

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**MINUTES OF THE REGENERATION & ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 29 JANUARY 2013**

PRESENT:

Councillors Black, Burton (Chairman), Cox, Newton
Paterson Ross and Springett,

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

It was resolved: that all items be webcast.

64. Apologies.

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Cuming.

65. Notification of Substitute Members.

There were no substitutes.

66. Notification of Visiting Members.

Councillor Hotson and Councillor Ring attended as a visiting members with an interest in item 8 Visitor Information Centre Review Update.

67. Disclosures by Members and Officers:

There were no disclosures.

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

It was agreed that all items be taken in public as proposed.

69. Minutes of the meetings held on 27 November and 6 December 2012

Resolved: that the minutes of the meetings held on 27th November and 6th December 2012 be approved as correct record of the meetings.

70. Visitor Information Centre Review Update

The Chairman welcomed Charlotte Osborn-Forde, Chief Executive, Liz Tredget, Volunteer Centre Manager and Kate Dickinson, Volunteer, all from Voluntary Action Maidstone (VAM) to the meeting.

Mrs Osborn-Forde explained to the Committee that they had previously occupied a large unit in The Mall and had moved to the Town Hall foyer after the space was offered by the Council. She informed the Committee that use of the Town Hall enabled the Volunteer Centre to attract a much higher number and broader range of people to volunteering and that the high street location gave them a higher profile and was easy to access.

In response to a question about location it was clarified that when the Volunteer Centre had been in the Mall they had received a huge number of enquires about volunteering but the conversion from enquiries to placements had not increased. At the Town Hall potential volunteers book an appointment to discuss what type of volunteering they want and hours available etc, this leads to more successful placement.

The Committee heard that although approximately 25% of visitors to the Town Hall want visitor information very few wanted help or advice on hotel bookings. The majority of the visitor enquires were for directions which the Volunteer Centre had been dealing with. It was noted that the Volunteer Centre provided maps and informed the enquirer where the Visitor Information Centre was located.

Mrs Osborn-Forde was asked if there was a possibility of the Volunteer Centre providing Visitor Information. The response was that with the right support, training and funding they would be happy to take this on. It was noted that VAM were also responsible for the successful Gateway Volunteer programme and that Gateway Volunteers had attended the Council's own customer service training.

VAM indicated that they would support opening the Town Hall/Volunteer Centre on a Saturday if a partnership arrangement for VAM providing visitor information was in place.

The Committee raised concerns about the priority given to tourism by the Council. The Chairman welcomed Christopher Garland, Leader of the Council to the meeting, who went on to clarify that the prioritisation matrix in the Strategic Plan 2011-15 put tourism as a low priority in financial terms only. He informed the Committee other ways of funding visitor economy development at a low cost were being looked into.

It was highlighted to the Committee that the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services was making a decision about the future of the Town Hall foyer that week. Several members expressed the view that it was difficult to find a sound economic reason to return the Visitor Information Centre in full to the Town Hall. The Committee agreed that if it was agreed that VAM should stay in the Town Hall a working group should be set up to develop this including their role in providing visitor information. The Committee also considered the appearance of the Town Hall.

Two further recommendations were suggested:

That the Leader of the Council and Chief Executive revisit they way in which portfolios are arranged and officer duties allocated so that there is more cohesion and clarity of purpose.

That this committee either wraps up this report as it has been overtaken by events or a further study as to how the visitor economy can be utilised to assist in the provision of the priority of economic prosperity.

The Committee concluded that they should wait for the outcomes of the Governance Review at full Council before making any recommendations about organisational structure.

The Committee agreed that the review into the Visitor Information Centre should be concluded and that a meeting should be arranged of the working group to facilitate the report writing.

It was resolved that: The Committee concludes the evidence gathering part of its review, with a meeting arranged to write the final report and recommends that:

- a) If the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services was minded to progress an agreement with VAM, part of which included volunteers offering Visitor Information Centre support, that firstly a small cross party group of members is set up with the Cabinet Member, officers and VAM on the detail to how this can be achieved; and
- b) The cross party working group (as set out above) review the visual presentation of the Town Hall both internally and externally.

71. Core Strategy Update

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Christopher Garland, Leader of the Council, Councillor Stephen Paine, Cabinet Member for Planning, Transport and Development and Rob Jarman, Head of Planning to the meeting. Councillor Paine gave the Committee an update on the Core Strategy programme the main points of which were:

- The Strategy needed revision following the publication of new population growth figures;
- It was estimated that approximately 4,000 additional homes would need to be delivered;
- Cabinet had taken the decision to postpone the Core Strategy in order to clarify the evidence base following criticism of other local authority's strategies by the inspector and this delay could be up to 18 months; and
- The call for employment sites was due to close on 1st February 2013, after which there would be a sifting process.

The Committee queried the effect of increasing the housing figures on the employment figures and was informed that following the process of sifting sites the land research would be updated and consultation on revised figures would take place. Mr Jarman clarified that there was a number of options around the employment figures including expanding and improving existing sites.

The Committee asked about the duty to cooperate and what was being done to enhance the relationships with neighbouring districts. The Committee raised concern about the proximity to the district boundary of Tonbridge and Malling's planned housing development. Cllr Paine informed the Committee that he was in communication with Councillors from several of the neighbouring districts and had a meeting planned with Tonbridge and Malling Councillors. Mr Jarman added that the Council was looking into a joint **Strategic Housing Market Assessment** (SHMA) with Tonbridge & Malling and Ashford districts and other joint studies were being investigated. In relation to the housing just outside Maidstone's boundary in Tonbridge and Malling members were informed that it was possible that Maidstone could give away a chunk of its housing provision however they would lose the funding with it.

Members were informed that an obstacle to doing the Core Strategy in partnership was that all the authorities were at different stages in the Core Strategy process and reminded the Committee that the duty was to cooperate and not to agree. The importance of a five year housing supply was also highlighted and it was noted that Maidstone had not allocated land for over 13 years.

The Committee asked about the progress of the Integrated Transport Strategy (ITS), concerned about the impact of the additional housing required on the boroughs roads. They heard that the Joint Transportation Board had rejected a number of the proposals but had failed to provide any alternatives. The ITS was to be revisited and therefore delayed until the end of summer post the decision in March on allocating housing sites and post Kent County Council elections. Once this decision has been made the housing shortfall will be looked into and various options including dispersal, urban extension and new village will be explored.

The Committee considered that the housing figures seemed the most variable and in order to meet the housing need the Council would need to be strategic and that in turn transport policy should also be flexible in order to cope with major change. Councillor Garland identified that funding was a constraint and therefore the focus should be on changing behaviour.

The Committee thanked Councillors Garland and Paine and Mr Jarman for the update.

Resolved that The progress update on the Core Strategy be noted and that the Committee's watching brief continue on the programme.

72. Future work Programme

The Committee considered the future work programme and items due at the next meeting on the 26th March 2013. It was agreed that they would consider the Report of the Regeneration & Economic Development Committee Working Group on the Visitor Information Centre, An Update on the Brunswick Street Car Park Call-in and the Regeneration & Economic

Development Plan. A Member questioned the action taken since the last meeting and it was clarified that the Chief Executive had written to each Committee Member in response to the concerns raised at the meeting on 27 November 2012.

Resolved that: That the future work programme be noted.