

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**MINUTES OF THE REGENERATION & ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 23 AUGUST 2011**

PRESENT: Councillor Burton (Chairman)
Councillors Cuming, Beerling, Black, English, Mrs Joy
and Springett

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

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

37. Apologies.

Councillors Newton and Ross sent their apologies.

38. Notification of Substitute Members.

There were no Substitute Members.

39. Notification of Visiting Members.

It was noted that Councillors Greer and Vizzard were Visiting Members interested in agenda item 9, Traffic Congestion Review.

40. Disclosures by Members and Officers:

There were none.

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

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

42. Minutes of the meeting held on 26 July 2011

Resolved: That subject to the amendment of minute 27, that Councillor Nelson-Gracie was a Visiting Member, that the minutes of the meeting held on 26 July 2011 be agreed as a correct record and duly signed by the Chairman.

43. Maidstone Museum and The Hazlitt Theatre Update

The Chairman welcomed Simon Lacey, Museums & Heritage Manager and Mandy Hare, Theatre & Events Manager to the meeting and invited them to provide the update.

Mr Lace informed the Committee that there had been significant progress since they last met in November 2010, however there was still £1.1m of funding to be sourced regardless of having obtained funds from various foundations. Mr Lace went through the Scrutiny Recommendation Action Implementation Plan (SCRAIP) that had previously held recommendations for the Museum, and provided an update shown in Appendix A.

The opening due in September 2011 had been delayed due to duct, lift and power supply not being finalised, and the new opening date was scheduled for 7 October 2011. In answer to a question, Mr Lace informed the Committee that there was a penalty clause of £3,500 per week. The Committee heard that the reason for the power supply being delayed was due to a dispute between the engineer and the contractors. The Committee requested that an update on this delay be provided for the next Committee meeting on 27 September 2011. A new Project Manager, Lewis Small, had been drafted in from Building Control and meets with the Museum and Contractors every Wednesday. Mr Lace confirmed that they were focussed on completing the extension before solving areas of disputes. As there were only seven months left until the Museum was fully open, there were concerns for securing funds. The Committee requested that the financial position of the Museum be provided at the next meeting.

Mrs Hare informed the Committee that the Theatre now had three hundred friends on facebook, which provided information about comedy shows and events appealing to that audience, and that they were twittering on a regular basis. The front of house camera was enabling photos of the show to be published onto their website.

Although the Theatre was closed for essential boiler works, they were on schedule for re-opening on 19 September, and had daily meetings with the contractors to ensure this remained the case.

Mrs Hare stated that Mr Morgan, Assistant Director of Regeneration & Cultural Services had appointed a consultant to look at the Theatre and ways in which it could be more efficient, including the possibility of government funds. A findings report was due at the end of October 2011, which the Committee requested to see at that time.

In answer to a question, Mrs Hare stated that there needed to be an acknowledgement by the council that advertising for the Theatre was different to other council departments, as it was money well spent due to the income it could bring with the correct publicity. The Committee enquired if the leaflet that was produced could be sent via email. Mrs Hare confirmed that this was being investigated, as they held 2,500 people on their database and email could be used for those who preferred it. The Committee suggested that the email be tailor made for the client's taste, using surveys or 'people who saw this, also liked this' at the bottom of the email. Mrs Hare noted this and agreed to investigate how to implement it.

The Committee wished to convey their thanks to the staff of both the Museum and the Theatre, as it had been a testing time during the building works.

Resolved: That Mr Lace and Mrs Hare be thanked for the information and that:

- a) An update on the dispute between the engineer and the contractor be provided to the Overview & Scrutiny Officer in time for the next meeting;
- b) the financial position of the Museum be provided at the next meeting; and
- c) the Theatre findings report due at the end of October 2011 be circulate to the Committee.

44. Traffic Congestion

The Chairman welcomed John Taylor, Director of the Invicta Chamber of Commerce, Rob Jarman, Head of Development Management, John Newington, Senior Pollution Officer and Christopher Finch, Member of the public to the Committee.

Mr Finch introduced himself and stated that he was a chartered surveyor by profession, and had studied pedestrianisation at university as part of his dissertation. He explained his views that were outlined in Appendix A of the report in the agenda, highlighting that Maidstone was populated with traffic lights especially around the town centre's gyratory system which did not allow vehicles to proceed in a smooth manner. Mr Finch circulated a map of the Town Centre, attached at Appendix A and suggested to the Committee that the bus stop on Tonbridge Road near Maidstone West train station should enter Station Approach, and stop outside the train station so to allow the Tonbridge Road traffic to utilise the two lanes more freely. He also suggested that due to the Whitehouse car showroom no longer trading and was up for sale, a roundabout could be placed there to allow access in and out of Barker Road and onto the Tonbridge Road/London Road, rather than use the gyratory unnecessarily, possibly as part of a wider regeneration scheme. This would make easier access for the new residences, Lockmeadow and the station, especially with the new high speed rail service being introduced. Mr Finch highlighted that London Boroughs were able to fine cars that were idle in yellow box junctions, however the Committee had learnt in its day visit to Chelmsford Borough Council that this was not possible for any Local Authority outside London. He also considered reducing the number of traffic lights/junctions at various points through the town 'ring road', and possible re-alignment or other roads as part of possible future regeneration schemes.

Mr Taylor informed the Committee that from the Chamber of Commerce's point of view, an infrastructure was needed before growth could take place. He also stressed that 'the rule of unintended consequences' happens and Maidstone had examples of that. Mr Taylor highlighted that other towns within the county were scheduled for schemes from Kent

County Council (KCC) however, Maidstone was not one of them and therefore felt that the County Town was losing out on offers of funds.

Mr Jarman stated that on planning applications, KCC Highways department were consulted giving advice on highway safety, not comments regarding volumes of traffic. If an application was refused, and potentially appealed against, the Council had to objectively find harm in the plans. Consultation with the Air Pollution team was also sought for major applications.

The Committee were informed that the Planning Policy Guidance 3: Housing, was introduced in 2003 which used the 'stick and carrot' methodology for predicting traffic growth in residential areas, and that the draft Integrated Transport Strategy was due out for public consultation in September which had been written in partnership with the Highways Agency and KCC Highways. The Chairman highlighted that these agencies had declined to assist the Committee with its review.

Mr Jarman informed the Committee that by utilising the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), developers could pay for infrastructure and reminded the Committee that a number of things were asked for with regards to planning funds, namely 40% affordable housing, schools, doctor surgeries, CCTV and Parks. Mr Jarman highlighted that it was key to get KCC highways buying into a development brief, and to get the scheme into their priority list from the start.

Mr Newington stated that there was a statutory duty to monitor air quality, and when pollution was found over EU levels the Council was required to declare an 'Air Quality Management Area' and produce an air quality action plan detailing ways in which it would reduce the pollution level, which was 70-90% traffic related. Maidstone had 6 areas that exceeded annual usage, and therefore a plan had been produced using internal and external partners to form a steering group. The relationship with those external bodies was very important, as the Council did not have the control over delivering some of the actions. The action plan was produced in 2010 and sought to reduce the number of vehicle trips generated, promote cycling, walking, public transport and a range of measures such as Park and Ride, bus lanes, variable speed limits, freight studies etc were being investigated, as well as a Travel Plan, which enabled the borough council to have a larger role by engaging with businesses, including the Federation of Small Businesses and the Chamber of Commerce to bring down the number of trips into the town centre, and identified savings for businesses.

The Committee discussed the idea of a strategic route to allow traffic to cross the town without going through it. It was suggested that businesses may be content to pay £1 for a quick easy access to the motorway. However, it was also suggested that the strategic route would need to be supported with regulations to ensure that it was the only way for freight to travel.

The Committee noted that where there were vacant premises, the Council could consider purchasing the land to be used for future road

developments. Mr Finch suggested that Tax Increment Financing (TIF) which was currently focussed on the Business Rates of commercial properties but understood central Government may consider widening this to include Council Tax. However, he stressed that for transparency purposes, an audit trail would be needed to reassure the public that funds obtained through this method were spent for the correct purpose, in this case for road developments. Mr Taylor confirmed that the only way to allow the traffic to be directed away from the town centre would be by using a strategic route and it was therefore a key ingredient in building the infrastructure that Maidstone needed.

Resolved: That the officers, Mr Finch and Mr Taylor be thanked for the information.

45. Future Work Programme

The Committee thanked the Overview and Scrutiny Officer for organising the field trip to Godstone Traffic Control Centre and Chelmsford Borough Council. The Overview and Scrutiny Officer informed the Committee that informal notes of the day would be circulated in due course.

Resolved: That the future work programme be noted.

46. Duration of Meeting

6.30pm to 8.22pm.