

**REPORTS FOR DECISION BY THE  
CABINET MEMBER FOR CORPORATE SERVICES**

Date Issued: 17 March 2011

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| 1. Report of the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Customer Services - Gateway Review | 1 - 31           |

**A Record of Decision will be issued following the conclusion of 5 clear working days from the date of issue of the Report**

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# Agenda Item 1

## **MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **CABINET MEMBER FOR CORPORATE SERVICES**

#### **REPORT OF CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**Report prepared by Christina Chemsil**

**Date Issued: 17 March 2011**

#### **1. Customer Services - Maidstone Gateway Review**

##### **1.1 Key Issue for Decision**

1.1.1 To consider the recommendations within the 'Customer Services - Maidstone Gateway Review' report attached at **Appendix A**.

1.1.2 The Cabinet Member for Corporate Services is required to complete the Scrutiny Committee Recommendation Implementation Plan attached at **Appendix B** within 28 days of publication.

##### **1.2 Recommendation of the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

1.2.1 That the Cabinet Member agrees the following recommendations:

- 1) Reduce opening hours from 8.30am-5.30pm to 9-5.30pm, whilst maintaining the opportunity for staff to start at 8.30am, to allow for training, setting up, etc.
- 2) The Mall to provide a car park pay machine by the Gateway entrance level to the car park.
- 3) Investigate whether it is possible to have a presence from Social Services on a Saturday.
- 4) Cabinet Member to pursue if registered social landlords will pay and provide a free-phone within the Gateway for customers.
- 5) KCC Registrar services to cease providing services within the Gateway, due to its own office location being so close.
- 6) In order for the CAB to maintain its independence, investigate the possibility of branding the CAB within the Gateway.
- 7) IT should prioritise improving the Parking Services information available online and this should also be accessible through mobile phone technology.

- 8) Parking Officer to be 'on-call' with the gateway staff equipped and trained to deal with initial enquiries.
- 9) To remove the weekly late night Thursday.
- 10) Planning Duty Officer to be 'on-call' for queries, with all minor enquiries primarily dealt with by Gateway staff.
- 11) Regular training be given to Gateway staff from all in-house qualified Planners.
- 12) A fee to partners be introduced to help cover cost of facilities provided in the Gateway.
- 13) Investigate new ways of working to avoid duplication of advice and money looking at what is being spent and where with CAB and neighbouring boroughs.
- 14) Carbon Footprint figures to be shared where applicable with Partners including KCC and the Chequers Mall Corporation.
- 15) Cabinet Member to investigate issues surrounding the wood burning central heating, ensuring that coppicing in local woodlands is incorporated.
- 16) Voluntary Action Maidstone to cease providing its services within the Gateway due to its own office location being so close.
- 17) The ground floor foyer be equipped for notices to the public, available to all departments and partners.
- 18) A pillar-box at the King Street entrance to the Gateway be installed allowing a secure and safe way to leave mail within office hours without the need to enter the Gateway itself.
- 19) Signage within the Gateway displaying the services and partners available should indicate the days and times that they are available.
- 20) Cabinet Member to pursue the opportunity to work with Job Centre Plus within the Gateway.
- 21) Cabinet Member to pursue the opportunity to have Kent Social Children's Services providing in the Gateway, due to their local offices being closed down.

### 1.3 Reasons for Recommendation

- 1.3.1 At its meeting on 1 June 2010, the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to carry out a review of the Council's approach with regard to Customer Services and the Maidstone Gateway, as it had been in operation since January 2009. This review focused on the operation of the Maidstone Gateway.

1.3.2 The Committee has carried out both select-committee style interviews and formal meetings with both internal officers and the Gateway partners, sent a questionnaire to Gateway staff and considered desktop research to identify alternative ways of providing a premium service to the public whilst maintaining value for money services.

1.3.3 Having considered the evidence, the Committee approved a wide range of recommendations for the Gateway service, and felt that it was a starting point in attempting to address perceived issues in the Maidstone Gateway.

1.4 Alternative Action and why not Recommended

1.4.1 The Cabinet Member could decide not to endorse any of the recommendations within the "Customer Services - Maidstone Gateway Review" report, however the recommendations are based on evidence from a range of sources and support the Council's objectives with regard to being a place with efficient and effective public services, as outlined at 1.5.

1.5 Impact on Corporate Objectives

1.5.1 The Council's Strategic Plan 2009-12 lists "a place with efficient and effective public services" and the new Strategic Plan 2011-2015 lists "corporate and customer excellence" as key priorities. The recommendations within the report contribute to the fulfillment of these objectives.

1.6 Risk Management

1.6.1 The Recommendations contained within the report will need to be risk assessed as part of reviewing whether they should be accepted or not.

1.7 Other Implications

1.7.1

- 1. Financial
- 2. Staffing
- 3. Legal
- 4. Equality Impact Needs Assessment
- 5. Environmental/Sustainable Development
- 6. Community Safety

|   |
|---|
| X |
| X |
|   |
|   |
|   |
|   |

7. Human Rights Act

8. Procurement

1.8 Relevant Documents

Appendices

Appendix A - Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee  
"Customer Services - Maidstone Gateway Review".

1.8.1 Background Documents

None

**IS THIS A KEY DECISION REPORT?**

Yes

No

If yes, when did it first appear in the Forward Plan?

.....

This is a Key Decision because: .....

.....

Wards/Parishes affected: .....

.....

**How to Comment**

Should you have any comments on the issue that is being considered please contact either the relevant Officer or the Member of the Executive who will be taking the decision.

Councillor Marion Ring

Cabinet Member for Corporate Services

Telephone: 01622 686492

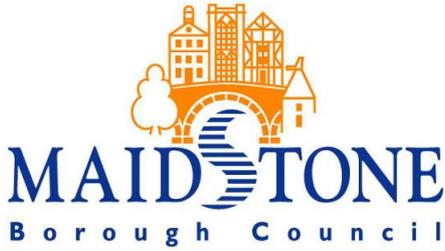
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Keeping an eye on  
Maidstone

## **Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee**



## **Maidstone Gateway Review**

**Municipal Year 2010/11**

### **Committee Membership:**

Councillor Harwood (Chairman)  
Councillor Lusty (Vice-Chairman)  
Councillor Bradshaw  
Councillor Mrs Wilson

Councillor Hinder  
Councillor Ross  
Councillor Parr

**This report is available in alternative formats. For further information about this service please contact the Scrutiny Section on 01622 602463.**

**The report is also available on the Council's website:**

**[www.maidstone.gov.uk/osc](http://www.maidstone.gov.uk/osc)**

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## **Forward from the Chairman**

This is an in-depth review to understand and analyse lessons learned from the first year of operation of The Gateway "one stop shop". Scrutiny of performance data and interviews with the public as well as personnel drawn from across the MBC and partner organisations informed recommendations aimed at enhancing public take-up and satisfaction with the services on offer whilst ensuring optimum performance and value for taxpayer's money.

We have identified that there was potential for duplication of work between officers and Gateway staff, and that with further in-house training and guidance Gateway staff can be better utilised to ensure officers are able to focus on work whilst the public are still receiving superb customer service. With this in mind the evidence shows that it is not a matter of needing more staff or power but, rather, greater simplification of the system and structure.

There is cause for confusion over who delivers services here at the Gateway, when some services delivered here have their own offices are locally based. In order to obtain value for money and to allow us to achieve our ambitions and priorities for local people it was established that by removing services that are already local, other services would gain opportunity to serve the residents in a centralised venue.

From the interviews with MBC and partners a number of recommendations have been identified for improving the provision of services, suitability for staff, the rural community and communication.

The diversity of Maidstone's residents is constantly changing, and services that are provided should be monitored by the Council and its partners to ensure ongoing suitability of policies and services are maintained. The Council's proactive approach has served the Borough well, and it is hoped that it will continue to thrive as a welcoming, inclusive place with efficient and effective public services.

On behalf of the Committee I would like to thank members of the public, MBC staff and partners for their contribution to the report as well as our Scrutiny Officers for their input.

Tony Harwood

Chairman, Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2010-11

## List of Recommendations

- 1) 5.1 - Reduce opening hours from 8.30am-5.30pm to 9-5.30pm, whilst maintaining the opportunity for staff to start at 8.30am, to allow for training, setting up, etc.
- 2) 5.2 - The Mall to provide a car park pay machine by the Gateway entrance level to the car park.
- 3) 5.3.2 - Investigate whether it is possible to have a presence from Social Services on a Saturday.
- 4) 5.3 - Cabinet Member to pursue if registered social landlords will pay and provide a free-phone within the Gateway for customers.
- 5) 5.3.5 - Voluntary Action Maidstone to cease providing its services within the Gateway due to its own office location being so close.
- 6) 5.3.4 - KCC Registrar services to cease providing services within the Gateway, due to its own office location being so close.
- 7) 5.3.6 - In order for the CAB to maintain its independence, investigate the possibility of branding the CAB within the Gateway.
- 8) 5.3.8 - IT should prioritise improving the Parking Services information available online and this should also be accessible through mobile phone technology.
- 9) 5.3.8 - Parking Officer to be 'on-call' with the gateway staff equipped and trained to deal with initial enquiries.
- 10) 5.1 - To remove the weekly late night Thursday.
- 11) 5.1 - Planning Duty Officer to be 'on-call' for queries, with all minor enquiries primarily dealt with by Gateway staff.
- 12) 5.1 - Regular training be given to Gateway staff from all in-house qualified Planners.
- 13) 7.4 - A fee to partners be introduced to help cover cost of facilities provided in the Gateway.
- 14) 8.5 - Investigate new ways of working to avoid duplication of advice and money looking at what is being spent and where with CAB and neighbouring boroughs.
- 15) 8.4 - Carbon Footprint figures to be shared where applicable with Partners including KCC and the Chequers Mall Corporation.
- 16) 8.4 - Cabinet Member to investigate issues surrounding the wood burning central heating, ensuring that coppicing in local woodlands is incorporated.
- 17) 9.2 - The ground floor foyer be equipped for notices to the public, available to all departments and partners.
- 18) 9.3 - A pillar-box at the King Street entrance to the Gateway be installed allowing a secure and safe way to leave mail within office hours without the need to enter the Gateway itself.
- 19) 9.4 - Signage within the Gateway displaying the services and partners available should indicate the days and times that they are available.
- 20) 10.4 - Cabinet Member to pursue the opportunity to work with Job Centre Plus within the Gateway.
- 21) 10.2 - Cabinet Member to pursue the opportunity to have Kent Social Children's Services providing in the Gateway, due to their local offices being closed down.

The Committee would like to thank the following who have contributed to this report:

**Maidstone Borough Council**

Customer Services Manager, Sandra Marchant  
Public Relations Manager, Roger Adley  
Head of Housing and Community Safety, John Littlemore  
Parking Services Manager, Jeff Kitson  
Head of Business Improvement, Georgia Hawkes  
Business Services Manager, Lee Davey  
Head of Revues and Benefits, Steve McGinnes  
Overview & Scrutiny Officer, Esther Bell  
Performance & Scrutiny Officer, Clare Wood  
Gateway Customer Service Advisor Staff  
Property & Procurement Manager, David Tibbit  
Overview & Scrutiny Officer, Christina Chems

**Kent County Council**

Jane Kendal, Gateway Delivery Manager  
Avis Heppenstall, Registrar

**Citizens Advice Bureau, Maidstone**

Bonnie Malhotra, Manager

**Voluntary Action Maidstone**

Charlotte Osbourn-Ford, Manager

**Kent Adult Social Services**

Sue Stower & Alan Fitzgerald

**Job Centre Plus, Maidstone**

Alison Culshaw, External Relations Manager

**Golding Homes**

Peter Stringer, Chief Executive

The Committee would also like to thank the council officers and members of the public who took the time to contact the Committee and offer their opinions and ideas on the Gateway. All of the correspondence received was considered and added a valuable dimension to this review.

## 1. Background

- 1.1. On 1 June 2010, Members participated in a Work Programming Workshop to develop ideas for the 2010-11 Overview and Scrutiny Work programmes. Ideas were received from residents, community and voluntary sector groups and officers, and these were considered alongside Members' own ideas at the workshop by each Committee. Members considered a range of ideas with the potential for further review.
- 1.2. At its meeting on 1 June, the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to carry out a review of the Council's approach with regard to Customer Services and Maidstone Gateway, as it had been in operation since January 2009.
- 1.3. The Committee interviewed the Customer Services Manager at its meeting with regards to Customer Service Gateway issues. As part of this discussion the Customer Services Manager outlined a number of issues. The relevant extract from the minutes of the meeting is as follows:
  - "The Gateway had proved a successful service in partnership with Kent County Council (KCC). It had provided more customer services to the public and had enabled more detailed holistic advice to be delivered. However, this had meant that wait times had increased;
  - There had been some issues with regard to trying to secure regular sessions with partners such as with KCC's Occupational Therapists. Some partners who had provided their services on an ad-hoc basis in the Gateway had felt that they did not have enough custom to justify their attendance, but officers felt that a regular spot would lead to more custom. It was difficult for the customer services team to refer customers to partners in the gateway when they were only present on an ad-hoc basis;
  - The Customer Services Manager felt that there was a need for more voluntary organisations to provide services in the Gateway;
  - The Committee was concerned that the facilities for staff were insufficient;
  - The customers services team aspired to have a more in-depth benefit service, beyond housing and council tax benefit;
  - They had achieved 90% customer satisfaction and aimed to answer 95% of all calls received; and
  - In response to a question, Members were informed that they were able to report on the number of calls by each service, but were not able to break it down to individual issues within the service."

The Committee agreed to undertake a major review of Council Customer Services and agreed to incorporate the review of the Gateway in to this. The Committee noted the existing work programme commitments and agreed that working groups to report back on particular aspects of the review may be required. The Committee agreed it was important to interview a wide range of experts and agreed to suggest possible witnesses to the Overview and Scrutiny Officer."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Minutes of the Corporate Services overview and scrutiny committee meeting held on Tuesday 1 June 2010.

## 2. Terms of Reference

2.1.1 The Committee agreed that, by conducting this review, it would aim to meet the following objectives and desired outcomes:

- To review the operation of the Gateway, in particular:
  - Establish what residents' awareness of the services provided in the gateway is;
  - Determine the suitability of the Gateway operations, including opening times and accessibility;
  - Identify whether there is a suitable provision for rural residents;
  - Establish whether the Gateway offers value for money and provides a good use of space;
  - Determine whether the Gateway resources are appropriate;
  - Identify opportunities to release service pressures through removing avoidable contact and channel migration;
  - Identify the provision and suitability of facilities available for staff;
  - Identify the provision and range of services available in the Gateway and establish if this is fit for purpose and what benefits each service provides to residents through their presence;
  - Identify how the presence of partner organisations is communicated and marketed by the organisations to Maidstone's residents;
  - Identify opportunities for new service provisions in the gateway (this could include interviews with Kent County Council Partners and Citizen Advice Bureau regarding their experiences);
  - Identify funding arrangements with partners and make recommendations as required;
  - Identify alternative ways of delivering services and make recommendations as required;
  - Consider performance standards and performance targets.
- To review Customer Services, in particular:
  - To identify the practice of authorities with superb service delivery reputations amongst their local populations and identify how they attained that reputation, including consideration of Councils in affluent and less affluent areas;
  - To determine the type of customer complaints received and identify how the Council had responded to them; and
  - To establish how the Council's welfare and benefits services are communicated and marketed to Maidstone's residents.

### 3. Methodology

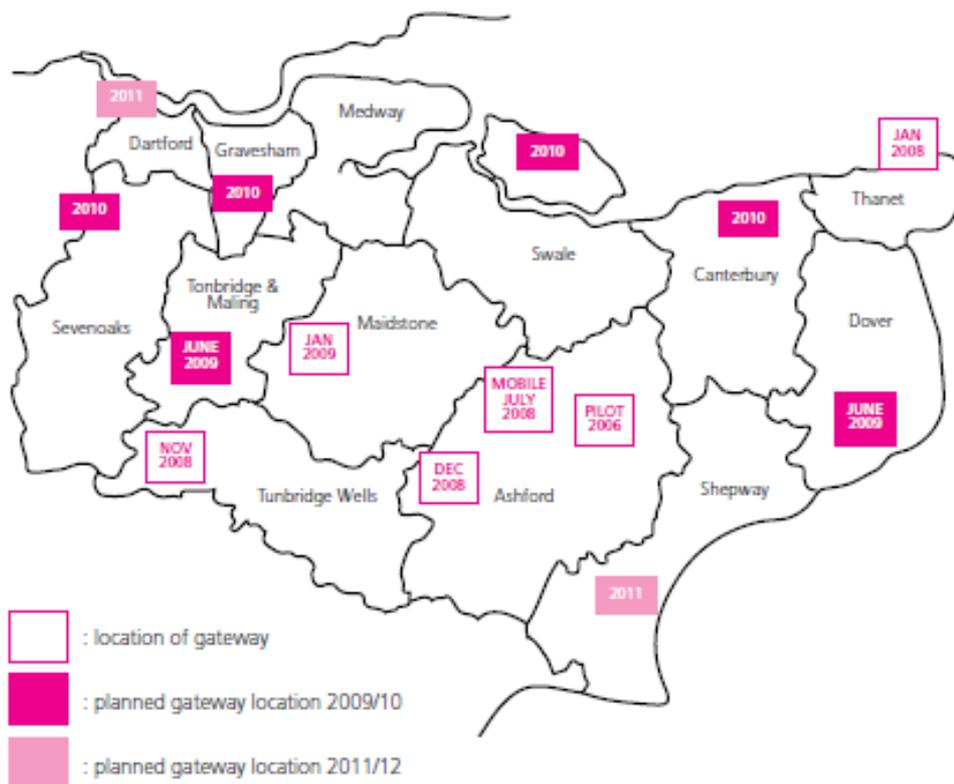
- 3.1 The Committee sought evidence from a variety of sources. Select Committee-style interviews with a number of witnesses were undertaken; these included interviews with the Customer Services Manager, the Head of Business Improvement, the Business Services Manager and the Gateway Delivery Manager from KCC.
- 3.2 The Committee considered the range of services provided via the Gateway compared to other Gateways in Kent, including the differences in opening times. Written evidence from the Job Centre Plus (JCP) and the carbon footprint of the Gateway at Maidstone was also discussed.
- 3.3 The involvement of the public was also considered to be vital for this review. A press release was sent to all residents via the Council's website, while a message was posted in a Maidstone-based group on the social networking site, 'Facebook'. Responses to these were circulated to the Committee and taken into account during Members' discussions.
- 3.4 Desktop research was carried out by the Overview and Scrutiny Officer to establish best practice in Customer Services and in particular the provision of the Gateway and to seek further evidence for the review.



## 4. Introduction

- 4.1 Located to the South East of London, Kent comprises of one County Council, twelve District Councils and one Unitary Council covering a wide range of land, rural and urban, with eighteen towns – the largest of which is Maidstone. The Gateway first launched in Ashford in 2005, and a total of fifteen are planned to be in place by 2012<sup>2</sup>.
- 4.2 The Gateway in Maidstone first opened on 5 January 2009 and is now operating with 23 partner services as well as 14 council related services, open 50.5 hours a week over 6 days.

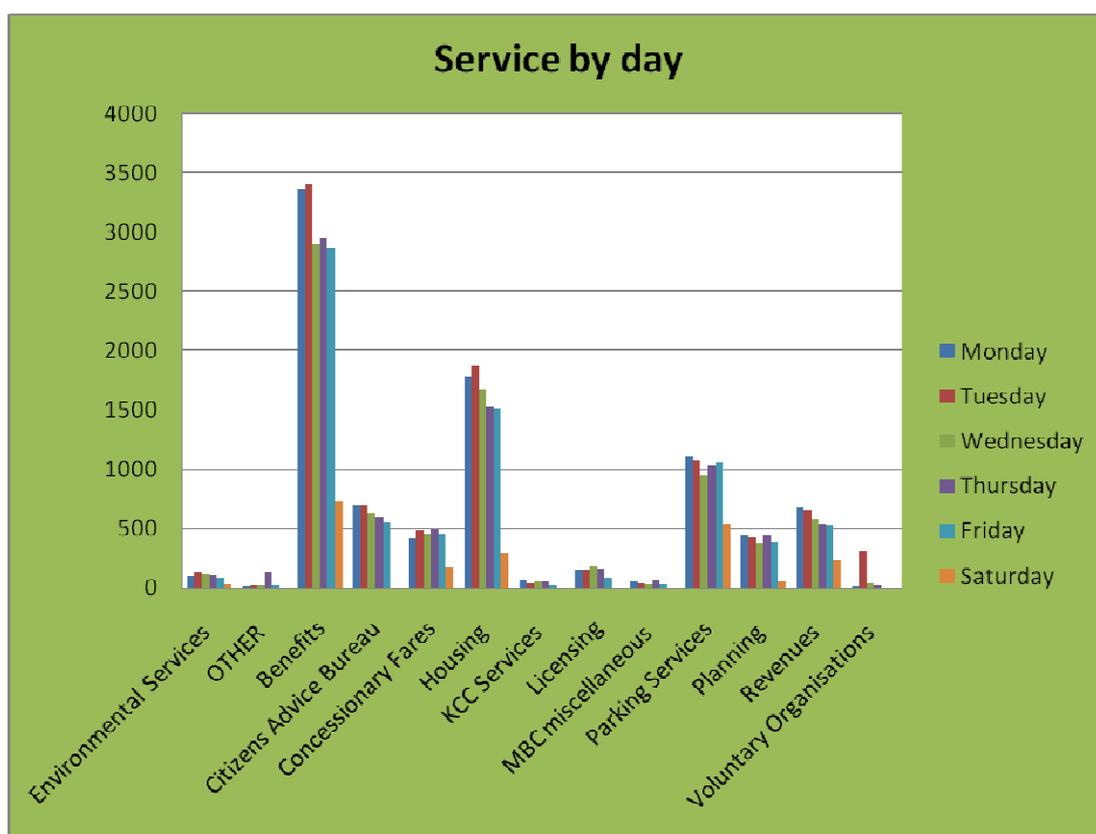
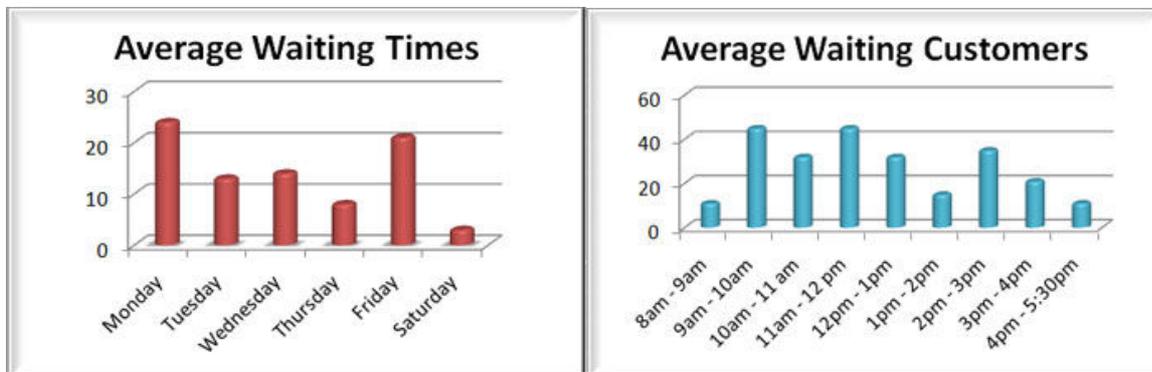
The graphic below depicts the roll-out of Gateways across Kent over time.



<sup>2</sup> Kent Gateway <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/10011270> [Accessed November 2010]

4.3 The Gateway sees approximately 6500 customers per month, and has served more than 93,000 customers since it opened in 2009<sup>3</sup>, with the busiest days being Monday and Friday. Across the whole week the busiest times are between 11am and 3pm.

The below graph shows the average waiting time for each day of the week, whilst graph 2 shows the average waiting times of the day.<sup>4</sup>



<sup>3</sup> Maidstone Borough Council Facebook Homepage, figures from January 2009 – 1 February 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Maidstone Borough Council [http://www.maidstone.gov.uk/where\\_to\\_find\\_us](http://www.maidstone.gov.uk/where_to_find_us). [Accessed December 2010]

<sup>5</sup> Mosaic information from presentation to Scrutiny 31 August 2010

## 5. Provision of services through the Gateway

5.1 Maidstone Gateway currently operates from 8.30am-5.30pm Monday to Friday with the exception of Thursday operating a late night service until 7pm. Saturday opening times are 9am-1pm.

In comparison to our neighbours, it would appear that Maidstone is open considerably longer than other Local Authorities with a Gateway, as they either start later, or finish earlier. Whilst it may be that this fits with that particular area, the graph on page 10 does highlight that the first thirty minutes are not essential to the residents of Maidstone with only a few members of the public using the gateway between 8.30 and 9am. This may be due to the school run or work commitments and traffic.

| Opening Times    | MBC              | ABC       | Dover     | Thanet           | TMBC      | TW         |
|------------------|------------------|-----------|-----------|------------------|-----------|------------|
| Monday           | 8.30-5.30        | 9.00-5.00 | 9.00-5.00 | 9.00-6.00        | 8.30-5.00 | 9.00-5.00  |
| Tuesday          | 8.30-5.30        | 9.00-5.00 | 9.00-5.00 | 9.00-6.00        | 8.30-5.00 | 9.00-5.00  |
| Wednesday        | 8.30-5.30        | 9.00-5.00 | 9.00-5.00 | 9.00-6.00        | 8.30-5.00 | 9.00-5.00  |
| Thursday         | <b>8.30-7.00</b> | 9.00-5.00 | 9.00-5.00 | <b>9.00-8.00</b> | 8.30-5.00 | 9.00-6.30  |
| Friday           | 8.30-5.30        | 9.00-5.00 | 9.00-5.00 | 9.00-6.00        | 8.30-5.00 | 9.00-5.00  |
| Saturday         | 9.00-1.00        | 9.00-4.00 | 9.00-1.00 | 9.00-5.00        | 9.00-5.00 | 10.00-4.00 |
| Sunday           | closed           | closed    | closed    | closed           | closed    | closed     |
| total hours p/wk | 50.5             | 47        | 45        | 55               | 50.5      | 47.5       |

### Recommendation 1

Reduce opening hours from 8.30am-5pm to 9-5pm, whilst maintaining the 8.30am start for staff, to allow for training, setting up.

5.2 The accessibility of the Gateway was a major factor when considering how the premises would be modernised, in order to ensure compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act and ensure that the building was accessible for all disabilities and ages.

However, the Kent Association for the Blind (KAB) noted that 'The outside of the main building can omit quite a lot of glare on a sunny day. Although the escalators are centrally in front as you enter the main door it is possible for a visually impaired person to miss the escalators and walk to the left and then be completely lost. The meet and greet station is too far from the door to the main area and it is difficult for a visually impaired person to locate the meet and greet station. However the lighting

and decor are adequate and there seems not to be any trip hazards in the general area.<sup>6</sup>

Also, the Multiple Sclerosis Society in Maidstone commented that they 'have used this [the Gateway] now a few times for the Supported Employment and Council services, while I think it is actually a very good facility there is just one thing that I find disappointing although I may just be ill informed. There doesn't seem to be a machine to pay for the car park within the Gateway, i.e. by the exit from the Gateway to the car park, so exiting the car park requires driving round to a pay booth and having the palaver of getting out the car with crutches etc again.'<sup>7</sup>

### **Recommendation 2**

The Mall to provide a car park pay machine by the Gateway entrance level to the car park.

## 5.3 Services provided in the Gateway via partners

5.3.1 On 16 September 2010, several partners met with the Scrutiny Officer to discuss how their service was used within the Gateway, and presented any suggestions for means of improvement

5.3.2 The Voluntary Action Maidstone (VAM) manager, Ms Charlotte Osbourn-Ford highlighted volunteers providing services within the Gateway; 'The current service that was being provided in the Gateway was a signposting service designed to improve the volunteer's confidence while helping customers in the Gateway for example showing them how to use the self-service PCs and advising them of additional services or groups that they may be able to access. The volunteer wears a tee shirt with the Gateway logo and has no permanent desk.'

5.3.3 Sue Stower and Alan Fitzgerald from KCC Adult Social Services (KASS) informed the officer that 'the number of people using KASS services has been increasing; as a result of this KASS planned to reconfigure the assessment services and intended to run regular clinics in the Gateway to reduce the amount of visits required. The Committee was informed that the revised service would be full-time and in addition to undertaking assessments, advisors would be trained to signpost customers to additional services. There was funding in place to expand the service.'

5.3.4 Avis Heppenstall and Catherine French, Registration Service, Kent County Council (KCC) told the officer that 'the proximity of the Archbishop Palace was one of the reasons that the Registrar's service within the Maidstone Gateway was limited and underused by the public.' Due to the lack of facilities at the Gateway, it was perceived that the quality of service was not as effective, as there was a need to

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<sup>6</sup> Written response from Anita Hinchcliff, Rehab Team Leader, KAB 6 December 2010

<sup>7</sup> Written response from Member of the MS group, Maidstone 26 November 2010

contact the Archbishops Palace to check Doctors signatures, and there was nowhere private to discuss a death. However, it was apparent that staff had been trained to use the Ceremonies and Registration on Line booking system. This booking system is also available to the public on line and the registration of births service could be provided within the Gateway.

5.3.5 **The Voluntary Action Maidstone is based in the Community Support Centre in Marsham Street, a short walk from King Street.** However they would not consider moving premises to the Gateway and are not prepared to pay a fee at present.<sup>8</sup>

**Recommendation 3**

Investigate whether it is possible to have a presence from Social Services on a Saturday

**Recommendation 4**

KCC Registrar services to cease providing services within the Gateway, due to its own office location being so close.

**Recommendation 5**

Voluntary Action Maidstone to cease providing its services within the Gateway due to its own office location being so close.

5.3.5 Peter Stringer, Chief Executive of Golding Homes mentioned that the decision by the Board to not be stationed in the Gateway took place in 2008, as their customer survey indicated that customers prefer to contact them via telephone, proven by the 86% satisfaction rate. **Leaflets detailing the Council services are provided in the 'Golding Homes New Tenant Pack'** together with housing and council tax benefit forms and utilities information.

5.3.6 On 19 October 2010 Bonnie Malhotra, Manager of the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) in Maidstone met with members of the scrutiny committee to discuss the function of the CAB within the Gateway. The CAB has 3 desks within the Gateway with 4 advisors and an appointment service for specialist advice. Mr Malhotra told the officer that without the Gateway the CAB would be struggling for space. However, due to confidentiality issues the use of a pod was not an effective working space. **The set up in the Gateway makes the CAB feel like a part of MBC, losing part of its independence**, even though they are an independent advisory service. This is due to the corporate partnership branding that is being used across Kent for all Gateways.

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<sup>8</sup> Minutes of the Corporate Services overview and scrutiny committee meeting held on Thursday 16 September 2010



### **Recommendation 6**

Cabinet Member to pursue if registered social landlords will pay and provide a free-phone within the Gateway for customers.

### **Recommendation 7**

In order for the CAB to maintain its independence, investigate the possibility of branding the CAB within the Gateway

## 5.4 Council Services Provided in the Gateway

5.4.1 John Littlemore, Head of Housing & Community Safety, and Pauline Meaney, Acting Housing Needs Manager, informed the Scrutiny Officer that 'some homelessness applications were more complex than other transactions, involving negotiations with landlords and mortgage companies, who need the opportunity to respond. There were also some customers who think the more visits they make to the Gateway the more likely they are to be housed'. However, 'the majority of homeless people coming to the Gateway were those who had been given notice to leave their current residence', not on the day they are made homeless. Since moving to the Gateway, **Housing's biggest challenge had been the increased volume of customers caused by the recession** but now there were four Housing Advisors to meet the increased demand. Between August 2009 and July 2010, Housing received 8237 visitors via the Gateway.<sup>9</sup> Mr Littlemore advised the officer that because MBC administers the Choice Based Lettings service, queries to MBC had increased.

<sup>9</sup> Mosaic information from presentation to Scrutiny 31 August 2010

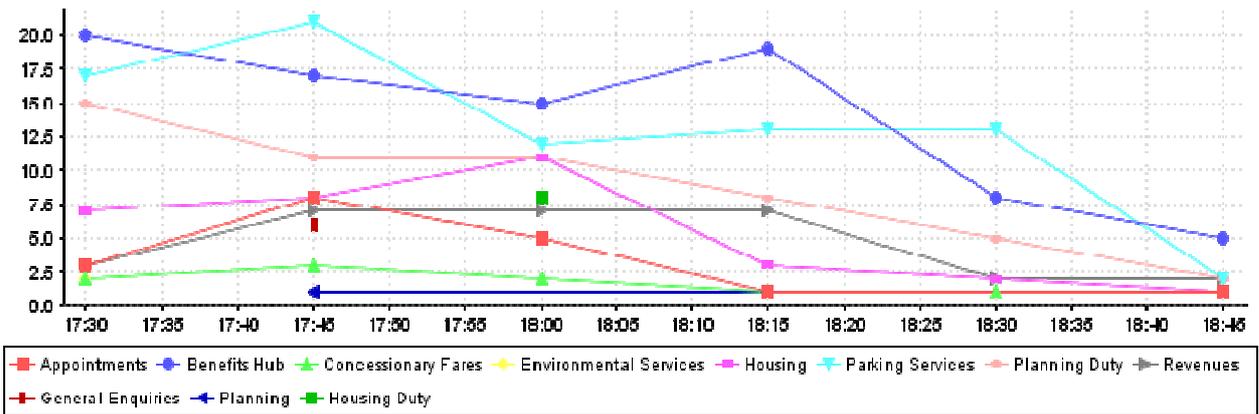


*Wayne Marder, Housing Options Officer in interview room at the Gateway*

- 5.4.2 Jeff Kitson, Parking Services Manager, informed the Officer that '1050 people had used the Gateway over a nine week period in relation to Parking Permits and 400 of these queries were specific to renewals. It was noted that **if Parking Services were not in the Gateway staff would have more time to process applications and renewals**'. Although parking permit renewals did not require a Gateway visit, temporary and proof for permits do. However, 'due to technological advances there may no longer be the need to issue paper permits with auto number plate recognition as from the end of the financial year 2010/11'. Mr Kitson 'expressed his satisfaction with the working arrangements in the Gateway and stated that the web service could be improved so customers could find out the progress of their application online as they can currently do with appeals'. It was also identified that they could reduce customers need for a face to face service within the Gateway as new technology introduced should be suitable for use from a mobile phone.
- 5.4.3 Out of the six Gateways in Kent, only two operate a weekly late night Thursday service<sup>10</sup>. After liaising with Principle Planning Officers, it became clear that this service was rarely used as they would either visit during the day to speak to a duty officer or **carry out research via the internet** – searching for planning applications and downloading general planning advice, and emailing directly requesting a written pre-application advice where a fee is required. When the Committee was presented with data on who used the Gateway and when, Monday and Tuesdays were the most popular and in the morning was the most popular time of day.
- 5.4.4 The graph below shows the services that are available on Thursdays between 5.30 and 6.45pm, otherwise known as 'late night Thursday' and the average number of service users from January 2010 to March 2011. The Committee felt that as footfall was not significant in the evening across the services the late night should be removed.

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<sup>10</sup> Information gathered by desktop research on each Gateway, November 2010



### Recommendation 8

IT should prioritise improving the Parking Services information available online and this should also be accessible through mobile phone technology.

### Recommendation 9

Parking Officer to be 'on-call' with the Gateway staff equipped and trained to deal with initial enquiries.

### Recommendation 10

To remove the weekly late night Thursday.

### Recommendation 11

Planning Duty Officer to be 'on-call' for queries, with all minor enquiries primarily dealt with by Gateway staff.

### Recommendation 12

Regular training be given to Gateway staff from all in-house qualified Planners.

5.4.4 Kent County Council's Head of Service for the Gateway Delivery, Jane Kendal, played a key role in helping the Maidstone Gateway take form, and informed the Committee in August that 'The Gateway programme was recognised with a green flag in the December 2009 Corporate Area Assessment (CAA) for Kent as an example of national best practice and also featured in the 2009 Front Office Shared Service event as an example of good practice.'<sup>11</sup> Although many services worked short shifts or by appointment only and did not offer a Saturday or late night service in the Gateway, Ms Kendal noted the particular **challenge facing Maidstone as many of the services already had provisions in the town centre as it was the County Town.**

<sup>11</sup> Minutes of the Corporate Services overview and scrutiny committee meeting held on Tuesday 31 August 2010

## 6. Suitability of service for staff

- 6.1 The Gateway currently has 17 staff, comprising ten full time and seven part time.<sup>12</sup> A recent survey requesting their views on the Gateway and its service for staff showed that the majority of **staff would appreciate being able to eat hot food in the kitchen.** Whilst Maidstone House is restricted to hot food on floor 1,<sup>13</sup> this was not suitable for Gateway staff as they have their own kitchen on ground floor which does not affect any working desk space or meeting area.
- 6.2 The lockers provided to staff are situated in their breakout area. However there is no mirror to use here to ensure that front line staff look presentable and professional. The survey showed that currently staff are using the hot water urn as a mirror.



*Gateway staff using the water urn as a mirror.*

- 6.3 At present the opening hours make training on matters such as health and safety, cashing up the pay-in machines and service or policy changes difficult to complete. **The survey reflected that by changing the Gateway opening time to 9am it would allow 30minutes per day for staff to carry out training.**

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<sup>12</sup> Data as at 17 December 2010 from Customer Services Supervisor

<sup>13</sup> Maidstone House - A Guide To Working Practices

## 7. Reaching the Rural Community

- 7.1 Mobile Gateways had been developed in Kent to provide fully transactional targeted services to ensure effective support to both urban and rural communities.. It was noted that there were no mobile Gateways provided in Maidstone. The Committee identified "the effectiveness of the mobile Gateways depended on the availability of staff to facilitate the required services. There would be staffing cost implications for providing such a service in Maidstone."<sup>14</sup>
- 7.2 Partners KCC Adult Social Services, concluded that to provide their service in a mobile Gateway would be 'something they would be willing to consider'<sup>15</sup>. However the KCC Registration Services added that their services in the rural areas perceived no issues and that 'the coverage was comprehensive in the rural areas with set outstations for residents to access.'<sup>16</sup>
- 7.3 The Mosaic data showed that **people who live in the town centre were more likely to use the Gateway**, however in the past outreach work had been undertaken but was not as successful as expected, presumably due to time frames waiting for the mobile to come around. Should a mobile gateway be running in the future, 'the CAB would be willing to make another attempt'<sup>17</sup> to help the rural community.
- 7.4 Due to the facilities at Bishops Terrace closing, and partly being made available at the Gateway, **a fee for usage of the Gateway to cover facilities** such electricity could be arranged. This could include a small fee to all partners, as Volunteers are able to use the premises freely whilst providing a service by their organisation.

### **Recommendation 13**

A fee to partners be introduced to help cover cost of facilities provided in the Gateway.

<sup>14</sup> Minutes of the Corporate Services overview and scrutiny committee meeting held on Tuesday 31 August 2010

<sup>15</sup> Minutes of the Corporate Services overview and scrutiny committee meeting held on Thursday 16 September 2010

<sup>16</sup> Minutes of the Corporate Services overview and scrutiny committee meeting held on Thursday 16 September 2010

<sup>17</sup> Minutes of the Corporate Services overview and scrutiny committee meeting held on Tuesday 19 October 2010

## 8. Sustainability

- 8.1 In 2009/2010 the Maidstone Gateway used 225268.5 kWh of electricity and the carbon footprint for the electricity use at Maidstone Gateway is 117,815 kg CO<sub>2</sub>.<sup>18</sup>
- 8.2 Methods to reduce energy are being trialled, such as escalators are turned off out of hours as is the lighting, and reducing the lighting during opening times.
- 8.3 In the summer staff find the Gateway is too hot, as the air conditioning is not able to be set differently to Maidstone House, due to the chilling plant being centralised.
- 8.4 **At present, Maidstone Borough Council does not share the carbon load with KCC or the Chequers Mall Corporation.**
- 8.5 As 15% of the CAB's clients come from other boroughs, 'yet no funding was received by the CAB from Tonbridge & Malling BC'<sup>19</sup> Mr Malhotra implied that partnerships could be improved if new ways of working to avoid duplication of advice and monies including what and where is money being spent was investigated.



### **Recommendation 14**

Investigate new ways of working to avoid duplication of advice and money looking at what is being spent and where with CAB and neighbouring boroughs

### **Recommendation 15**

Carbon Footprint figures to be shared where applicable with Partners including KCC and the Chequers Mall Corporation.

### **Recommendation 16**

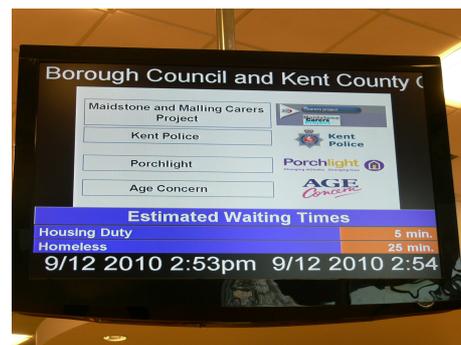
Cabinet Member to investigate issues surrounding the wood burning central heating, ensuring that coppicing in local woodlands is incorporated.

<sup>18</sup> Response from David Tibbit, Property & Procurement Manager to Chairman 22 November 2010

<sup>19</sup> Minutes of the Corporate Services overview and scrutiny committee meeting held on Tuesday 19 October 2010

## 9. Communication & Marketing

9.1 The Gateway has numerous methods of advertising its location and services provided by the partners. This is believed to be suitable for rural and urban residents as well as the, old and young as modern technologies such as the internet, facebook and plasma screens are kept up-to-date as well as the Borough Update and leaflets and posters.



9.2 **The ground floor foyer is an ideal location for advertisements from current community events to Committee meeting notices**, however to date, this has not been utilised. This could also provide information about Parish and other community events including contact details for Parish and Ward Councillors. The Operations Manager for the Mall has confirmed on 19 January 2011 that providing notices are displayed neatly and do not leave marks on the **windows in the foyer, any notice can be displayed with regards to Council services and events.**

9.3 Although the Gateway has many ways of communicating with the public, the public including Members and partners are not always able to communicate back to the council. Therefore forms or hand written letters are required to be sent in during the day or by Royal Mail. **A pillar box at the King Street entrance to the Gateway** could be installed allowing a secure and safe way to leave mail inside office hours without the need to see the Meet & Greet desk.

9.4 Signage within the Gateway displayed the services and partners available should **indicate the days and times that they are available.** This will ensure that the public can see this at any time, without needing to speak to staff to enquire.

### **Recommendation 17**

The ground floor foyer be equipped for notices to the public, available to all departments and partners.

### **Recommendation 18**

A pillar-box at the King Street entrance to the Gateway be installed allowing a secure and safe way to leave mail within office hours without the need to enter the Gateway itself.

### **Recommendation 19**

Signage within the Gateway displaying the services and partners available should indicate the days and times that they are available

## 10. Alternative Services Provision

- 10.1 It was noted by the Committee that there may be an option of introducing the appeals service for Blue Badges to the Gateway and possibly the issuing of Blue Badges. The Revenues and Benefits Manager, Steve McGinnes stressed the 'need for a framework to ensure that **if this service was to come into the Gateway that Maidstone was suitably reimbursed** for handling any transactions'.<sup>20</sup>
- 10.2 The Committee queried if there were any plans to introduce Kent Children's Social Services into the Gateway. Mrs Stower made it clear that this was a separate service but work was being done on how this complicated service could be delivered in different ways, **in particular with the closure of Bishops Terrace**. The Committee requested that they be kept informed of progress in this area.<sup>21</sup>
- 10.3 The Committee asked if Mrs Osborn-Ford was concerned about funding streams. She responded that MBC would have to work harder if VAM was unable to provide its services, and that communication between the two organisations should be improved. The Committee noted that vulnerable people were at risk because of the spending cuts and that all stakeholders should undertake an exercise to identify consequences of potential funding loss so that the issue could be raised with the Minister and addressed.<sup>22</sup>
- 10.4 The Committee investigated whether Job Centre Plus (JCP) would be interested in providing services at the Gateway. Unfortunately, JCP declined to take part in the review so we have not been able to ascertain if this is possible. However we think the Council should continue to pursue this opportunity and work with JCP.

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<sup>20</sup> KCC Adult Social Services meeting held on 19 September 2010.

<sup>21</sup> KCSS meeting held on 19 September 2010.

<sup>22</sup> VAM meeting held on 19 September 2010.

## **11. Conclusion**

- 11.1 Through carrying out this review, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee was able to establish that by removing late night Thursday services, and ensuring Planning Duty Officer schedules were resumed the Gateway staff would be able to provide initial key services via adequate in-house training. It was considered that this would allow Planning Officers to continue their work in their office, whilst still providing a premium service to customers.
- 11.2 The survey responses from Gateway staff were considered, and noted levels of enthusiasm for the Gateway to open to the public at 9am, allowing 30minutes prior to this for staff to complete tasks, training and team meetings.
- 11.3 The location of many of the gateway services within the town centre was noted. This raised a question of whether partners who provide a service within the Gateway are paying for the facilities.
- 11.4 An investigation into the carbon footprint usage showed that to date this had not been shared with KCC. Although methods to reduce energy had been trialled, it became apparent that having the chilling plant centralised with Maidstone House meant that it was difficult to ascertain exactly what the Gateway is using and it's carbon footprint.
- 11.5 A lack of communication was identified with regard to service operating times in the Gateway, as leaflets displayed are unclear on which days of the month services are available and there are no signs within the Gateway, or at its doors to reflect the names and times the services are available.
- 11.6 The Committee identified a few services that could cease to operate from within the Gateway, such as KCC Registrar and others that the Gateway could benefit from having, such as KCSS. Members considered this to be a better use of space within the Gateway and members of the public's time, as the original office was either deemed too close to warrant two facilitating venues or too remote should their original venue close. It was hoped that these changes to the partners incorporated within the Gateway, would maintain the level of service that the residents of Maidstone would find beneficial.

**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION ACTION AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN (SCRAIP)**

**Report Title: Customer Services - Maidstone Gateway Review**

**Report of Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**Date of Publication: 17 March 2011**

**Dates to report back to Committee:**

| <b>Update</b>   | <b>Date</b>       | <b>Completed?</b> | <b>Note</b>                 |
|-----------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> | <b>Sept 2011</b>  |                   | 6 months after publication  |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> | <b>March 2012</b> |                   | 12 months after publication |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> |                   |                   |                             |

| <b>Recommendation<sup>i</sup></b>   | <b>Cabinet Member<sup>ii</sup></b> | <b>Response<sup>iii</sup></b> | <b>Timetable<sup>iv</sup></b> | <b>Lead Officer<sup>v</sup></b> |
|---|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Reduce opening hours from 8.30am-5.30pm to 9-5.30pm, whilst maintaining the opportunity for staff to start at 8.30am, to allow for training, setting up, etc. | Cabinet Member                     |                               |                               |                                 |
| The Mall to provide a car park pay machine by the Gateway entrance level to the car park.   | Cabinet Member                     |                               |                               |                                 |
| Investigate whether it is possible to have a presence from Social Services on a Saturday.   | Cabinet Member                     |                               |                               |                                 |
| Cabinet Member to pursue if registered social landlords will pay and provide a free-phone within the Gateway for customers.                                   | Cabinet Member                     |                               |                               |                                 |
| KCC Registrar services to cease providing services within the Gateway, due to its own office location being so close.   | Cabinet Member                     |                               |                               |                                 |

|   |                |  |  |  |
|---|----------------|--|--|--|
| In order for the CAB to maintain its independence, investigate the possibility of branding the CAB within the Gateway.                              | Cabinet Member |  |  |  |
| IT should prioritise improving the Parking Services information available online and this should also be accessible through mobile phone technology | Cabinet Member |  |  |  |
| Parking Officer to be 'on-call' with the gateway staff equipped and trained to deal with initial enquiries.   | Cabinet Member |  |  |  |
| To remove the weekly late night Thursday.   | Cabinet Member |  |  |  |
| Planning Duty Officer to be 'on-call' for queries, with all minor enquiries primarily dealt with by Gateway staff.                                  | Cabinet Member |  |  |  |
| Regular training be given to Gateway staff from all in-house qualified Planners.  | Cabinet Member |  |  |  |
| A fee to partners be introduced to help cover cost of facilities provided in the Gateway.   | Cabinet Member |  |  |  |
| Investigate new ways of working to avoid duplication of advice and money looking at what is being spent and   | Cabinet Member |  |  |  |

|   |                |  |  |  |  |
|---|----------------|--|--|--|--|
| where with CAB and neighbouring boroughs.   |                |  |  |  |  |
| Carbon Footprint figures to be shared where applicable with Partners including KCC and the Chequers Mall Corporation.   | Cabinet Member |  |  |  |  |
| Cabinet Member to investigate issues surrounding the wood burning central heating, ensuring that coppicing in local woodlands is incorporated.                                      | Cabinet Member |  |  |  |  |
| Voluntary Action Maidstone to cease providing its services within the Gateway due to its own office location being so close.  | Cabinet Member |  |  |  |  |
| The ground floor foyer be equipped for notices to the public, available to all departments and partners.  | Cabinet Member |  |  |  |  |
| A pillar-box at the King Street entrance to the Gateway be installed allowing a secure and safe way to leave mail within office hours without the need to enter the Gateway itself. | Cabinet Member |  |  |  |  |
| Signage within the Gateway displaying the services and partners available should indicate the days and times that they are  | Cabinet Member |  |  |  |  |

|  |                |  |  |  |
|--|----------------|--|--|--|
| available.   |                |  |  |  |
| Cabinet Member to pursue the opportunity to work with Job Centre Plus within the Gateway.  | Cabinet Member |  |  |  |
| Cabinet Member to pursue the opportunity to have Kent Social Children's Services providing in the Gateway, due to their local offices being closed down. | Cabinet Member |  |  |  |

**Notes on the completion of SCRAIP**

- i Report recommendations are listed as found in the report.
- ii Insert in this box the Cabinet Member whose portfolio the recommendation falls within.
- iii The Officer/Cabinet Member responsible for responding to the recommendation should indicate in this box either the acceptance or rejection of the recommendation.  
**If the recommendation is rejected** an explanation for its rejection should be provided. The 'timetable' and 'lead officer' boxes can be left blank  
**If the recommendation is accepted** an explanation of the action to be taken to implement the recommendation should be recorded in this box. Please also complete the 'timetable' and 'lead officer' boxes.
- iv The Officer/Cabinet Member responsible for responding to the recommendation should indicate in this box when the action in indicated in the previous box will be implemented.
- v The Officer/Cabinet Member responsible for responding to the recommendation should indicate in this box the Officer responsible for the implementation of the action highlighted in the 'response' box.