

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**MINUTES OF THE REGENERATION AND SUSTAINABLE
COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 30 JUNE 2009**

PRESENT: Councillor Sherreard (Chairman)
Councillors Beerling, FitzGerald, Nelson-Gracie, Paine,
Thick and Vizzard

APOLOGIES: None.

9. Web-Casting

Resolved: It was agreed that all items on the agenda would be web-cast.

10. Notification of Substitute Members

There were no substitute members.

11. Notification of Visiting Members

There were no visiting members.

12. Disclosures by Members and Officers

Councillor Beerling declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 10, Work Programming 2009/10, as he was a Director of Maidstone Housing Trust.

13. Exempt Items

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

14. Minutes of the Meetings

It was requested that a resolution be added to page 9 of the minutes of 23 April with regard to the discussion of possible dates for the launch of the road safety report.

The minutes of 14 April, 23 April and 27 May were agreed subject to the above amendment.

Resolved:

That the minutes were agreed subject to the inclusion of a recommendation identifying possible dates for the road safety launch in the minutes of the 23 April.

15. Cabinet Member for Environment - Progress for 2008/09 and Plans and Priorities for 2009/10

The Chairman welcomed the Cabinet Member for Environment, Councillor Mark Wooding. The Committee was reminded that many of the changes made by the Cabinet Member for Environment during the previous year were well known due to publicity within the press and his attendance at this Committee. During 2009-10 the Cabinet Member would be seeking short term benefits for the Council and setting some medium and long term direction.

Parking

Councillor Wooding highlighted a number of changes that had been made with regard to parking services within the previous year:

1. Resident parking zones had seen the introduction of permit charges. Residents were able to obtain first and second permits at a cost of £25 and a third permit for £50. This decision had been made to manage increasing street parking demand, and prevent the parking budget from falling into deficit, as well as to cover the cost of producing the permits.

It was noted that the number of calls the council had received regarding these charges had been minimal.

2. Changes had also been made to off street parking, most notably the introduction of Sunday charges. This had been operating for five weeks, and had so far provided revenue of £1800 - £2700 each Sunday.

Officers were undertaking a review of the volumes of traffic within the town centre now that these charges had been implemented and this was to be reported back to the Cabinet Member by August. The Committee was also informed that local businesses in the area were to be consulted in order to establish whether the charges had had any significant impact upon the number of people coming into the town on Sundays.

The Committee was informed that no major changes should be required within the forthcoming year although small amendments could be necessary in light of the economic climate.

Several aspects of the decisions on monitoring on and off street parking demand had been deferred last year following consultation and reports were due in August on these. Councillor Wooding noted that these would fully consider concerns that had been raised by residents during the consultation process. There could also be further opportunity to develop car parks in order to generate further income, however this would also depend upon the economic climate and the availability of monies.

In response to a question, the Cabinet Member stated that the introduction of Sunday charges had been well publicised, and any car owners who failed to display tickets on the first Sunday the scheme was introduced were not penalised.

Highways

Councillor Wooding informed the Committee that he had been working hard to establish good links with Kent County Council (KCC). A joint seminar with KCC had been held in December which the KCC Cabinet Member with responsibility for highways. KCC had agreed to work towards decreasing the number of people who were killed or seriously injured on the roads within Maidstone. The Cabinet Member had requested a review of progress now that six months had passed. It was the aim of the Cabinet Member to maintain a good relationship with KCC.

It was requested that the Committee receive an update on road safety issues from KCC.

Public Transport

The Committee was informed that safeguarding the park and ride service was of paramount importance. However it was important that the subsidy which was required from the tax payer in order to facilitate the service was reduced. Changes last year had reduced this subsidy from £450,000 to £225,000. As a result no major changes would be required this year, however small adjustments could be necessary to reflect the economic situation.

Last year's tendering exercise had resulted in the renewal of the park and ride contract with Arriva. Some amendments had also been made to the schedule of services. It was recognised that this had caused some problems, as new routes had conflicted with road maintenance subsequently delaying some services. Customer surveys, however, particularly those of customers using the London Road park and ride site, had demonstrated that the majority of customers were satisfied with the services which they had received.

The Committee was also reminded that there had been a 25% increase in the park and ride fares which may have had some impact upon the level of usage. It was noted however, that a decrease in the number of people using the service had been seen before the implementation of the fare increase and bus usage nationally was decreasing. This was being monitored.

All three sites were now manned by two mobile attendants and initial indications suggested that this was working well. Holiday and sickness were covered by members of the parking services team where necessary. A mobile phone number was available for customers at each site; however calls so far had been minimal. Maintenance work continued to be carried out by the attendants.

Long term targets with regard to park and ride included the consideration of additional park and ride sites. However, this was to be considered alongside the development of the Core Strategy and the Local Development Framework.

A member enquired as to whether Bluebell Hill was to be considered as a possible location for a new park and ride site. The Committee was informed that this location was still under consideration, and was being reviewed by consultants. It was requested that the Committee receive a copy of this report.

Concessionary Travel

The Committee was reminded of the assisted travel scheme which had been introduced during the previous year. Over 400 people had so far benefited from the scheme, in addition to 100 people who had companion passes. The Cabinet Member also noted that changes had been made to the availability of concessionary fares, from 9 a.m. to 9.30 a.m. Central Government was currently consulting on potential changes to the administration of the concessionary fares scheme, including a proposal to move this to county-level.

The Council continued to support the Stockbury and Lenham Community transport schemes which had been re-established following the removal of the post-bus service.

Rail Services

Pressure would continue to be exerted on Southeastern Rail with regard to the proposals to remove the fast service to Cannon Street service in December. Improvement of the rail service was particularly important as Maidstone would have 11,080 new homes by 2026 as a result of its Growth Point Status.

Network Rail had released its Kent Rail Utilisation Strategy report, and the Cabinet Member would respond outlining a strong argument for Thameslink services to serve Maidstone and the benefits of the high speed shuttle running to Maidstone West.

In response to a question, the Committee was informed that Councillor Wooding had written to the Chief Executive of Southeastern three weeks previously, but had not yet received a response. This had, however been heavily publicised.

Resolved: That

- a) an update be received from Kent Highways Services on road safety issues; and
- b) the committee receive a copy of the updated consultant's report on the potential Bluebell Hill park and ride site when this was received by the Cabinet Member.

16. Cabinet Member for Regeneration - Progress for 2008/09 and Plans and Priorities for 2009/10

The Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Councillor Malcolm Greer, congratulated Members and the Overview and Scrutiny Officer on the production of the report regarding Section 106 agreements and stated that he had taken on board the report's recommendations.

The Committee was informed that improvements had been made to officer working arrangements within the development control (DC), building control (BC) and planning enforcement departments. Within the DC department an office manager had been introduced and computer systems had been updated to ensure appropriate systems were in place and were compatible with each other. The Committee was informed that not all information had yet been transferred to these new systems, but work was being done to further this. A planning manager was also introduced with the hope of ensuring that quick decisions could be taken with regard to enforcement issues.

The recession had had a significant influence on the number of planning applications received, which had dropped to 1700 last year, and so significantly affected pre-application monies. This had resulted in a decrease in staffing, the majority of which was facilitated by not renewing fixed term contracts. The Committee was informed that the process was monitored on a two weekly basis and computer systems allowed for the production of regular performance reports. It was hoped that this system would also improve the transparency of information regarding planning applications.

It was requested that a structure diagram be produced detailing how BC, DC and enforcement interact, and the contact details and where in the building the team members can be found.

A Draft Enforcement Policy had recently been produced, based upon the priorities within the Strategic Plan. This document was to come to members for consultation when complete. Developers' Forums had also been established and were proving to be successful. It was aimed that this would facilitate efficient consideration of planning applications and so attract developers. A legal charter was also in the process of being developed, which would inform developers of what was required of them legally.

The first Enabling Committee had been established with regard to the Sutton Valence running track. This helped to solve potential difficulties and inform interested parties, including the Parish Council, of the work which was to be carried out in the foreseeable future. A committee of this kind was also to be established with regard to the new clinic at Junction 7 and the proposed developments at the Senacre Site.

Gypsy Sites

The consultants, Brakes, had recently been instructed to review possible locations for gypsy sites. A joint membership steering group was to meet on 17 July to discuss the issue. Councillor Greer informed the Committee that Parish Councils would play an important role in establishing potential sites.

Economic Development

A design for the development of the High Street had now been selected. It was hoped that these improvements would encourage companies into the area and would have a positive impact on the surrounding locations. The Council was now in the consultation period with regard to the plans. This was scheduled to last for between six to nine months. In response to a question, Councillor Greer confirmed that local utility companies were involved in the consultation process.

Small businesses were being supported by the Council which offered advice clinics at the Gateway. 36 small businesses had also received free advertising within the Kent Messenger.

Work was already underway to remove clutter, including excess signage and rails, from the High Street and make the area more aesthetically pleasing. Plans were also being devised for the development of the river area with the use of Section 106 monies.

Housing

The Committee was reassured that everything was being done to ensure the Council did not lose out on any potential money with regard to housing. It was particularly important to ensure the sustainability of any new developments which highlighted the importance of attracting new businesses into the area in order to ensure the availability of high quality jobs. Sustainability had also been a crucial factor in the development of the new office depot.

A Member requested that the Committee be provided with a report regarding the development of Parkwood Industrial Estate and the possibility of attracting business into the area. The Committee was also informed that the Cabinet Member was working closely with the Town Centre Manager to ensure empty shops in the town could not be vandalised. It was questioned whether more could be done to prevent damage to shops.

A Member raised concern that Whatman Park may now be at a disadvantage in terms of parking due to the failure to agree to develop grounds for Maidstone Football Club.

Finally, the Committee was informed that, where feasible, devolution of power to parish councils would be looked in to; however Councillor Greer was unsure as to whether the appetite for this existed.

Resolved: That

- a) The Cabinet Member develop a strategy for dealing with empty shop windows in Maidstone Town Centre;
- b) The Cabinet Member investigate options for the future development of the Parkwood Industrial Estate; and
- c) A structure chart for Development Control, Building Control and Planning Enforcement, including names and phone numbers for officers, be provided to the Committee.

17. Work Programming 2009/10

The Committee agreed that clearance of contaminated land would be its major review of this year. It was noted that there were a number of sensitive issues with regard to this matter, and the Legal Team had been asked for advice on this. A smaller review would also be carried out with regard to disabled facilities grants.

Resolved: That

- a) The Committee would focus on the clearance of contaminated land as this years major review; and
- b) A smaller review would be carried out with regard to disabled facilities grants.

18. Future Work Programme and Forward Plan of Key Decisions

It was agreed that the Overview and Scrutiny Officers were to establish an appropriate date for the required Councillor Call for Action meeting. It was noted that this may require the amendment of the pre arranged meeting dates.

The Committee was informed that key decisions falling within its remit would be printed on the back of the agenda each month to enable Members to request a decision to be discussed at a future meeting if necessary.

A Member requested that an update on potential gypsy site locations and progress with regard to economic development within the Borough be provided to the Committee in December. The Chairman requested that Members monitor the Forward Plan for when these decisions arose and request further information at that time.

Resolved: That

- a) The Overview and Scrutiny officers would establish an appropriate meeting date for the Councillor Call for Action; and

- b) The Committee be given an update of on potential gypsy site locations and economic development within the Borough in December.

19. Duration of the Meeting

6:30 p.m. to 8:50 p.m.