

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**MINUTES OF THE LEISURE AND PROSPERITY OVERVIEW
AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY
22 MARCH 2011**

PRESENT: Councillor Paine (Chairman)
Councillors Burton, Mrs Gibson, Mrs Joy, Nelson-Gracie, Pickett and Mrs Smith

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

Resolved: That all items on the agenda be web-cast.

31. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from John Foster, Economic Development Manager.

32. Notification of Substitute Members

There were no substitute members.

33. Notification of Visiting Members

There were no visiting members.

34. Disclosures by Members and Officers:

It was noted that Councillor Burton declared a personal interest in agenda item 8 by virtue of his membership of the Marden Business Forum.

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

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

36. Minutes of the Meeting Held on 22 February 2011

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 22 February 2011 be agreed as a correct record and duly signed by the Chairman.

37. Rural Economy

The Chairman welcomed Liz Harrison, Kent County Council Rural Regeneration Manager and Huw Jarvis, Kent Downs and Marshes Leader

Programme Manager to the meeting, and invited them to present their report to the Committee.

Mrs Harrison summarised the work that had been accomplished over the past two years, and informed the Committee outlined some of the key headlines from the Kent Rural Evidence Base work (an ongoing research project). This has utilised the 2004, Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and Office for National Statistics (ONS) official urban and rural definition to produce specific rural datasets for Kent. Mrs Harrison informed the Committee that 40% of Kent's businesses were located in the rural areas, and although it was recognised that farming was an important component, it was not the only industry in rural areas. Research had shown that there were many similarities between industries in the urban and rural areas and rural businesses generated £5.5 billion per annum to Kent's economy. Mrs Harrison stated that by 2050 the world population was due to reach nine billion, with a 30% increase in food required. The food sector was particularly important for Kent and was worth £2.6 billion per annum. Growing concerns over global food security are leading to a reappraisal of the strategic importance of UK food production and in Kent a Food Sector Strategy is being developed.

In answer to a question Mrs Harrison informed the Committee that depending on the required levels of 'E-channels' it would be necessary to factor in that many rural areas and businesses have poor quality broadband provision.

The Committee queried the statistics that Mrs Harrison had mentioned regarding South Korea providing 250mb and asked if this was something the residents had to pay extra for, or was it considered the normal bandwidth to receive. Mrs Harrison stated that this was installed when South Korea had reconstructed its streets which enabled exchanges to be placed within many buildings. The Committee acknowledged this, and enquired into recent news that every medical library in the UK had a network already available for the public to use, and whether Mrs Harrison could elaborate on this. Mrs Harrison informed the Committee that as part of its pilot they were looking into utilising the Kent public network which provides broadband access to public sector buildings across Kent e.g. schools and libraries.

In answer to a question, Mrs Harrison stated that the issues surrounding transport in the rural area were hard to address due to the lack of resources in the transport infrastructure. However, as there is no specific rural strategy covering this, she advised the Committee to refer any transport concerns within the review to the 'Growth without Grid-lock strategy' and KCC's Highways team, and would provide the Overview & Scrutiny Officer with this document to circulate to Members.

The Chairman asked if live work units should be promoted via planning or whether the Council would be better advised to restrain from permitting this in rural areas. Mrs Harrison informed the Committee that KCC was currently undertaking research into the home based business sector and

the potential for live-work. This was being undertaken by Tim Dwelly, a national expert in this field, who has published extensively on live work potential and concepts. Mrs Harrison explained that she would be happy to arrange for copies of these reports to be forwarded to the Overview and Scrutiny Officer. This work has stressed that live work needs to be specifically designed for home-based businesses rather than simply placing a desk in the corner.

To date, the research has highlighted that between 2001 - 2009 there was a 12.5% increase in home working within Kent. Mr Dwelley's draft report advised local authorities to take a brave approach and encourage it as a means to grow the economy. His final report will provide guidance for what Kent should be achieving for the future.

The Committee noted this and stated that the recent field trip accentuated the various sizes of business within the boroughs' rural areas, and asked if Mrs Harrison was aware of other initiatives currently being pursued by other local authorities that would benefit Maidstone. Mrs Harrison informed the Committee that nationally policies were beginning to cite good practice including planning and economic development policies being more intertwined, and rural proofing policies becoming part of normal procedure. An example of where rural proofing was currently being done was at Medway Council. The Committee noted this and suggested that this be investigated further as part of the review. Mrs Harrison highlighted a recent OECD report commissioned by DEFRA had emphasised the importance of planning and economic development being a joint approach whilst the Food, Agricultural and Horticultural Business Growth event held in January had highlighted rural business concerns over perceived inconsistencies and proportionality issues regarding planning policy across Kent. In particular, there was growing concern from the business community planning policy needs to keep abreast of changing business requirements to ensure that the sector remained competitive and productive.

The Chairman enquired into the relationship between Mrs Harrison's department and the councils Economic Development team, and how often do they meet. Mrs Harrison stated that although KCC's rural team was small, the connection with Maidstone Borough Council was impeccable, as the team are very proactive and forthcoming. The Chairman expressed his delight at this news, and informed the Committee that Mr Foster, Economic Development Manager had sent his apologies as a sporting injury had prevented him from attending. The Committee stated they would appreciate Mr Foster's views on the topic in a written response.

Mr Jarvis gave a summary of the work he was involved with concerning the Leader Programme. He explained the geographical areas that his section covered and what the Leader programme can do for rural Communities, for example the £1.8million funding available for projects. In answer to a question Mr Jarvis confirmed that this was only available to rural areas.

He explained how the membership was set up within the Local Action Group (LAG), and the each member stood for two years. Mr Jarvis explained that a member from Shepway Council represented Dover,

Ashford, Shepway and Canterbury and that a member from Swale Council represented Medway, Maidstone and Swale. The Committee expressed a keen interest in Maidstone becoming a representative for the forthcoming 2 years. Mr Jarvis welcomed this and informed the Committee that further information would be provided via the Economic Development team.

Mr Jarvis stated that regardless of providing presentations on the leader programme in Headcorn, and other various locations, Maidstone had received funding for 5 projects out of the 30 in the Kent Downs and Marshes area. The Committee enquired why, in Mr Jarvis' opinion, Maidstone had not submitted more plans for projects. Mr Jarvis explained that the biggest obstacle was the upfront funding required from the applicant. Although the programme would match 50% of the funding required (up to £50,000), many applicants did not have the funding upfront to support this. He gave an example of a local authority who had created a 'bank roll' service, whereby they provided the funding upfront on a 0% interest, and they received the funding back within two months. The Committee were very interested in how this local authority, Cornwall, made this work and requested further information be provided with a view to consider this as a way forward. The Overview and Scrutiny Officer advised the Committee that Corporate Services Committee should also partake in the decision to provide a 'bank roll' service. Mr Jarvis also highlighted another obstacle that applicants frequently met with regards to obtaining written confirmation from planning that no planning permission was required on the site concerned, as this was possibly taking longer than necessary. The Committee agreed this could be frustrating and would consider this as part of the recommendations found within the rural economy review.

The Committee noted that the information within the covering report and the Kent Rural Delivery Programme showed no future plans after 2013, and queried if this was due to no funding being available then. Mr Jarvis confirmed that the programme was due to finish in the summer of 2013 due to lack of funds.

In answer to a question, Mr Jarvis informed the Committee that the National Farmers Union, Swale Borough Council and Chamber of Commerce had advertised the programme particularly well which was a reflection of the amount of projects submitted in that area. The Committee stated that they would be very accommodating with any assistance required with advertising within Maidstone, using tools such as the 'Downs Mail'. It was noted that both the Communications and Economic Development team could liaise together with Mr Jarvis to achieve this.

The Committee asked both Mrs Harrison and Mr Jarvis their opinion on what Maidstone Borough Council could do to help the rural economy. Mrs Harrison suggested that whatever outcomes materialise from the review, that it feeds back into the planning and economic policies. Mr Jarvis reiterated the need for a 'bank roll' service and quicker process for obtaining proof that no planning permission is required.

Resolved: That Mrs Harrison and Mr Jarvis be thanked for the information and it be recommended that:

- a) The Communications Team and Economic Development Team work together with Mr Jarvis to promote the Leader Programme within the borough;
- b) Mr Jarvis provides an example of bank rolling used in Cornwall, to be circulated to the Committee;
- c) It be suggested that Maidstone be nominated as a representative for the next two years as part of the Leader Programme;
- d) Mrs Harrison provides the documents as suggested throughout the meeting as part of the ongoing work with the review, and these be circulated to the Committee;
- e) A closer look at Medway Council regarding planning policies and inclusion of rural proficiencies be undertaken and circulated to the Committee;
- f) A definition of working from home and business at home be provided and circulated to the Committee;
- g) Pre-existing broadband provisions within medical libraries be explored and explained to the Committee; and
- h) Mr Foster provides a written response to the Committee due to his unavoidable absence.

38. Future Work Programme

The Committee considered the future work programme, it was noted that the end of year progress reports from the Leader of the Council, Cabinet Members for Regeneration and Leisure and Culture and the last witness for the rural economy will be considered at the next meeting.

The Chairman discussed the possibility of a day time meeting to discuss the tourism impact in the rural economy, as part of the review. The Overview and Scrutiny Officer informed the Committee of the availability of Mrs Christine Dier, Assistant Economic Development Officer and arranged that three Members would attend, with confirmation via email of the venue in due course.

The Chair and Vice Chairman confirmed that following a Scrutiny Chairman's Meeting on 30 March 2011, they will inform the Committee of any discussion required regarding a summary of the work achieved within this Municipal Year.

The Committee noted the 3rd quarter performance monitoring report and the Overview and Scrutiny Officer informed the Committee of the progress made towards the rural economy review.

Resolved: That:

- a) The 3rd quarter performance monitoring report be noted;

- b) The Chair and Vice Chairman will provide information following a Scrutiny Chairman's Meeting on 30 March 2011 prior to the next; and
- c) The work programme be noted.

39. Duration of Meeting

6.32pm to 9.03pm.