

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**MINUTES OF THE COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 17 JULY 2012**

PRESENT: Councillors Mrs Blackmore (Chairman), Butler,
Mrs Gooch, Mrs Joy, D Mortimer, McLoughlin, Vizzard
and De Wiggondene

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

It was resolved that all items be webcast.

12. Apologies.

Apologies were received from Councillors Brindle, Munford and Mrs Parvin.

13. Notification of Substitute Members.

Councillors Butler and Mrs Gooch substituted for Councillors Munford and Brindle respectively.

14. Notification of Visiting Members.

Councillor John A Wilson attended as a Visiting Member with an interest in Item 9 on the agenda, Local Council Tax Scheme & Impact of Welfare Reforms.

15. Disclosures by Members and Officers:

There were no disclosures.

16. 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.

17. Minutes of the meeting held on 23 May 2012

It was resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 23 May 2012 be agreed as a correct record of the meeting and duly signed.

18. Local Council Tax Scheme & the Impact of Welfare Reforms

The Chairman welcomed Steve McGinnes, Head of Revenues & Benefits Shared Service and John Littlemore, Head of Housing & Community Services.

Mr McGinnes gave a presentation which outlined the following changes brought about by Welfare Reforms:

- The Local Council Tax Discount Scheme;
- Housing Benefit Scheme;
- Universal Credit; and
- Personal Independence Payments & Social Fund.

The options for the Local Council Tax Discount Scheme were presented to the Committee, as detailed in the report going to Cabinet on 25 July 2012. It was explained that the preferred option, recommended in the report, was a local variation of the common framework agreed for schemes in Kent. The scheme would protect those of a pensionable age and pass on the impact of the 10% reduction in funding for Council Tax benefit from April 2013 to those of a working age. Through the removal of the current 10% second homes discount and a reduction in the Class C exemption on empty properties, from 6 months to 1 month, the Council would be able to reduce the amount those currently receiving Council Tax Benefit would have to pay to 13%.

It was confirmed that local variations of a common scheme would be accepted by Kent County Council who would be contributing £125,000 to help cover the cost of administration and would underwrite future cost increases for three years.

Members observed that the new scheme would affect a category of residents that had received full Council Tax benefit in the past. It was estimated that 3,000 of the 5,500 residents affected would fall into this category. The Committee requested a breakdown of residents across all Council Tax bands in receipt of Council Tax benefit.

Members were informed that the scheme Cabinet agreed would go out to public consultation on 6 August and a final decision would be made in November 2012. Consultation with residents would be conducted via the website and the Council would specifically write to those affected. The Committee requested that that an electronic version of the consultation document be circulated to it for comments and feedback.

Mr McGinnes highlighted recent changes to Housing Benefit including:

- The extension of the single room rate to people under 35; and
- Restriction to 4 bedroom rate of Housing Benefit.

And the following changes to come:

- The Benefits cap of £350 for single persons and £500 family; and
- Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) size criteria.

Members were informed that the Benefits cap would affect 80 households in Maidstone. The size criteria which was the calculation of Housing Benefit based on accommodation need would replicate the size criteria that already applied to Housing Benefit claimants in the privately rented

sector. These claims were assessed using the local housing allowance rules. The applicable maximum rent would be reduced by a national percentage rate depending on the number of spare bedrooms in the household. It was estimated that this would affect 21% of social households.

It was explained that the focus of Universal Credit was to reduce benefit dependence and decrease worklessness. It was a range of benefits coming together that would be administered by a single agency, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and would include Housing Benefit. A single monthly payment would be made to each household.

The Committee was provided with key dates for the migration of Universal Credit and the following points were highlighted:

- There would be 12 million claims to transfer;
- There would be a 'real time' link with tax system so the customer would not have to report changes in earnings;
- The DWP were running 6 national pathfinders to ensure assistance was available to vulnerable groups; and
- Staff from Maidstone Borough Council would not TUPE (Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006) across to the DWP.

Mr Littlemore, Head of Housing and Community Services, confirmed that the Housing team were contacting residents now to mitigate risks. Members considered the relationship the Council had with voluntary and charitable organisations that offered support for vulnerable groups. It was confirmed that the authority had established relationships with organisations such as the Citizens Advice Bureau (based in the Gateway), amongst others.

The Committee was informed that Personal Independence Payments and the Social Fund remained outside the scope for Universal Credit. Personal Independence Payments would replace Disability Living Allowance for working age claimants from April 2013. The Social Fund would be similar to the Discretionary Social Fund and was a potential role of Districts and the Gateway.

It was resolved that:

- a) The Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommend that Cabinet support Option 6 in the Localisation of Council Tax Support report: Local variation within the framework for scheme in Kent which recommends that the Council applies a standard deduction of 13% on all non-pensioner claimants, removes the 10% discount currently applicable to second homes and reduces the exemption on Class C empty properties from 6 months to 1 month;
- b) Maidstone Borough Council Officers actively assist vulnerable groups affected by the Local Council Tax Discount Scheme and the wider impacts of Welfare Reforms through continued engagement with stakeholders and the voluntary and charity sector;

- c) The following information be provided:
- An electronic version of the consultation document on the Local Council Tax Discount Scheme be circulated via email to the Committee for its feedback; and
 - A breakdown of the number of residents across all Council Tax bands in receipt of Council Tax Benefit be provided.

19. Appointment of Joint Health Sub Committee

The Chairman asked for nominations for representatives for the Joint Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells Health Sub Committee.

Councillors Mrs Blackmore, Mortimer and Vizzard were nominated and appointed as representatives for the Joint Health Sub Committee.

It was resolved that Councillors Mrs Blackmore, Mortimer and Vizzard be appointed as Maidstone's representatives on the Joint Health Sub Committee with Tunbridge Wells for the 2012-13 Municipal Year.

20. Forward Plan of Key Decisions and Future Work Programme

The Committee considered its Future Work Programme and the Forward Plan of Key Decisions.

It was agreed that Housing and Housing Associations and the impact of Welfare Reforms should be the focus of the September meeting. Steve McGinnes, Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service, John Littlemore, Head of Housing and Community Services, and Jillie Smithies from Golding Homes were identified as witnesses

The Committee considered its October meeting and its role as the Crime and Disorder Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Members agreed that the meeting should include updates on CCTV, Kent Police and The Safer Maidstone Partnership.

It was resolved that:

- a) Housing and Housing Associations should be the focus of the September meeting with Steve McGinnes, John Littlemore and Jillie Smithies invited as witnesses;
- b) An update on the implementation of CCTV should be the focus of the next Crime and Disorder Overview and Scrutiny meeting; and
- c) Representatives from Kent Police and the Safer Maidstone Partnership should be invited to the October meeting.

21. Duration of Meeting

6.30 p.m. to 8.37 p.m.