

Maidstone Borough Council

Regeneration and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 30 June 2009

Cabinet Member for Regeneration: Progress for 2008-09 and Plans and Priorities for 2009-10

Report of: Overview and Scrutiny Officer

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Regeneration and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee is responsible for holding to account those Cabinet Members whose portfolios fall within the remit of the Committee.
- 1.2 The Cabinet Members whose portfolios relate to the Committee are the Cabinet Members for Regeneration and for Environment.
- 1.3 At its meeting on 14 April 2009, the Regeneration and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to defer the Cabinet Member's progress report to its meeting in June 2009.

2. Cabinet Member for Regeneration

- 2.1 The areas of the Cabinet Member for Regeneration's portfolio that are relevant to the Committee are as follows:
 - **Local Development Plan** – to be responsible for planning strategy for the Borough including detailed consideration of planning policy and guidance; to be responsible for developing the Local Development Plan alongside the Leader of the Council for submission to Cabinet and the Council for approval; to be responsible for the preparation of development briefs and informal guidance notes.
 - **Planning** – to be responsible for all Executive planning matters, including Building Control.
 - **Economic Development** – to be responsible for the implementation and review of an annual strategy that will foster the local economy and bring associated benefits to the wider community; to be responsible for the development, review and application of the Council's Economic Development Strategy alongside the Leader of the Council.
 - **Sustainability** – to guide, advise and provide a strategic overview on sustainability issues as they affect the Council's internal and external activities; to ensure that the Council, the non-executive Committees, Cabinet and Cabinet Members are aware of sustainability issues when formulating policy; to make recommendations to Council on sustainability

issues arising from Council policies, and promote proposals to be adopted as Council Policy; to maintain the environmental quality of the Borough.

- **Housing** – to be responsible for the Housing Strategy; to be responsible for the relationship with local Registered Social Landlord's (RSLs); to be responsible for the development, operation and review of all the private housing functions of the Council and protection of private sector tenants, including the provision of the homelessness service.

3. Progress

3.1 At the meeting of the Regeneration and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 8 July 2008, Members interviewed the Cabinet Member for Regeneration with regard to his priorities for the Municipal Year 2008/09. Members also considered a written statement by the Cabinet Member at this meeting, which is attached at Appendix A to this report.

3.2 The relevant extract from the minutes of the 8 July 2008 meeting is below:

"The Chairman welcomed the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Councillor Malcolm Greer to the meeting. Councillor Greer informed the Committee that he believed that resources were not adequate across a number of services, specifically Building Control, Development Control and Enforcement particularly in relation to the Information Technology (IT) interface between the services. Following meetings with senior management, reports had been requested for September to evaluate whether these services could be more efficient. He informed the Committee that officers in IT were visiting other local authorities to identify best practice including the IT interface equipment used between departments. The Committee was informed that money was available for an additional senior surveyor and it was hoped that this position would address the imbalanced work load. It was also envisaged that this post would give Building Control additional capacity to assist in ensuring that planning conditions were not breached. Councillor Greer offered to report back to the Committee on the findings of the efficiency reports.

Planning Enforcement

Councillor Greer advised the Committee that he intended to address the problems with enforcement through an enabling panel to work with contractors, to monitor and ensure procedures and planning conditions were adhered to and enforced. The Council's representatives on these panels were Councillors Harwood and Greer. Councillor Harwood would take responsibility for environmental and landscaping issues, whilst Councillor Greer would take responsibility for development delivery. The Committee welcomed the innovative idea of the enabling panels. Councillor Greer noted the achievement under the previous administration of a

reduction in the number of enforcement cases from 600 to 400 but noted that a number of the remaining cases required legal assistance. He advised the Committee that he intended to set the precedent that repercussions would ensue for developers if they breached planning conditions. He had therefore asked for estimates of the extra costs involved in pursuing high profile cases, noting that the Council does not have capacity within its Legal Service to pursue these. Councillor Greer advised the Committee that he had requested a report for September on methods of becoming more pro-active in enforcement. In response to a question Councillor Greer noted the importance of communicating the timescale of delivery and the actions the Council was undertaking to enforce conditions. A Member believed that there was a general timidity and lack of willingness on the part of legal services in enforcement to pursue anything that was difficult or might result in the need to litigate and it was therefore requested that the Cabinet Member gives attention to this. Councillor Greer advised the Committee that he was mindful of these issues and that these formulated part of the reason he had requested the reports.

A number of Members commented on Parish Councils' dissatisfaction with regard to the level of information they were allowed to access regarding enforcement investigations. Councillor Greer noted the Parish Councils' frustration but advised the Committee that he was seeking advice from officers and that they intended to introduce planning service information packs for Parish Councils. The Committee requested that they be informed of the legal information that Parish Councils will have made available to them. As well as the forthcoming information packs the Council had a limited fund available to provide equipment such as projectors to Parish Councils. The Committee expressed concern that Community Groups and Forums in non-parished areas of the Borough did not have the assistance available to them that was available to Parish Councils and requested that this be investigated and appropriate action be taken.

Character Area Assessments

In response to a question, Councillor Greer informed the Committee that he supported Character Area Assessments. Public consultation on Character Area Assessments was taking place in August 2008. The results of the consultation would inform the policy for Character Area Assessments which would be developed by the end of December 2008. Councillor Greer informed the Committee that he was currently unsure of the timetable of future Character Area Assessments. Future Character Area Assessments were being prioritised and it was hoped that future assessments would be identified by the end of December 2008. It was explained that assessments cost approximately £20,000 each so the number of future assessments would be constrained by the level of finances available.

Economic Development

Councillor Greer advised the Committee that his priority was the economic development of Maidstone. Councillor Greer informed the Committee that he approved of the development at junction seven of the M20 as he believed that this would create a high quality 'Grade A' office space. With regard to the town centre the work that had previously been conducted was highlighted to the Committee. It was explained that he was particularly interested and committed to the pedestrianisation of the high street including the transport infrastructure required. . Councillor Greer advised the Committee that the plans for pedestrianisation included additional arts facilities in Maidstone. The Committee was assured that the plans would include the requirements of various town centre users including disabled people, taxis and buses. A think tank would be created to collate details of best practice across the country and build on the previous work of the Scrutiny Pedestrianisation Working Group to create a costed progressive master plan to achieve pedestrianisation. The Committee requested to be kept informed on the progress of the pedestrianisation of the high street, especially in light of the requirement of Kent County Councils investment into Maidstone to achieve it.

Gypsies and Travellers

Councillor Greer invited Councillors to continue forwarding information with regard to the enforcement of gypsy and traveller policies to him. He also advised the Committee that a review of gypsy and traveller site's policies would be undertaken during the next municipal year. Legal advice was also being received with respect of pursuing a gypsy and traveller site policy.

UCCA (University College for the Creative Arts)

Councillor Greer advised the Committee that the contact with UCCA had been positive. The Committee was informed that UCCA were looking at a number of sites across Kent however he felt that UCCA had seemed encouraged by Maidstone's potential with respect of the positioning of the campus.

The Committee thanked Councillor Greer for an informative introduction to his priorities for the year ahead."

4. Plans and Priorities

- 4.1 The Cabinet Member for Regeneration will present his plans and priorities for the 2009/10 municipal year to the Committee. This will enable the Committee to monitor the progress of the Cabinet Member through the year.

5. Recommendation

- 5.1 Members are recommended to consider the statement made by the Cabinet Member for Regeneration in July 2008 and ask questions

with regard to the progress that has been made on those issues highlighted as priorities.

- 5.2 The areas of the Cabinet Member for Regeneration's portfolio that are relevant to the Committee are outlined at section 2.1. Members are also recommended to consider these, and ask questions of the Cabinet Member for Regeneration with regard to his plans and priorities for the year for these areas.
- 5.3 Furthermore, Members are recommended to make recommendations to the Cabinet Member for Regeneration with regard to his plans and priorities for the year.
- 5.4 Members are reminded that "Quality Recommendations" are those that adhere to the following categories:
 - Recommendations that affect and make a difference to local people;
 - Recommendations that result in a change in policy that improves services;
 - Recommendations that identify savings and maintain/improve service quality; or
 - Recommendations that objectively identify a solution.