

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW AND
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 5 JULY
2011**

PRESENT: Councillor Mrs Gooch (Chairman)
Councillors Mrs Wilson, Butler, Black, English,
Mrs Gibson, Paine, Pickett and de Wiggondene

23. The Committee to consider whether all items on the agenda should be web-cast.

Resolved: That all items be web-cast.

24. Apologies.

Councillors Harwood, Hogg and Barned sent their apologies.

25. Notification of Substitute Members.

Councillor English substituted for Councillor Harwood and Councillors Butler and Black substituted for Councillors Barned and Hogg respectively.

26. Notification of Visiting Members.

Councillor Field and Councillor Hotson attended as Visiting Members interested in item 9, The Marketing of Council Buildings.

27. Appointment of Chairman and Vice -Chairman

It was resolved that:

- a) Councillor Fay Gooch be appointed as Chairman for the municipal year 2011-12; and
- b) Councillor Stephen Paine be appointed as Vice-Chairman for the municipal year 2011-12

28. Disclosures by Members and Officers:

There were no disclosures.

29. To consider whether any items should be taken in private because of the possible disclosure of exempt information.

It was agreed that all items should be taken in public as proposed.

30. Minutes of the Meeting held on 7 June 2011

It was resolved that subject to the amendment of minute 20 paragraph two to include "and income generation" after savings, the minutes of the meeting held on 7 June 2011 be agreed as a correct record of the meeting and duly signed by the Chairman.

31. The Marketing of Council Buildings

The Chairman invited Councillor Field to introduce 'The marketing of council buildings' item to the committee in accordance with the constitution. Councillor Field explained that he felt that the recent marketing of council properties in Mote Park had taken place in a manner that was not transparent and had attracted negative publicity. The Committee was told that the auctioneer had been instructed to market the properties in Mote Park before the Cabinet Member had made a decision. Councillor Field felt that this coupled with Members being asked to consider the price of the buildings after they had been marketed made the process somewhat farcical. Councillor Field concluded by saying that the he understood the urgency of the matter given the condition of the building but asked Members to examine the clause in the constitution that had allowed the sale to take place and satisfy themselves that it allowed for transparency. If they felt the clause did not, Councillor Field requested they made recommendations as appropriate.

Members surmised that the media coverage had not reflected well on the authority and despite there being no wrong doing the result of the action taken did not demonstrate transparency and good governance. Members felt it was important to examine the constitutional clause with the legal department's assistance. The Committee agreed that whilst the email explanation sent to Members from the Chief Executive had clarified the situation, the public and press would have benefited from a clearer understanding of the process. Members felt that the Scrutiny function was of great benefit in providing the assurance to the public that decisions made by the executive were accountable; the action taken in the marketing of Mote Park buildings had resulted in a bypass of the Scrutiny process. Councillor Hotson joined the meeting as a Visiting Member and told members that the Executive should have informed the opposition at the time and provided clearer communication about the actions taken. Members were advised that there had been a call-in period once the decision had been made which was not utilised by Scrutiny Members. The Committee discussed Councillor Field utilising his right under the constitution that to place an item on the scrutiny agenda. The Constitution states that: 'Any Member of an Overview and Scrutiny Committee or Sub-Committee shall be entitled to give notice to the proper officer that he wishes an item relevant to the functions of the Committee or Sub-Committee to be included on the agenda for the next available meeting of the Committee or Sub-Committee. On receipt of such a request the proper officer will ensure that it is included on the next available agenda.' Members agreed this should be publicised to other Members.

It was resolved that:

- a) Legal advice should be taken by the Committee to add an extra sentence to the appropriate part of the constitution to ensure transparency and good governance in the future; and
- b) The Scrutiny e-bulletin should be used to raise awareness of the constitutional device used by Councillor Field to add this item to the agenda.

32. Annual Review of Complaints 2010/11

The Chairman welcomed Angela Woodhouse, Head of Change and Scrutiny and Ellie Kershaw, Policy and Performance Officer to the meeting. Ms Kershaw outlined the Annual Review of Complaints for 2010-2011 and the more robust approach taken with complaints monitoring over the past 12 months. The Officer explained that the over all purpose was improve overall customer satisfaction as well as using it as a tool for improvement with a focus on outcomes. The Committee was informed of training being delivered in conjunction with the Hazlitt Theatre, offering a chance to role play customer service scenarios as well as training in letter writing to eliminate the use of jargon and promote plain English. Members were informed that the next step would be to look at the Complaints Policy and that customers would be involved in the review. Ms Kershaw explained that complaints were now being categorised and that a new IT system was in development which would allow for reports to be run which would provide the finite detail needed to see where problems were occurring and for what reasons.

Members queried level 1 complaints; how they were established at the first point of contact and how they were dealt with. The Officer explained that all online complaint forms were sent to the Contact Centre who decided whether or not they were complaints. If they were enquiries they would be forwarded via email to the relevant department. Members were assured that reports run on a quarterly basis looked again at the details of the complaint and an adjustment could be made if it was actually an enquiry. The Committee queried when an enquiry or complaint became an official complaint. It was explained that a request for service only became a complaint when the service was not carried out within the agreed timescales for service delivery.

The Committee made the suggestion that all complaints should be handled by the Contact Centre. The Officers advised that at present the Contact Centre did not have the resources to do this which could cause a problem with waiting times but this was something the Committee could evaluate in the performance statistics. Members asked if there was a timeline for the review of the Complaints Policy. Officers explained that the review had begun with a workshop with Officers; there would then be a customer focus group and an online consultation with residents and a staff survey was already underway. Scrutiny would be welcome to review it prior to going to Cabinet in August

It was resolved that:

- a) Future reports should include how many enquiries or requests for service become complaints because they were not handled correctly at the first point of contact;
- b) Officers should investigate how issues passed on to Officers via Councillors from residents are recorded and a mechanism devised to record this in a cohesive manner;
- c) The Communications Strategy should address issues customers may have with communication skills, written or verbal, and any other factors which could hinder the customer including access for disabled persons;
- d) The Communications team should investigate methods to ensure policy and operational changes are communicated widely and in a timely manner to all residents and staff; and
- e) Reports that the supply of green sacks have run out until August should be investigated by Officers.

33. The Council as a Business Review

The Committee moved on to the scoping document for their major review topic, 'The Council as a Business'. Members emphasised that the review was about 'blue sky thinking' (original or creative thinking, unfettered by convention) and mention should be given to income generation specifically in the broader explanation of the title and a question mark should be added to the title of the review to add resonance. Members looked at the outcomes and decided how best to group these together to tackle at meetings. The Committee felt that the outcomes for the review (Appendix A) would be better presented in a numbered order and on that basis they would like to address 1, 2 and 6 first, then 3 and 5 and lastly 4 and 7. It was decided that the first meeting should include the outlook of the council on the review topic with the Chief Executive and Directors invited as witnesses.

The Committee felt that it was important that they looked at the outside world and the business community as much as the activity of other local authorities. Members suggested areas to investigate such as the Local Government Association for examples of good practice and decided that all Committee Members should conduct individual research on innovative income generating practices which would be presented and discussed at the September meeting when the Committee would invite external witnesses. Members suggested ways in which they could engage with the public and staff to find out what services residents wanted and ways in which income could be generated. The Committee decided that a survey would be the best way to engage with staff and Councillors and this should be designed by the Scrutiny Officer, with the Committee's input so the initial responses could be discussed at the next meeting with a workshop to follow at a later date. Members emphasised that they were looking for innovative business opportunities from staff and Councillors and an anonymous response may encourage participation. Members felt that a press release would be their initial step in engaging with the public; Councillors Paine, English and Pickett volunteered to meet with the

Communications team for advice and decide the best way forward on behalf of the Committee.

The Committee resolved that:

- a) A question mark should be added to the review title;
- b) The outcomes should be numbered and grouped together to be examined at specific meetings: 1, 2 & 6 at the first meeting in August, 3 & 5 for the September meeting and 4 & 7 at a later meeting;
- c) The LGA should be looked to for good examples of best practice;
- d) A meeting should be arranged with Communications and volunteers from the Committee to decide the best way to engage with the public on the review with a press release as the starting point;
- e) An anonymous staff and Councillor Survey should be designed with the input of members asking staff and Councillors for their ideas for business innovation to provide the Council with an income. This should be the starting point for a later cross Councillor/staff workshop;
- f) An interim report showing the results of the staff survey should be prepared for the August meeting;
- g) The Committee should prepare their own research on best practice for the September meeting when external witnesses will be invited; and
- h) Senior Officers should be invited to the next meeting to provide Members with the Council's outlook on income generation and the authority operating as a business.

34. The Leader and Cabinet Members - Written Updates

The Committee discussed the written updates from the Leader and Cabinet Members. Members noted the differing approaches and levels of detail given about the various portfolios and priorities for the year. The Committee felt that the updates were valuable and enabled them to pick up on certain issues which they could immediately offer feedback and identify areas where further information would be useful. The Committee was particularly interested in youth deprivation and teenage pregnancy, an area addressed by Councillor John A Wilson in his update. It was decided that this should be highlighted to the appropriate Scrutiny Committee in the form of a written recommendation. Members felt that engagement at County level was missing in particular and wanted to ensure that the Local Strategic Partnership were aware of their concerns.

Member's felt that the Cabinet Member for Community and Leisure Service's priorities were areas where duplication could occur because of the uncertain future of the Local Strategic Partnership with the development of Locality Boards. The Committee felt that this was something they could therefore monitor as changes took place over the year and the Cabinet Member's statement had provided them with the information required. Members also felt that recent Scrutiny work in the

previous Municipal Year could be provided as a useful background to other areas of the Cabinet Member's portfolio.

The Committee was interested in finding out more from the Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Transport in three specific areas: the use of the river, transportation and general planning matters regarding the regeneration of Maidstone. In terms of regeneration projects Members asked that the Cabinet Member update them on Maidstone East Station, the Post Office and Kent County Council.

If was resolved that:

- a) The Cabinet should be thanked for their updates and Councillor J A Wilson's contribution be noted as exactly what Members were looking for in terms of a written update;
- b) Councillor J A Wilson advised of Scrutiny's 2010-11 Work Programmes as a useful background to his 2011-12 priorities and that the work and developments of the Local Strategic Partnership be monitored;
- c) Councillor Greer, Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Transport should be asked to provide further detail on the following areas of his portfolio:
 - Making more use of the River, complete with an 'artists corner';
 - Transportation;
 - General planning matters regarding the regeneration of Maidstone; an update on the regeneration plans for Maidstone East Station, The Post Office and KCC Buildings: and
- d) A recommendation should be sent to the Cabinet Member for Communities and Leisure and the Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee advising that the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny would like the issues of teenage pregnancy and disadvantaged young people addressed urgently though the Local Strategic Partnership with high level engagement with Kent County Council Education and Youth Services following the approval of the Committee.

35. Future Work Programme and Scrutiny Officer Update

Members discussed their Future Work Programme and items on the Forward Plan. The Scrutiny Officer updated the Committee with a response from the Cabinet Member for Communities and Leisure on Concurrent Functions as requested at the June Meeting. It was highlighted that the matter was still under negotiation. Councillor English declared an interest in this item in relation to his role with Kent Association for Local Councils (KALC). The Committee also considered the review of community halls, the upcoming budget strategy and the proposed changes to non-domestic rates.

It was resolved that:

- a) The Committee would not seek to have an involvement with the Concurrent Functions project at present;
- b) A training session should be arranged with Paul Riley on the budget strategy before the next meeting;
- c) An update on the nationalisation of non-domestic rates should be sought and provided to the Committee when available; and
- d) 'Community Halls' as a one off topic should be investigated and timetabled into the Committee's future work programme.

36. Duration of Meeting

6.30 p.m. to 8.45 p.m.