

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

DEMOCRACY AND GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY 11
NOVEMBER 2020**

Present: Councillors Mrs Blackmore, Chappell-Tay, Mrs Gooch (Chairman), Hastie, Joy, Lewins, Perry, Purle and Webb

Also Present: Councillors Brice, Cox, Kimmance and Wilby

127. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

128. NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

There were no Substitute Members.

129. URGENT ITEMS

There were no urgent items.

130. NOTIFICATION OF VISITING MEMBERS

Councillors Brice, Cox, Kimmance and Wilby were present as Visiting Members for Item 16 – Democratic Representation – Boundary Review.

131. DISCLOSURES BY MEMBERS AND OFFICERS

There were no disclosures by Members or Officers.

132. DISCLOSURES OF LOBBYING

Councillor Chappell-Tay had been lobbied on Item 14 – Councillor Training Update and Item 15 – Access to Information Review Report.

133. EXEMPT ITEMS

RESOLVED: That all items be taken in public as proposed.

134. CHANGE TO THE ORDER OF BUSINESS

The Chairman stated that they intended to take Item 16 – Democratic Representation – Boundary Review, before Item 12 – Committee work Programme. This was due to the attendance of Visiting Members to speak on the item following a Member briefing on the topic prior to the meeting.

135. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 2 SEPTEMBER 2020

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 2 September 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed at a later date, subject to the addition of Councillor Blackmore to the list of Members present.

136. PRESENTATION OF PETITIONS

There were no petitions.

137. QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION FOR MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

There were no questions from members of the public.

138. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO THE CHAIRMAN

There were no questions from Members to the Chairman.

139. DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION - BOUNDARY REVIEW

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager introduced the report that had been produced following consideration of the Council's Strategic Priorities by the Policy and Resources Committee in September 2020, which included Democratic Representation. The report had set out that no stone should remain unturned in the consideration of savings and priorities for the Council going forward. It had been identified that savings could be achieved through whole council elections and an assessment of the number of Members through a boundary review, if agreed.

The Council met two of the criteria set by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) to conduct a boundary review; variation in the average number of electors per member and 20 years since the last review being past the 14-year requirement. In answer to Member concerns it was clarified that in the event that Unitary Authorities were brought into force for Kent during the boundary review, LGBCE would pause the process.

If a boundary review were agreed, a significant piece of work would be undertaken between June 2021 until November 2021 to develop proposals for the Council. Whole Council elections would then follow, with the LGBCE likely to aim for this to occur in 2024. It was explained that prior to the review the Council would need to be clear on its governance arrangements and electoral cycle so additional reports would be needed on these, subject to Committee agreement.

Whilst there were concerns expressed about the possible reduction in Councillor numbers arising from the review, it was felt that the review would need to take place before outcomes were considered. It was reiterated that Members would be consulted throughout the process, with the LGBCE to consider the Council's views in conducting a review.

RESOLVED: That

1. The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) be informed that Maidstone requests a Ward Boundary Review;
2. In light of the potential changes a boundary review would bring, and the impact of electoral cycle, governance arrangements, and scrutiny arrangements on that review, the following be agreed for the next meeting of the Committee:
 - a. A report recommending that Council votes on whether to switch to Whole Council Elections, to include the impacts of a Ward Boundary Review;
 - b. A report recommending that Council votes on its future governance arrangements for decision making and scrutiny (Leader and Cabinet or Committee system);
 - c. Political groups be consulted and engaged in the reports on Whole Council elections and governance arrangements and on matters such as council size and the review generally; and
3. In the event of any definite proposals on Unitary Authorities coming forward the LGBCE will consider 'pausing' a review to allow those proposals to conclude, be noted.

140. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

RESOLVED: That the Committee Work Programme be noted.

141. REPORTS OF OUTSIDE BODIES

There were no reports of outside bodies.

142. COUNCILLOR TRAINING UPDATE

The Head of Policy, Communications and Governance introduced the report following the Member survey undertaken during the Summer on preferred learning approaches and training requirements. Virtual training and Member briefings would continue during the second lockdown period, with a combined approach of virtual and classroom learning suggested for the future.

Further training had been requested from those surveyed on the Council's Constitution and procedural rules and questioning skills and social media. External training would be organised for questioning skills and social media.

Additional Members briefings on Housing and Homelessness, the Benefits System, Community Protection and the Local Plan would take place.

The Committee expressed thanks for the work undertaken.

RESOLVED: That

1. The update on Councillor Training be noted; and
2. The proposed additions to the training programmes for 2020-21, be approved.

143. ACCESS TO INFORMATION REVIEW REPORT

The Monitoring Officer introduced the report that had been produced following Member queries on the access requirements for exempt information. Advice had been sought from Counsel and the Council's position on access to exempt information, outside of Committee Membership, was outlined.

A benchmarking exercise had been undertaken, with all authorities confirming that either the Director, Monitoring Officer or Chief Executive was responsible for determining access to information requests.

RESOLVED: That the update provided be noted.

144. DURATION OF MEETING

7.30 p.m. to 8.37 p.m.