

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP AND CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 3 SEPTEMBER 2013

Present: Councillor Mrs Gooch (Chairman) and
Councillors Black, Brindle, Butler, Mrs Grigg, Hotson,
D Mortimer, Nelson-Gracie and Pickett

Also Present: Councillor Moss

37. WEBCASTING

RESOLVED: That all items on the agenda be webcast.

38. APOLOGIES

It was noted that apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Yates.

39. NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

It was noted that Councillor Brindle was substituting for Councillor Yates.

40. NOTIFICATION OF VISITING MEMBERS/WITNESSES

Councillor Moss attended as a witness in relation to agenda items 8 and 9.

41. DISCLOSURES BY MEMBERS AND OFFICERS

There were no disclosures by Members or Officers.

42. EXEMPT ITEMS

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

43. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 6 AUGUST 2013

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 6 August 2013 be approved as a correct record and signed.

44. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 6 AUGUST 2013

Minutes 28 and 35 – Disclosure of Interests

In response to a question, the Chairman said that she had discussed Members' concerns regarding the requirements in relation to the disclosure of interests with the Officers. The Monitoring Officer only had delegated powers to grant dispensations where so many Members of the

decision making body had interests in the matter that it would impede the transaction of business. This had not been the case at the last meeting. It was considered that specific training on the disclosure of interests was not justified, but an information sheet had been circulated. She had looked at other Council websites for additional information, and she would share what she had found with Members.

RESOLVED: That the position be noted.

45. QUARTER 1 PERFORMANCE REPORT 2013/14

Clare Wood, Policy and Performance Officer, provided an overview of the quarter 1 Key Performance Indicator report 2013/14. It was noted that:

- There were 40 performance indicators that could be monitored on a quarterly basis to ensure that the Council was on track to meet its annual performance targets.
- Overall, for quarter 1, 40% (15) of performance indicators had been rated green (currently on target), compared to 48% (13) at the same point in 2012/13. Of the 13 performance indicators that had been rated amber, 5 were within 2% of target and 8 were within 5% of the target. 10 performance indicators had been rated red (target not achieved).

During the ensuing discussion, reference was made to the following:

- The need for Members to have an input into the Parking Manager's plans to mitigate the impact of the continuing decline in Park and Ride on-board transactions on income targets.
- The need to update the Committee before the next quarterly report on the performance in relation to the waste and recycling indicators having regard to the launch of the new waste collection contract.
- The need to update the Committee before the next quarterly report on the performance in relation to the housing indicators taking into account the funding allocated from the revenue underspends to schemes promoted by the Head of Housing and Community Services and the fact that some of the indicators have been rated red.

The Policy and Performance Officer also undertook to arrange for the following information to be provided for Members:

- An update for Councillor Black on the recovery rate in respect of benefits overpayments which have arisen as a result of fraud.
- An update for Councillor Mrs Grigg on the reasons for the increase in the average wait times for calls into the Contact Centre during the last quarter, including the impact of the new automated telephone system.

- An update for Councillor Mrs Grigg on the work of the Employability and Skills Officer in facilitating employer engagement with NEETs.

Rob Jarman, the Head of Planning and Development, and Peter Hockney, Principal Planning Officer, attended the meeting to explain the reasons why the percentage of residential planning applications processed within statutory timescales (DCV 003) had not achieved the quarterly target and performance had declined compared to the same period last year.

A Member referred to the budgetary underspend due to a Planning Officer post not being filled, and asked whether the recruitment of another Planning Officer would help clear the backlog and mitigate the impact of having to prioritise work on the Local Plan.

The Principal Planning Officer explained that an advertisement had been placed with a view to recruiting two permanent full time Planning Officers. None of the applicants were considered to be suitable for interview, and two consultants had been appointed, initially on four month contracts, to deal with the backlog of planning applications. The position would be reviewed as the contracts neared an end.

The Head of Planning and Development advised the Committee that although the Development Management team had spent a considerable amount of time on the assessment of potential development sites, which was not an annual exercise, he considered that, on balance, one extra post was required.

Questions were asked as to whether (a) the difficulties experienced in recruiting staff were due to a shortage of Planning Officers county-wide and (b) there was a need to pay a market supplement to recruit.

The Head of HR Shared Service, who was present at the meeting to discuss performance in relation to another indicator, advised the Committee that it was too early to say whether the unsuccessful attempt to recruit reflected a return to the shortage of Planning Officers and skills gap among Planning Officers experienced some five years ago. In her opinion, it was necessary to identify both short and long term staffing requirements, and then, if considered appropriate, test the market again with the advice and support of the HR team. If that further attempt was unsuccessful, it would be necessary to look at the payment of a market supplement.

The Head of Planning and Development added that there did seem to be a lack of planning professionals coming into the system with private sector employers competing for the same skills at an earlier stage. In the public sector, Planning Officers processed planning applications and dealt with appeals, but were also required to undertake administrative work, including responding to Freedom of Information requests, complaints and comments made on Facebook and Twitter, and this had resource implications.

It was suggested and agreed that the Officers be requested to provide an update in two months' time on the action being taken to resolve the

difficulties experienced in recruiting suitably qualified Planning Officers to join the Development Management team, the report to include details of the administrative work associated with the role, including responding to Freedom of Information requests and complaints etc., and the time and costs involved.

Members then took the opportunity to ask questions of the Officers relating to the delays associated with having to report applications to the Planning Committee rather than dealing with them under delegated powers, and the impact on performance; the introduction of new indicators to measure the time taken to process planning applications outside the statutory timescales in order to better understand trends in customer service; and the Council's policy in relation to planning enforcement.

Dena Smart, the Head of HR Shared Service, and Bal Sandher, HR Shared Services Manager, attended the meeting to provide an update with regard to the following indicator which had been rated red:

HRO 001 – Working Days Lost Due to Sickness Absence (rolling year)

The Head of HR Shared Service explained that:

- It was necessary to differentiate between short term and long term sickness. In terms of management, short term sickness was the area where there could be a greater impact through good sickness management processes.
- It was the responsibility of line managers to ensure that all staff sickness absence was recorded on the integrated HR system, ITrent, in order to accurately monitor sickness levels. There were a number of absence reports available to line managers from the management information in ITrent to help with the monitoring process.
- Following any period of sickness absence, the line manager was required to conduct a return to work interview, and this was proven to be one of the most effective tools in managing short term sickness. In addition, the Bradford Factor was a formula used to identify patterns of absence and whether it was necessary to look more closely at a person's attendance.
- Not all of the other Kent authorities were as sophisticated as Maidstone in the way that they recorded sickness. Of those that did record short term versus long term sickness, Maidstone was the second lowest on short term sickness but the second highest overall. The average number of working days lost due to sickness absence in the public sector was currently 11.1 days per employee. Last year the figure for the Council was 9.18 days (3.24 short term sickness and 5.94 long term sickness) which was below average, but above the target of 8 days. The high level of long term sickness was driving the figure upwards.

The HR Shared Services Manager explained that:

- The main reasons for long term sickness were hospital treatment and operations, stress and depression. The main areas where there were high levels of sickness were the Environment and Public Realm Department (the Depot), Finance and Housing and Community Development.
- The action taken by managers to reduce the level of sickness included referral to the Occupational Health Nurse; referral for a full Occupational Health report; advice and counselling for depression; discussions with staff regarding their levels of sickness; and formal action if there were no underlying medical reasons for the sickness absence. The Council also ran a health and wellbeing programme for staff to promote healthy living and a new attendance management policy had been drafted.

Members asked a number of questions of the Officers relating to, inter alia, the reasons for sickness due to stress and depression (work related and/or home related); the qualifications of the people involved in the Council's health and wellbeing programme; the way in which maternity related sickness absence was dealt with; employee engagement and management training and development in relation to stress, depression and the promotion of wellbeing; the procedures for managing short and long term absence due to ill health; and sick pay administration.

The Committee agreed with the view expressed by the Chairman that the HR team had responded comprehensively to earlier concerns about the number of working days lost due to sickness absence. It was reassuring to know that there were effective systems in place to record and monitor absence due to sickness combined with a pro-active approach to employee engagement and training and development to reduce sickness levels.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the progress and out-turns of the Council's Key Performance Indicators in quarter 1 of 2013/14, as set out in Appendix A to the report of the Head of Policy and Communications, be noted;
- (b) That the areas where performance is strong and on track to achieve annual targets be noted;
- (c) That the areas where performance has declined and performance requires further monitoring be noted;
- (d) That the action plan to address the decline in the overall employment rate, attached as Appendix C to the report of the Head of Policy and Communications, be noted;
- (e) That the action being taken to manage and reduce absence due to sickness be noted;

- (f) That the Officers be requested to arrange for Members to have an input into the Parking Manager's plans to mitigate the impact of the continuing decline in Park and Ride on-board transactions on income targets;
- (g) That the following information be provided for the Committee before the next quarterly report:
 - (i) An update on the performance in relation to the waste and recycling indicators having regard to the launch of the new waste collection contract; and
 - (ii) An update on the performance in relation to the housing indicators taking into account the funding allocated from the revenue underspends to schemes promoted by the Head of Housing and Community Services and the fact that some of the indicators have been rated red.
- (h) That an update be provided for the Committee in two months' time on the action being taken to resolve the difficulties experienced in recruiting suitably qualified Planning Officers to join the Development Management team, the report to include details of the administrative work associated with the role, including responding to Freedom of Information requests and complaints etc., and the time and costs involved; and
- (i) That the following information be provided for Members as specified:
 - (i) An update for Councillor Black on the recovery rate in respect of benefits overpayments which have arisen as a result of fraud;
 - (ii) An update for Councillor Mrs Grigg on the reasons for the increase in the average wait times for calls into the Contact Centre during the last quarter, including the impact of the new automated telephone system; and
 - (iii) An update for Councillor Mrs Grigg on the work of the Employability and Skills Officer in facilitating employer engagement with NEETs.

46. QUARTER 1 2013/2014 COMPLAINTS REPORT

Sam Bailey, Research and Performance Officer, presented the complaints report to the Committee. The report also included details of compliments received by the Council during the last quarter. It was noted that:

- 94 Stage 1 complaints were closed of which 90 (95.70%) were responded to in time.
- 23 Stage 2 complaints were processed which represented a 92% increase on quarter 4 of 2012/13. The number of Stage 2 complaints would be monitored by the Policy and Performance team to assess whether this was a cyclical trend or a genuine increase.

- Only 10 complaints handling satisfaction surveys were returned which represented a 13% response rate. The Policy and Performance team was looking at ways to improve the response rate, including telephone surveys.

Concerns were expressed by Members as to the point of the complaints handling satisfaction surveys given that it appeared that the majority of those who were not satisfied with the way in which their complaint was handled could not separate the outcome of their complaint from how it was processed. The Research and Performance Officer undertook to look at best practice and how the survey form could be redesigned to separate customer satisfaction with outcome and process.

The Research and Performance Officer also undertook to provide the following information in the quarter 2 report for 2013/14:

- An update on the way in which complaints filtered by Members are recorded.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Council's performance in relation to complaints be noted;
- (b) That the teams and individual Officers within the Council be congratulated on the compliments received; and
- (c) That the following information be provided for the Committee in the quarter 2 report for 2013/14:
 - (i) An update on the action taken to improve the effectiveness of the complaints handling satisfaction surveys; and
 - (ii) An update on the way in which complaints filtered by Members are recorded.

47. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2012/13

The Chairman introduced the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2012/13.

The Committee felt that the report clearly and comprehensively reflected the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees over the past year.

RESOLVED: That subject to the inclusion of an introduction from all three of the Committee Chairmen and typographical amendments as appropriate, the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2012/13 be approved for submission to the Council pursuant to Article 6.03 (d) of the Constitution.

48. FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered its future work programme. It was noted that arrangements were being made for a joint meeting on MKIP and that the training on questioning skills was in hand.

Concern was expressed by Members that whilst performance monitoring and monitoring of complaints were areas of work that required particular attention, the Committee should be more involved in influencing and monitoring decision making by the Cabinet. In this connection, it was suggested and agreed that the work programme should include the following:

- An update from the Budget Working Group at each meeting and quarterly reports from the appropriate Cabinet Members and Directors on strategic issues, including work undertaken and planned.

It was also suggested and agreed that the work programme should be the first item on the agenda for meetings of the Committee and that there was no need for Officers to spend time introducing their reports as this would enable Members to concentrate more on the issues.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the work programme should include an update from the Budget Working Group at each meeting and quarterly reports from the appropriate Cabinet Members and Directors on strategic issues, including work undertaken and planned;
- (b) That the work programme should be the first item on the agenda for meetings of the Committee; and
- (c) That there is no need for Officers to spend time introducing their reports as this will enable Members to concentrate more on the issues.

49. DURATION OF MEETING

6.30 p.m. to 9.00 p.m.