of LSP partners to establish whether the previous community strategy priorities had been embedded in these, as the priorities were supposed to be multi-agency.

The largest difference between the previous community strategy and the SCS was the evidence base. Miss King had developed a Maidstone profile which looked at a range of issues and indicators to develop a picture of Maidstone in terms of its strengths, weaknesses and direction of travel. It also helped to highlight some 'hidden' problems, for example, Maidstone's performance in GCSE results was above average but some schools' results were significantly below average. The SCS would attempt to tackle inequalities by targeting problem areas while supporting those areas that were more successful. Mr Boot explained that previously, Government funding had gone to those areas with more widespread or 'obvious' levels of deprivation and Maidstone had been overlooked because its pockets of deprivation, though acute, were very confined. The SCS would highlight that this situation could not continue. Mr Boot also pointed out to Members that the Maidstone profile had been built using available data and some of this was quite patchy. The ethnic profile of the area, for example, did not exist. Also, because Maidstone did not have major problems in many areas, some issues did not show up at all.

The Maidstone LSP had met on 17 November 2008 and agreed the following vision: "we want Maidstone Borough to be a vibrant, prosperous 21st century urban and rural community at the heart of Kent, where its distinctive character is enhanced to create a safe, healthy, high quality environment with high quality education and employment where people can realise their aspirations". The LSP had put emphasis on prosperity, the balance between urban and rural areas, Maidstone's pivotal role in Kent, and Maidstone's heritage. The vision had been used to develop the objectives and chapters for the SCS. Actions, targets and performance measures were now being put to these objectives to form the draft SCS.

In response to a question, Mr Boot explained that the 'high', 'medium' and 'low' priority given to different issues related to the Kent Agreement 2 (KA2). The KA2 had identified 35 priorities for Kent but these were not all relevant for all districts. Therefore,

each district had been asked to produce a Local Action Plan prioritising the indicators for that area and this had been agreed by the LSP and Cabinet. All were still considered priorities but were considered in terms of where the LSP could give 'added value' to those indicators. For example, Maidstone's domestic violence record was similar to other districts in Kent so was only 'low' priority, whereas the number of people killed or seriously injured on Maidstone's roads was significantly higher than average so this was a 'high' priority.

A Councillor asked for further information on deprived areas and funding being diverted to areas of perceived higher need. Mr Boot highlighted the issue of teenage pregnancy and noted that Government funding to tackle this had gone to those areas with the highest rates. In the late 1990s, this had been areas such as Thanet, Margate and Folkestone, and these areas had subsequently seen a significant reduction in teenage pregnancy rates. The SCS was trying to pick up on other indices of deprivation and feed information back to the Kent Partnership and the Kent Public Service Board to highlight that where resources had gone to other areas, the situation in Maidstone had developed and in some cases got worse, despite local attempts to tackle it. A Councillor stated that statistics on teenage pregnancy showed high rates in Parkwood but this was because that was where social housing for teenage mothers was. Mr Boot agreed that this needed to be carefully portrayed in the SCS as the statistics could be misleading and informed Members that the Council, as a housing authority, was actively pursuing this issue as part of the solution to the problem.

With regard to consultation, Miss King explained that no consultation on the SCS was currently taking place as the draft strategy was being developed. Public consultation would take place when the draft had been agreed by Cabinet. Mr Boot stated that he wanted the partners to take more ownership of the strategy and responsibility for consultation because they needed to embed the strategy in their organisations as much as the Council did. In response to concerns over low rates of consultation for the development of the SCS priorities and vision, Mr Boot emphasised that a number of consultations and sources had been drawn upon to inform this, and parish plans, which achieved 60-80% response rates for consultation, had also been used. Results of the Place Survey were expected soon and this would provide a robust, representative sample of Maidstone's population that could be used to reinforce or amend the priorities.

A Councillor stated that representatives of NHS West Kent and the Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust had attended an External Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 18 November 2008 and provided different information to that outlined in the draft SCS. This needed to be addressed as improvements at Maidstone Hospital should be a key milestone in the Strategy.

A Member stated that educational attainment was a major strand of the strategy but the Council was limited in its influence over this. Mr Boot pointed out that the plan was a multi-agency partnership plan so the partners could support schools to improve standards. The Council and its partners also needed to consider how they worked with the new school structures, for example academies.

In response to a question, Mr Boot informed Members that the draft plan would go to Cabinet on 14 January 2009, followed by a 6 week public consultation. It would then be amended as necessary and taken to Cabinet in March before being approved by Full Council. The Chairman requested that the draft strategy be brought to the External Overview and Scrutiny Committee as part of the public consultation. A Member also suggested that the priorities within the strategy needed some flexibility as priorities changed with differing situations, which was particularly important as this strategy covered a 10 year period.

Resolved: That

- a) The issue of statistics showing a high teenage pregnancy rate in Parkwood be addressed in the Sustainable Community Strategy;
- b) Information on Maidstone Hospital and the provision of healthcare in Maidstone be amended to reflect the information provided to the External Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 18 November 2008; and
- c) The Sustainable Community Strategy be considered by the External Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 17 February 2009.

65. Duration of the Meeting

6:30 p.m. to 8:40 p.m.