

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

Economic and Commercial Development Overview & Scrutiny Committee

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 28 OCTOBER 2014

Present: Councillor Paterson (Chairman), and
Councillors Butler, Cuming, Fissenden, Harper, Paine,
Powell, Round and Mrs Wilson

Also Present: Councillor Mrs Grigg

56. THE COMMITTEE TO CONSIDER WHETHER ALL ITEMS ON THE AGENDA SHOULD BE WEBCAST

RESOLVED: That all items on the agenda be webcast.

57. APOLOGIES

Apologies were noted from Councillors Hinder, Hogg and Vizzard.

58. NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

It was noted that Councillor Paine was a substitute for Councillor Mrs Hinder, Councillor Round was a substitute for Councillor Hogg and Councillor Fran Wilson was a substitute for Councillor Vizzard.

59. NOTIFICATION OF VISITING MEMBERS

Councillor Susan Grigg was present for item 8: Maidstone Culture and Leisure Business Plan 2014-2018.

60. DISCLOSURES BY MEMBERS AND OFFICERS

There were no disclosures by members and officers.

61. 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.

62. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 29 SEPTEMBER 2014

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 29th July 2014 be approved as a correct record of the meeting and signed.

63. AMENDMENT TO THE ORDER OF BUSINESS

RESOLVED: That Item 9: Twilight Economy Review be considered before Item 8: Maidstone Culture and Leisure Business Plan 2014-2018.

64. TWILIGHT ECONOMY REVIEW

The Chairman invited Dawn Hudd, Head of Economic and Commercial Development, Laura Case, Cultural Services Manager, and John Barnes, Manager of Wonderland Nightclub to speak on item 9: Twilight Economy Review.

The Chairman relayed to the committee information that had been gathered from Bill Moss, Town Centre Manager, in a meeting earlier in the day. The main points raised by Mr Moss were:

- There seemed to be little demand from consumers for late night shopping, other than at Christmas time;
- Maidstone was very strong in terms of the choice of restaurants, especially on and around Earl Street. On a typical Saturday, 3500 meals would be served at 81 venues across the town centre;
- Lack of free parking didn't seem to be an issue, as it doesn't cost much to park in the town centre in the evening (£1.50 in council car parks);
- Using public assets in the evening may be helpful- for example opening the museum up later in the evening; and
- Mr Moss felt that Maidstone should concentrate on improving on its strength in the restaurant sector.

Dawn Hudd gave evidence to the committee on the Twilight Economy and made the following points:

- The problem of the town centre being quiet in the early part of the Twilight Economy period was common to many towns;
- Canterbury have made efforts in this area, however it could still be a struggle to attract people to stay in the town centre after shops and businesses closed;
- What was needed to improve on any success in the Twilight Economy was a 'champion' who was a business owner or operator from this sector of the economy;
- There were two key pieces of work that would feed in to the future of the Twilight Economy that were in their early stages:
 - Town Centre Vision- this was a piece of work that was being carried out as part of the local plan process. This piece of work would set out the future of the Town Centre, including where various activities would take place.
 - Destination Management Plan- this piece of work would develop how the council wanted Maidstone to look as a destination. It would focus on telling the story of Maidstone and would involve local stakeholders, including from the private sector.

Laura Case outlined some of the initiatives to help the Twilight Economy from her business area, which included:

- Museum Lates- opening the museum in the evening for one Thursday a month; and

- Jazz at the Museum in the evening.

Mrs Case also suggested to the committee that cross promoting events that were happening around the Town Centre could go some way to improving the Twilight Economy.

John Barnes gave evidence to the committee and focused on the following topics:

- The car park for the Lockmeadow complex was not being used to its full potential. Mr Barnes suggested that events such as a Drive in Cinema or a Winter Wonderland might be a success there, and these would help improve the Twilight Economy;
- The customers for the Night Time Economy and the Twilight Economy were from different demographics;
- Maidstone should capitalise on seasonal events to improve the Twilight Economy. Mr Barnes gave the example of bonfire night, where a series of events could be put on throughout the evening using this theme to draw people into the town centre;
- Street lighting was an issue for the Twilight Economy in the winter. Mr Barnes felt that the river could be better lit up to make it more inviting;
- Jubilee Square would be an ideal location for restaurants, as this is the sort of area other towns would locate their restaurants. Mr Barnes was surprised there were currently no restaurants located in Jubilee Square.

The committee asked the witnesses whether they felt the geography of the town, especially how spread out many activities critical to the Twilight Economy are, was a problem for the Twilight Economy.

Mrs Hudd responded that this was a potential problem. However this problem would be addressed through the Town Centre Vision and the Destination Management Plan. Local businesses would be involved in drafting these documents.

The committee felt that Maidstone, as the County Town of Kent, had lots of unique selling points that could be capitalised on. One particular idea that the committee felt would be helpful to promote was that Maidstone was the 'musical capital of Kent'. The committee felt this could help improve the Twilight Economy. Mr Barnes agreed with this assertion, stating that those who frequent the Night Time Economy in Maidstone expected very high standards for the music in clubs.

The committee felt it was important to include culture and heritage in any plans for improving the Twilight Economy.

RESOLVED: That

- 1) A visit be organised by the Research and Performance Officer, before the next committee meeting, to Canterbury to see what twilight economy initiatives had been successful there; and

- 2) A visit be organised by the Research and Performance Officer, before the next committee meeting, to Earl Street to see the current state of the Twilight Economy in Maidstone.

65. MAIDSTONE CULTURE AND LEISURE BUSINESS PLAN 2014-2018

The Chairman invited Dawn Hudd, Head of Economic and Commercial Development, Marcus Lawler, Commercial Projects Manager and Laura Case, Cultural Services Manager to speak on item 8: Maidstone Culture and Leisure Business Plan 2014-2018.

Mrs Hudd made a presentation that covered the following points:

- The formation of the Maidstone Culture and Leisure (MCL) service was decided on by Cabinet on the 28 June 2013. MCL consisted of the Parks and Leisure team and the Cultural Services team which included museums, visitor economy and festivals and events.
- The Business Plan was not something that required a formal decision- it was an operational document for MCL to refer to.
- The core functions of MCL were:
 - Museum management;
 - Managing the Leisure Centre and Hazlitt contracts;
 - Parks and Open Spaces;
 - Management of the Cobtree Estate;
 - Festivals and Events;
 - Visitor Economy; and
 - Commercial projects for the service- including those listed in the business plan.
- The commercial projects listed in the business plan were not fully formed business cases- they were ideas at differing stages of development;

A visiting member was invited to question the witnesses. The visiting member was concerned that projects listed in the list of commercial projects would be going ahead, regardless of member or officer input.

Mrs Hudd stressed to the committee that none of the commercial projects listed in the report had been decided on, and reminded the committee that cabinet had reserved full decision making powers for all commercial projects. This meant that, in keeping with the principle of pre-decision Scrutiny, each project would be considered by the Economic and Commercial Development Overview and Scrutiny Committee before any decision was made on these projects.

The visiting member enquired about the monitoring arrangements for the Hazlitt contract.

Mrs Case responded that there was a contract monitoring officer for the Hazlitt. Mrs Case confirmed that both herself and the Cabinet Member were satisfied with the current performance of the Hazlitt.

The committee enquired whether there were any plans to re-launch a leisure card.

Mrs Hudd confirmed there were no plans to re-launch a leisure card. However Mrs Hudd informed the committee that Canterbury had a 'My Canterbury' app that operated as a more high-tech version of a leisure card. Mrs Hudd believed this option was worth exploring in more detail for Maidstone instead of a leisure card.

The committee were concerned that, as the County Town, Maidstone should have a better market. The committee asked Mrs Hudd what plans there were for improving the market offer in the town.

Mrs Hudd replied that she had the ambition of improving the market offer in Maidstone, particularly farmers markets. However at the moment there were no firm plans for this and other commercial projects were a higher priority.

The committee requested clarification over the scale of the retail outlet in Mote Park that was mentioned in the report. Mrs Hudd explained that the concept was a visitor centre, café and gift shop; but that further development of this idea would take place in January 2015.

The committee raised concerns around three areas of the report:

- The business plan had very few mentions of members within it;
- There seemed to have been a lack of member engagement around the commercial projects; and
- The plan appeared to focus purely on making a profit.

In response to these concerns, officers explained that the plan was currently being used as an operational document, hence the lack of reference to members. However it was accepted that a renewed focus on member engagement would be beneficial for commercial projects. Officers also confirmed that generating income was not an end in itself for MCL- it was a way to protect non statutory services from budget cuts and to expand and improve the culture and leisure offer for the residents of, and visitors to, Maidstone.

The committee asked Mr Lawler whether any of these projects may affect local businesses. Mr Lawler explained to the committee that some of these projects had potential to affect local businesses, mostly in a positive way by bringing more visitors into the borough, and due to this the decision whether to go ahead with such projects should be left to members.

Mrs Case also highlighted that the projects were not just about competition, and that a lot of mutual benefits could be gained through collaboration with local businesses.

RESOLVED: That

- 1) The Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee be asked to decide on the constitution of a group of members to give early input for commercial projects;

- 2) The Head of Economic and Commercial Development be recommended to refine the language in the Maidstone Culture and Leisure Business Plan to make it clear that the formation of Maidstone Culture and Leisure is not purely a profit making exercise; and
- 3) The Head of Economic and Commercial Development, at the earliest opportunity, be asked to give all councillors access to the full list of commercial projects for their positive input.

66. FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

Sam Bailey, Research and Performance Officer, provided an update on the Future Work Programme.

Mr Bailey drew the committee's attention to the list of forthcoming decisions. It was noted that on this list was the Enterprise Hub decision, which was scheduled for Wednesday 12 November. Mr Bailey reminded the committee that at the meeting of 29 September 2014 the committee had asked Karen Franek to see the full proposal before the decision was taken.

The committee agreed that due to their support for the principle of the project they would not call it in. However the committee asked for a copy of the cabinet agenda to be sent to all committee members so that they could see the full proposal, and ask questions of the cabinet member if necessary. The committee agreed that if the decision was postponed until December 2014 the committee would still like to see the full proposal at their November 2014 meeting.

Mr Bailey asked the committee to check their diaries to ensure the committee would be quorate for its meeting on the 23 December 2014, and to report back to the committee on their availability at the meeting of 25 November 2014.

RESOLVED:

That if a cabinet member decision is to be taken on the Enterprise Hub on 12 November 2014 a copy of the cabinet agenda should be sent to all committee members. However if the decision is postponed until December 2014, the full proposal should be considered by the Committee at the November 2014 meeting.

67. DURATION OF MEETING

18:30 until 21:16