

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**MINUTES OF THE LEISURE AND PROSPERITY OVERVIEW
AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY
26 APRIL 2011**

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

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

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

41. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Malcolm Greer, Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Elaine Collins, Chairman for the Network of Rural Business Forum.

42. Notification of Substitute Members

There were no substitute members.

43. Notification of Visiting Members

There were no visiting members.

44. Disclosures by Members and Officers:

It was noted that Councillor Burton declared a personal interest in agenda Item 8, Rural economy, by virtue of his membership of the Marden Business Forum. Councillors Mrs Joy and Mrs Smith declared a personal interest in agenda Item 11, Interview with the Cabinet Member for Leisure and Culture by virtue of their membership of the Twinning Committee.

45. 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.

46. Minutes of the Meeting Held on 22 March 2011

Resolved: That subject to the amendment of minute thirty seven, to include medical libraries and centres, the minutes of the meeting held on 22 March 2011 be agreed as a correct record and duly signed by the Chairman.

47. Rural Economy

The Chairman informed the Committee that Mrs Collins, Chairman for the Network of Rural Business Forums (NRBF) had sent her apologies as unforeseen travel commitments had prevented her from attending. The Committee stated they would appreciate Mrs Collins' views on the topic in a written response. The Vice Chairman for Marden Business Forum (MBF), Councillor Burton would answer any questions he was able in the meeting.

The Committee was informed by Councillor Burton that the website for the NRBF was managed by members of the forum, primarily on a volunteer basis which had since received monetary contributions via the membership fee.

Councillor Burton explained that the forum is fiercely independent, however they recognised that working with other forums would provide strength for all forums connected and would place the forum in a strong position to make the most of the opportunities presented by the Big Society agenda. In answer to a question Councillor Burton confirmed they do have a constitution which stipulates a one member company, one member vote system, allowing businesses of all sizes to have an equal ratio of representation within the forum.

The support received from the Council was evident in the collaboration to promote the NRBF within Downs Mail, which had been effective.

Councillor Burton offered to give the Committee information regarding the Marden Business Forum MBF for which he is the Vice-Chairman as a means to expand on how forums work. The Committee heard that the MBF was created in response to a Kent County Council (KCC) proposal to install a roundabout in the village which would interfere with local traders road usage. As a community of traders, they collaborated their skills and knowledge to petition against the roundabout proposal, which proved successful. This led them to believe that a network of businesses traders would be valuable. The Parish boundary was used as a boundary for members, they achieved a membership of 130 businesses out of a possible 200, employing 2500 people collectively. The MBF had created a training programme that allowed one company at a time to apply for a grant via the Skills South East. They would then distribute the training within the MBF members accordingly, using their own skilled trainers.

The Committee enquired how many people come to the meetings, and whether it was open to the public. Councillor Burton confirmed that the meetings were not open to the public; however they were open to all Members and network events that took place four times a year received between 40 and 100 people, depending on the season. Annually there were one or two exceptions who did not renew their membership, but they retained as close to 100% as thought possible.

In response to a question, Councillor Burton informed the Committee that although he personally believed it had been successful, there was a danger of it becoming stagnant in response to this they occasionally meet

with other forums to cross-fertilize ideas, whilst each forum remained distinctly local.

Resolved: That Councillor Burton be thanked for the information and it be recommended that the Overview and Scrutiny Officer send the questions to Mrs Collins, for an urgent written response.

48. Interview with Leader of the Council - Progress Over the Year - Local Development Framework

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Chris Garland, Leader of the Council to the meeting.

Councillor Garland informed the Committee that with regard to the progress made with the Local Development Framework (LDF), Maidstone had decided to continue working on the LDF without waiting for the Localism Bill to be implemented. Although other local authorities had chosen to wait, it was in Maidstone Councils' view that this would not benefit the borough.

The Committee heard that the South East Plan was being abolished, which allowed each local authority to devise their own system for determining housing figures in the borough. The South East Plan had specified government imposed housing figures. Councillor Garland informed the Committee that the Localism Bill was introducing Neighbourhood Development Plans (NDPs). This gave more credence to plans produced by parish council and residential areas allowing parishes to determine distribution of housing in their own areas as long as it accorded with local planning policies. The Committee stated that a level of expectation was being set by Parishes whereby in creating a plan, they could control the destiny of the area completely, rather than accord with the LDF. They urged the Leader to engage with the Parishes now, rather than let this false interpretation of the NDPs continue. Councillor Garland agreed, and reiterated that Parishes can only give preference, and could not go against the LDF.

Councillor Garland informed the Committee about the Development Plan Document (DPD) which supports the core strategy and includes the gypsy and traveller policy was currently in development and nearly complete once finalised it will run until 2016. This would not stop marginal applications occurring, however the policy must be in place to aid planning appeals. It was hoped that the DPD would be completed before the core strategy, and Councillor Garland urged those that wished to encourage this should write to Mrs Flo Churchill, Interim Head of Core Strategy Development.

The Committee received an update on the urban extension in particular in the south east of town centre area. It had suffered transport issues, which if not resolved would make continuing the extension the wrong thing to do as supported in cross party views to not pursue the extension. The Committee highlighted that the South East Strategic Route was, regardless of its size, a key point as part of the urban infrastructure and

should be addressed rather than by-passed. They also stated that the employment infrastructure needs to be suitably addressed as part of the planning process. Councillor Garland noted the Committees views, and agreed they are valid areas that need to be looked into. He informed the Committee of a new Land Allocation Doctrine, which when completed would highlight areas that was in use, as opposed to the Strategic Housing Land Allocation Assessment which highlighted land that was available to use.

With regard to housing the 10,080 figure was chosen due to economic aspiration, transport issues and the 2006 growth point target which all parties agreed. This meant between now and 2026 when the core strategy ends some 5000 houses remained to be built to meet these aspirations. Having set this target, the distribution pattern was then developed, involving urban and rural areas, service centres, and further housing in Harrietsham, Lenham and Allington which all political groups had agreed.

Consultation with the public, developers and any other party interested on the Core Strategy would commence after the elections, for a period of 6weeks. Previously consultations had involved stands throughout Maidstone , DVDs and café conversations to involve as many individuals as possible. Funding had already been allocated for a similar approach to this consultation. Given the changes in policy and that Maidstone had to produce its own system to support its plans, the LDF would now move rapidly forward, with an estimated timeframe for the Secretary of State to approve the LDF in the next 12-18months, before going to Full Council for approval.

The Chairman asked if any work had progressed for the blue and green infrastructure with a 'green map exercise' of the borough indicating routes that should be preserved for wildlife to pass through. Councillor Garland stated it was an interesting idea and would need to investigate if this had been undertaken.

Resolved: That the Leader of the Council be thanked for the information and it be recommended that:

- a) The Leader engages with the Parishes to relay the status of the Neighbourhood Development Plans;
- b) Any member of the Committee wishing to have the DPD agreed before the Core Strategy should put that in writing to Mrs Flo Churchill; and
- c) The Leader investigate any work that indicates a 'green route' for wildlife as part of the core strategy.

49. Interview with Cabinet Member for Regeneration - Progress Over the Year

In the absence of Councillor Greer, Councillor Garland agreed to present the information for the progress over the year on Councillor Greers' behalf.

Councillor Garland stated that Councillor Greer had been involved with a number of projects over the past year throughout the borough and town.

Councillor Greer had been instrumental in ensuring that Development Control increased efficiency by having an agreed time slot when Members could meet with case officers rather than on a frequent ad hoc basis. Pre Application meetings were now making a profit and backlogged enforcement cases had been reduced from 500 to 50.

The Committee heard that the finance was in place for the next agreed stage of the high street improvement project with no need to borrow. The current cost of the project stood at an estimated £2.2million, with KCC contributing £600,000. It was predicted that it will generate £4million a year to the economy and contracts to implement the work would take place shortly. The GVA Grimley Assessment contains the figures as stated, which Councillor Garland will forward to the Members via the Overview and Scrutiny Officer. In answer to a question Councillor Garland stated that he did not know if new traders had already sought information for trading in the High Street following its refurbishment, but recommended that Mr John Foster, Economic Development Manager may be able to answer if Councillor Greer was not able to provide this information in his written report.

Councillor Garland was not aware of the update regarding twinning with Ghent in Belgium, and suggested this be done via a written response from Councillor Greer.

With regard to other projects within the portfolio the review of clutter such as street furniture across the borough had seen some 500 items removed. In terms of other improvements Councillor Greer had recruited the help of Maidstone Community Care Housing to clear Palace Avenue car park. The Campaign for Rural England had visited recently and was very impressed with the improvements that had been made to the town.

Councillor Garland informed the Committee that with new quality jobs being created, Maidstone was being recognized as one of the top places in Kent to invest in.

Councillor Garland stated that ongoing work included the river enhancement, making the tourist attractions a top focus point. By encouraging the University of Creative Arts to be involved, it was hoped that this would add value to the borough and enhance cultural offering. At present there was no news on the feasibility report, however, the Committee stated they would appreciate a written response detailing the latest news on this development.

The Committee voiced the concerns of the Parish Councils, as it was perceived that they were being 'brushed aside'. Councillor Garland stated that this was not the intention of the Council, but that the Localism Bill may address these issues. The Committee noted this, and suggested that the planners in Development Control engage with the Parish Councils to

lead and guide the Parishes through the changes proposed by the Localism Bill.

Resolved: That Councillor Garland be thanked for the update and that:

- a) Councillor Malcolm Greer be thanked for his collaboration with High Street Ward Members for the improvements within the High Street that had already taken place;
- b) Councillor Garland sends the GVA report to the Overview and Scrutiny Officer to circulate to Members;
- c) The Cabinet Member for Regeneration urge the planning department to engage with Parish Councils to guide the Parishes through the changes proposed by the Localism Bill; and
- d) Councillor Greer provides a written update detailing the points that were not covered in the Committee meeting, those being:
 - i. Update on the twinning with Ghent, Belgium; and
 - ii. Whether traders had already enquired about trading in the High St following the refurbishment.

50. Interview with Cabinet Member for Leisure and Culture - Progress Over the year

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Richard Ash to the meeting, and invited him to present his update to the Committee.

Councillor Ash informed the Committee that the number of traders in the market on Tuesdays was in excess of 50, whilst Saturday traders were struggling at 23. However the boot fair and Saturday Hall Hire had increased in number. Car Parks throughout the town were now advertising the market, as well as advertising at the Gateway, Museum and on a Council vehicle. They had enquired into using the advert boards on highway land for advertising the market, however this was deemed too expensive. In answer to a question, Councillor Ash confirmed that should the Saturday trading stop, the funds could be put to enhance the Tuesday market.

The Committee heard about the fund raising for the museum had proved difficult. Councillor Ash stated that due to the recent natural disaster events in Japan, they had not sought funding from them for the display of Japanese artwork. However, recent fundraising events had been successful, with the latest abseiling team raising £700, the Committee thanked the abseiling team for this effort.

The museum had continued to be a successful visitor attraction, there had been 4000 visitors during the February School half term holidays and the Museum had the busiest August ever recorded in 2010. The Committee was delighted to hear this, but did stress its disappointment that the café for the museum was not in the centre. It was felt that this was a mistake, and urged Councillor Ash to relay this back. Councillor Ash

acknowledged this, and confirmed he would convey the Committees' thoughts to the Project Board.

The Committee enquired into the issues relating to the contract, and whether this had been resolved at no further cost to the Council. Councillor Ash confirmed that the initial problems with surveying levels had been rectified, albeit at an additional cost. He assured the Committee that Brian Morgan, Assistant Director of Regeneration and Cultural Services, had been dealing with the matter that was now with legal in a bid to recoup the expenses this had caused and felt confident this would happen as the contractor concerned had admitted liability.

The Committee and Councillor Ash expressed their thanks to the Simon Lace, Museum Manager, Brian Morgan and the host of officers who had been involved with the Museums' work.

Councillor Ash informed the Committee that the Leisure Centre had been a success since its refurbishment, seeing an increase in gym membership. Furthermore no complaints had been relayed to him via the users of Mote Hall. The Committee asked if this was because they had expected the users to voice their concerns regardless of being asked. Councillor Ash confirmed they had not asked users, but from experience if something was not right people would voice concerns. However, he was happy to make contact with the users if the Committee so wished. The Committee stated they would appreciate this. He stated that he was happy with the progress that had been made, and there were no further plans to do anything more. The Committee enquired into the contract with Serco, and whether they had received a summary as requested in December. The Overview and Scrutiny Officer confirmed she would look back at the recommendations that were made on 13 December 2010 to Jason Taylor, Parks and Open Spaces Manager and would circulate any information on to the Committee.

Councillor Ash stated that the community development team were a fantastic team, who work very hard with the schemes that they run. Despite cost cuts, Hotfoot had increased to 90% attendance, and there had been an increase in vulnerable youngsters attending. The new system for recruitment using Human Resources had gone well, which made it easier for the team. The Committee stated they had on occasion seen Hotfoot in action, and it was nice to see the children enjoying themselves.

The Committee enquired into the Sutton Valence sports track, as it was noted in the mid-year progress report that Cabinet Member for Leisure and Culture would obtain a report showing the usage of the track facilities. Councillor Ash stated he had not been able to obtain this information, however Councillor Nelson-Gracie had the contact details for the bursar, Andrew Hutchins and was happy to convey this to Councillor Ash.

In answer to a question, Councillor Ash confirmed that Maidstone's Dream funding scheme had seen 11 or 12 Olympians benefit from the boroughs funding therefore was proving to be a success.

Councillor Ash confirmed that a great deal of work had been going on behind the scenes at the Hazlitt Theatre with Brian Morgan. Two business plans had been submitted for the theatre, one internal one external and they were looking to have agreed a business plan during 2011. The Hazlitt choir was received well, as well as the youth theatre and pantomime which had in excess of 90% tickets sold in 2010.

The Committee heard that there had been no grant received for the twinning plans, and therefore the £2000 Council funding was being withdrawn. The Committee was disappointed with this, and acknowledged that it was hard to fundraise, and suggested that the Twinning Committee Chairman should be contacted before the end of this Municipal Year to explain why this was the case.

- Resolved:** That the Cabinet Member for Leisure and Culture be thanked for the information and it be recommended that:
- a) the Cabinet Member relays the Scrutiny Committees disappointment that the Café is not situated in the centre of the Museum, and enquires into the possibility of this being done;
 - b) the Cabinet Member ensures that the financial loss relating to the mistake made at surveying level of the museum be recouped;
 - c) the Cabinet Member contacts the users of Mote Hall to ensure that they are satisfied with the current functions of the hall;
 - d) the Cabinet Member contacts Councillor Nelson-Gracie for the contact details of the bursar to Sutton Valence School, so to obtain a monitoring report of the track facilities;
 - e) the Cabinet Member contacts the Chairman of the Twinning Committee this Municipal Year 2010-11 to explain the reasons behind the funding being withdrawn; and
 - f) the Overview and Scrutiny Officer re-circulates to the Members the responses following the recommendations made on 13 December 2010 ensuring that the summary of the Serco contract was included.

51. Future Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme 2011-12

The Committee considered the future work programme, and it was noted that this was the last meeting for this municipal year. The Head of Change and Scrutiny requested that the Committee consider items it would like to suggest for the scrutiny work programme for 2011-12. The Overview and Scrutiny Officer reminded the Committee that the new structure of the Scrutiny Committees would be focusing on the three new priorities for the Council, irrespective of which Committee the present Members were on. The Committee agreed that the LDF Process workshop and Neighbourhood Development Plans should be put forward as suggestions for the 2011-12 work programme.

The Committee thanked the Overview and Scrutiny Officer for her help, in particular with the rural economy review including the organised field trip.

The Committee noted the 4th quarter performance monitoring report. The Overview and Scrutiny Officer informed the Committee of the progress made towards the rural economy review, and informed the Committee that the final draft version would be sent to them on Thursday 28 April 2011, any comments need to be sent to the Overview and Scrutiny Officer by Tuesday 3 May 2011.

Resolved: That:

- a) The LDF Process workshop and Neighbourhood Development Plans be suggested for the 2011-12 work programme; and
- b) The Committee send comments on the draft rural economy review to the Overview and Scrutiny Officer by Tuesday 3 May 2011.

52. Duration of meeting

6.30pm to 8.54pm.