

Environment and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 24th June 2008

Councillor Brian Moss

Cabinet Member for Leisure and Culture: Plans and Priorities for 2008-09

I start with an apology for the lateness of this report, I have been away on holiday for two weeks and have therefore had limited time to study in detail progress within my portfolio. I managed this portfolio during the period 2006-07 and so I am aware of most issues and problems that exist.

I would comment that my predecessor Cllr Dan Daley kept me up to date with his actions on a portfolio where we were in general agreement on what it was hoped to achieve for Maidstone and its residents. For this I would thank him and say that I am willing to discuss any aspect of my portfolio with any councillor who expresses an interest or concern about any matter included within my remit.

There are a number of matters which I started over a year ago and for a host of reasons have not yet been concluded. It is my aim to address these matters and seek early conclusions.

- i) **The Maidstone Marker** – the erection of this prominent piece of art work has been delayed, firstly because of siting problems and secondly because the structure had design faults which could have caused problems in heavy winds. These have now been resolved and it is hoped to erect the structure within the next two months.
- ii) **Athletics Track** – The Athletics track a joint venture between the council, Maidstone Athletics Club and Sutton Valence School is now progressing and will be dealt with by the planning committee later this month. I am a strong supporter of this project in that it will provide athletes and young people of Maidstone with superb training facilities. The involvement of Sutton Valence School who are putting in a very large financial contribution and are keen to involve other schools, clubs and Maidstone's youth is making this project a viable long term facility.
- iii) **Hazlitt Arts Centre** – The conversions to the Exchange has been completed and the project launched at the beginning of May. The project does not end there; it will need ongoing advertising support and the attraction of quality arts – both visual and performing – to make it an ongoing success. I am ambitious that this cultural activity succeeds in the long term and provides a facility for all ages and interests.

- iv) **Maidstone Museum and Bents Art Gallery** – The east wing project is progressing well and all being well will be completed for opening in July 2010. There is the small matter of raising £1.6 million which together with the £2.0 million from the Lottery fund and £400,000 from our capital budget will finance the project. We have taken on a fundraising consultant with considerable experience and I am confident that we will raise at least the finance needed. I am hopeful that excess funds can be raised to ensure no corners are cut and that all aspects of the project are of the best quality and design. The importance of this project cannot be emphasised enough, when completed it will put Maidstone well and truly on the map as a visitor venue of excellence.
- v) **Mote Park** – The consultant's paper has been published and presented to members. The report, I believe, is a good compromise between retaining the essential character of the park and improving facilities and its attraction for the public. We are fortunate to have such a prominent open space within the town and now hope that the consultants report when finally approved will attract the grant funding necessary for the parks improvement.
- vi) **Leisure Centre** – This will need careful supervision to ensure that the necessary improvements and maintenance are carried out and that the new contract for its management gives Maidstone the best 'deal' for its long term future.
- vii) **Direct Labour** – The maintenance of parks, gardens and open spaces is now done by our own direct labour force. I intend to review their staffing, supervision and level of expertise to ensure that this department gives best value. It really does have the potential to improve the appearance of many aspects of the borough; I want to ensure it meets a high standard.
- viii) **Weaving Heath** – Whilst this project has proceeded over the past year I am now happy to report that the extra piece of wet land by the roundabout at the top of new cut is being purchased by the council. This will complete a green area of importance within the borough.

Few areas within the leisure and culture portfolio are statutory obligations of the council however my view is that they are of premier importance in making the borough an attractive place to live, work and set up business. They are crucial to the prosperity of the town and we neglect them at our peril.

Arts development, where grant funding has ceased, tourism which brings considerable benefits to the borough, the market as an attraction, allotments so necessary now that we have too many flats without gardens are all within my portfolio and will receive my attention over the coming months. I look forward to reporting progress at the end of the year.