

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW AND
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 6
MARCH 2012**

PRESENT: Councillor Mrs Gooch (Chairman)
Councillors Mrs Wilson, Yates, Mrs Gibson, Hogg,
Paine, Pickett and de Wiggondene

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

It was resolved that all items should be webcast.

98. Apologies.

Apologies were received from Councillor English.

99. Notification of Substitute Members.

There were no Substitute Members.

100. Notification of Visiting Members.

There were no Visiting Members.

101. Disclosures by Members and Officers:

There were no disclosures.

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

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

103. Minutes of the meeting held on 10 January 2012

It was resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 10 January 2011 be agreed as a correct record of the meeting and duly signed.

104. Quarter 3 Complaints Monitoring

Catherine Negus, Policy and Research Assistant introduced the Quarter 3 Complaints Monitoring report. She informed the Committee that in Quarter 3, October to December 2011 there had been 102 complaints and 86% of those complaints had been resolved within the agreed timescale. This was down on the previous period.

Housing had the highest number of out of time complaints because of long term sick leave. They were now receiving assistance from Executive Support. Ten stage two complaints had been received, 90% of these had been resolved within the agreed timescale which showed an improvement on the previous quarter. 28 responses had been received to the Complaints Questionnaire, 29% of those contacted were satisfied or very satisfied with the way their complaint had been dealt with.

An issue highlighted to Members was that staff were not always recording the equalities aspect of complaints. Members were informed that the Core Brief (a document that was circulated to all staff at Team Meetings to inform them of important information) would highlight the need for staff to be aware of this when handling complaints. Miss Negus also explained that in some cases only details of the original complaint or our response to it were being logged, the requirement for both would also be highlighted in the Core Brief and reported to CLT (Corporate Leadership Team). The Officer highlighted that within the last quarter two complainants had been registered as vexatious.

The Committee questioned the progress of the new correspondence and complaints system. They were informed that a consultant had come into to look at work carried out by the IT department and some progress had been made. However, a share point system which matched the desired specifications was now available from an external provider. The Council would be able to purchase this and adapt it to Maidstone Borough Council's exact requirements at approximately the same cost as developing a new system. Members voiced their concerns at this as previous updates given in Quarter 1 and 2 had been on the implementation of a new system. They suggested to Officers that the Council's approach to the development of the correspondence system should have been in line with the principles of Prince II project management as widely advocated by the Council and the progress reported to a project board.

Ellie Kershaw, Policy and Performance Manager, explained that there were a number of Officers now trained in Prince II but training had taken place after this project had begun. As a result it was included in the day to day workload of IT who had had staffing problems.

The Officer explained that the system currently being used was corrupt, meaning that notifications were not being sent when complaints were running out of time and Executive Support were having to remind managers. Members felt that this should not be an excuse for poor performance. They felt that complaints should be monitored by the responsible Manager. The Manager should also be responsible for analysing complaints and identifying trends and these issues should be addressed in the forward planning of the service. There were concerns raised as to whether the issue was symptomatic of a bigger problem such as staff resources as the authority had suffered staff losses.

The Committee considered complaints handling critical to the management and effectiveness of the organisation. It was questioned

whether complaints should be further categorised by 'seriousness'. Miss Kershaw explained that if a complaint was important to the customer it should be important to the authority and it was not for Council Officers to make that distinction. She added that determining the seriousness of a complaint would be costly as it would be a manual job. Members were informed that the new correspondence system would allow a general costing to be allocated to complaints.

Miss Kershaw highlighted the issue of content in complaints handling. She explained that work was being done with Housing as some complaints were actually be appeals against the housing points system for housing allocation. The Committee discussed Development Control and the representations made during the planning process. They considered the handling of representations made after a decision had been made and whether these should be considered as complaints. Members felt that all issues should be logged as a complaint initially and then evaluated and categorised as appropriate at a later stage. The Officer agreed that it was beneficial to be cautious and informed Members that the new correspondence system facilitated this approach.

Members considered the way in which complaints reported by Councillors on behalf of residents were dealt with. They were informed that the new system would allow for two names to be allocated per complaint, the Councillors name and the resident's name, making it easier for the complaint to be tracked. The Officer told members that all complaints whether reported by a Councillor or resident should be recorded in the same way.

Members queried whether the Council had many complaints made about the High Street Project. The Officer confirmed that to date there were one recorded but that as it was a project they may have been kept on file separately.

Members were updated on the complaints training. The pilot session, run in conjunction with the Hazlitt Theatre, had been carried out two weeks prior and a focus group had followed. The Officer reported a positive response and explained that the training would be rolled out to front line staff initially and a session could be run for councillors if this was of interest. She explained that a similar session could be developed on customer care.

It was recommended that:

- a) The implementation of the complaints/correspondence system should be reviewed and the remainder of the project should be undertaken utilising the project management principles of Prince II as advocated by the Council;
- b) The Committee remains informed on trends and reoccurring issues for the future analysis of complaints that will be available to them via the new complaints/correspondence system. Training needs should be identified by Managers; and

- c) Whilst the complaints system is not sending reminders, Managers should be monitoring complaints to ensure they do not go out of time.

105. Equalities Objectives

Catherine Negus, Policy and Research Assistant introduced the Equalities Objectives report to the Committee. She explained that the Council's duty under the new act was to set one or more equalities objectives. Members were informed that the Council would be setting three objectives which as felt to be proportionate to the size of the authority. They were required to be specific, measurable and achievable.

The authority had to consider the data available to them on the 'protected characteristics' which were:

- Disability;
- Gender reassignment;
- Pregnancy;
- Race;
- Religion;
- Sex and Sexual orientation;
- Age; and
- Marriage.

Miss Negus explained that the data that had been available mainly related to age, gender, ethnicity and disabilities. As more data became available more objectives could be set, the Council would not have to wait a further four years to do this. One of the key recommendations of the report was that when the Council ran surveys more of the characteristics would be included in the questions. There was also an intention to talk to stakeholders and improve data collection methods.

Members were concerned that there would be pressure on residents to reveal private information such and religion and sexual orientation. Ellie Kershaw, Policy and Performance Manager, assured Members that all equalities questions were optional.

The Committee were told that the three objectives to be set were:

- **Improve the number of visitors to the museum aged 55+ by 5% over the next year. This target would then be expected to recur but this should be assessed after the first year.**

The Committee were informed that this would fit into the Council's priority of making Maidstone a decent place. The museum was underused by the borough's elderly residents and work would involve a cafe and events for older people.

- **Increase the proportion of men registering for the Healthy Weight from 24% to 28% over the next year. Subject to review, targets would then be set for each of the next three**

years leading to a probable target of 40% by the end of the fourth year.

It was highlighted that this was dependent on the programme being granted PCT funding to continue. This target would fit with the Council's priority outcome of ensuring that 'residents are not disadvantaged because of where they live or who they are, vulnerable people are assisted and the level of deprivation is reduced'. Members were informed that it was mainly women who were referred to the programme despite research showing that there were a higher proportion of overweight men in the borough than women. This target could also help to address the issue that men in deprived wards had a life expectancy of up to 5 years less than in other wards.

- **Increase the proportion of people aged 18-24 who feel that the Council keeps people 'well informed' or 'fairly well informed' about services and benefits to 58% over four years.**

Members were told that this objective was based on the results of the recent Resident's Satisfaction Survey and the earlier Place Survey in 2008.

The Committee questioned who would take ownership of the objectives and targets. They were informed that each objective would be assigned to a manager and actions included in service plans. It was explained that there would be a number of different contributors but there would be overall ownership. The objective set around young people would be owned by the Head of Communications but there would be a number of different departments whose leaflets and communication methods would have to be considered in ensuring that this objective was met.

It was established that when the action plans were developed Managers would be questioning the cause of the inequality and why it existed before setting recommendations to achieve the outcome. Members were informed that the objectives would be monitored in the Council's biannual survey.

Concern was raised over the objective set around the museum. It was felt that there would be an impact on visitor numbers when the neighbouring Library relocated, reducing footfall to the area. The Museum had been extended but there had been staff cuts and income generation targets put in place because of a funding shortfall. Members were concerned that the various actions taken with the Museum, along with the equalities objective set, were not being addressed in a joined up manner.

Miss Kershaw explained that surveys would be used to measure the outcome of the objective which would reduce the burden to staff.

Members questioned the way in which people were selected for the Healthy Weight programmes. It was clarified that this was through self referral or by a GP referral and the criteria was a BMI of 28 or over.

A Member referred to 1.3.14 in the report and the comment made regarding the shortage of young people at Maidstone Borough Council. It was felt that this could be seen as a positive outcome as happy staff remained in continuous employment which over time increased the age group.

In relation to staff numbers Members questioned the number of staff leavers since March 2011, when the last staff analysis was undertaken. They were informed there had been 61 leavers.

It was recommended that:

- a) The report be noted by the Committee and recommendations set out in the report be taken forward with the Committee's approval; and
- b) The Committee's concerns regarding the capacity of the Museum in achieving the outcome of the equalities objective: 'Improve the number of visitors to the museum aged 55+ by 5% over the next year' be taken into account by the Cabinet Member in his decision making.

106. Residents Satisfaction Survey

Roger Adley, Head of Communalisations, introduced the Residents Satisfaction Survey which he explained was an independent postal survey conducted by Lake Market Research from November 2011 to January 2012. Members were informed that this was within the same timescale as the previous 'Place Survey' conducted in 2008. The questions were not like for like but there was a continuation of a number of questions that could be tracked.

It was explained that survey asked a number of questions about the Council's Priorities. He noted that there was a strong correlation between value for money and customer satisfaction. Areas where customer satisfaction was high included communications and a rise in satisfaction was noted with doorstep recycling, local decision making and treating people fairly. Areas where there was a slight fall in satisfaction were with refuse and street collection and different backgrounds getting on well together.

Members were informed that residents had been asked to vote on a list of actions to help deliver the Council's priorities. These included encouraging new business, attracting investment, keeping the elderly and disabled in their own homes for longer, affordable housing, energy efficiency and improving consultation with residents .

The Officer explained that the results of the survey had been analysed on a ward by ward basis so that areas where there were differences in satisfaction levels could be addressed.

Members were pleased to see that satisfaction with the Council was high but there was some disappointment that the ward results did not always echo the same levels of satisfaction and the successes that as ward Members, they were aware of. The Committee questioned what targeted work was going to be done with wards to address the areas highlighted and how the information that underpinned the results would be used. The Officer explained that this would be addressed by each manager in their service planning. He told Members that the results had been very pleasing and the insight into the improvements that needed to be made would be something that Cabinet would be keen to take forward.

Ellie Kershaw, Policy and Performance Manager, informed Members that although exact benchmarking could not be done with the results, she had been in touch with other authorities and those carrying out surveys would share their results to enable some comparison to be made.

The Committee considered the question relating to the satisfaction of the Leisure Centre. It was felt that comparisons between the use of the Leisure Centre and other facilities such as the YMCA and private gyms would be useful in future surveys. Members felt that this was especially important in aiding the fitness of Maidstone residents

A member questioned the way in which the results of Question 3 'Percentage of people agreeing that they can influence decisions affecting their local area' would be addressed as it was noted the satisfaction level was low. Mr Adley informed Members that the Democratic Services Manager was already looking at this issue. The use of Social Networking sites for agendas, decisions and notices was being investigated and other innovative methods. Miss Kershaw advised that the Localism Act would give residents new powers in their local area and in two years time when the next survey was carried out there could be an impact as a result of this.

It was recommended that:

- a) The content of the report should be noted by the Committee;
- b) The question 'How satisfied are you with each of the following services... Maidstone Leisure Centre?' in the Residents Satisfaction Survey be expanded to include the usage of other fitness facilities in the borough including the YMCA centres and private gyms so that the fitness of the borough can be evaluated; and
- c) Members of the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee begin a dialogue with Officers about the results of the Residents Survey in relation to their wards. This should be done with a view to further evaluation of the results of the survey returning to the Committee in 3 months time and the evidence being utilised widely by all Members and Officers.

107. Future Work Programme and Forward Plan of Key Decisions

The Committee considered its Future Work Programme and the Forward Plan of Key Decisions. It was felt that the Asset Management Plan was an important document to be considered. Members took into consideration their remaining meetings and decided that this document should be circulated to them by email.

Members considered the Leader and Cabinet Member updates scheduled for the April meeting. It was decided that the written updates given at the beginning of the Municipal Year should be revisited by the Committee to determine if there were any areas where an update was required.

It was recommended that:

- a) The draft Council as a Business Review report is circulated to all Members of the committee for their input and amendments in preparation for the final meeting;
- b) The Asset Management Plan 2012-15, as detailed on the forward Plan of Key Decisions, is circulated to the Committee electronically for the its information and individual representations if necessary; and
- c) The Leader and Cabinet Member updates from the start of the Municipal Year are circulated electronically for Members to decide if a final update is necessary.

108. Duration of the Meeting.

6.31 p.m. to 8.10 p.m.