

Maidstone Borough Council

External Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 17 February 2009

Sustainable Community Strategy

Report of: Senior Overview and Scrutiny Officer

1. Introduction

1.1 At its meeting on 24 November 2008, the Committee interviewed the Community Planning Co-ordinator and the Community Planning Officer with regard to the Sustainable Community Strategy: Vision and Objectives.

1.2 The relevant extract from the minutes of the meeting is as follows:

"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."

1.3 As a result of these discussions, the Committee recommended 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.

1.4 In accordance with recommendation (c), the Community Planning Co-ordinator will be in attendance at the meeting to discuss the Draft Sustainable Community Strategy.

2. Recommendation

2.1 Members are recommended to consider the draft Sustainable Community Strategy and make any comments or recommendations on this as they see fit.

2.2 Areas that Members may wish to consider include, but are not limited to:

- Whether the SCS adequately reflect the priorities of the community;
- Whether the SCS is realistic; and
- The degree to which the vision supports the development of a 'sustainable community'.

3. Sustainable Community Strategy

3.1 Under Part One (Section Four) of the Local Government Act 2000, local authorities in England and Wales have to produce a community strategy to promote the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of their areas, and to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development in the United Kingdom.

3.2 These strategies must be developed through a "community planning" process – this means that key stakeholders must be involved, including large groups such as the police and health authorities, and smaller ones such as community and voluntary groups.

3.3 The idea of community strategies was developed further in the *Strong and Prosperous Communities* Local Government White Paper that was published in October 2006 by Communities and Local Government. This proposed that a Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) would set the overall strategic direction and long-term vision for the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of a local area and look at how to address difficult and cross cutting issues such as the economic direction of an area, cohesion, social exclusion and climate change¹.

3.4 Communities and Local Government offers the following definition of a 'sustainable community':

"Sustainable communities are places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They meet the diverse needs of existing and future

¹ *Creating Strong, Safe and Prosperous Communities Statutory Guidance* Communities and Local Government, July 2008, page 26

residents, are sensitive to their environment, and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run, and offer equality of opportunity and good services for all.

For communities to be sustainable, they must offer:

- decent homes at prices people can afford
- good public transport
- schools
- hospitals
- shops
- a clean, safe environment.

People also need open public space where they can relax and interact and the ability to have a say on the way their neighbourhood is run.²

- 3.5 The SCS will set the vision for the Borough and will describe how people living and working in the Borough want it to change over time.
- 3.6 The Maidstone Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) is the overseeing body for the SCS and promotes co-operation between key public, private, community and voluntary organisations to deliver the aims of the SCS.

² <http://www.communities.gov.uk/archived/general-content/communities/whatis/>