

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**ECONOMIC REGENERATION AND LEISURE
POLICY ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 4 OCTOBER 2022

Present:

Committee Members:	Councillor Garten (Chairman) and Councillors Bryant, Forecast, Fort, Mrs Gooch, Hastie, Hinder, Naghi and D Wilkinson
Lead Members:	Councillors Burton (Leader of the Council) and Russell (Lead Member for Leisure and Arts)

33. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

It was noted that apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Harper and that Councillor Hastie would be late in arriving at the meeting.

34. NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

It was noted that Councillor D Wilkinson was substituting for Councillor Harper.

35. URGENT ITEMS

There were no urgent items.

36. NOTIFICATION OF VISITING MEMBERS

There were no Visiting Members.

37. DISCLOSURES BY MEMBERS AND OFFICERS

Councillor Mrs Gooch said that she was a Friend of the Maidstone Museums' Foundation.

38. DISCLOSURES OF LOBBYING

There were no disclosures of lobbying.

39. EXEMPT ITEMS

RESOLVED: That the items on the agenda be taken in public unless any Member wishes to refer to exempt Appendix B to item 14 (Town Centre Strategy – Procurement of Professional Team), in which case it will be necessary to move into closed session due to the possible disclosure of exempt information.

40. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 5 JULY 2022

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 5 July 2022 be approved as a correct record and signed.

In response to questions by a Member, it was noted that the outcome of previous resolutions relating to the former Head of Regeneration and Economic Development and improvements to the Town Centre would be reported back to the Committee in due course.

41. PRESENTATION OF PETITIONS

There were no petitions.

42. QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION FOR LOCAL RESIDENTS

There were no questions from local residents.

43. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO THE CHAIRMAN

There were no questions from Members to the Chairman.

44. FORWARD PLAN RELATING TO THE COMMITTEE'S TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Committee considered the Forward Plan for the period 1 September 2022 to 31 December 2022 in so far as it related to its terms of reference.

The Chairman advised Members that a further report arising from the motion at the last Council meeting relating to Museum opening hours would be added to the Forward Plan for consideration at the November meeting of the Committee.

RESOLVED: That the Forward Plan relating to the Committee's terms of reference, as amended, be noted.

Note: Councillor Bryant entered the meeting during consideration of this item (6.38 p.m.). She said that she had no disclosures of interest or of lobbying.

45. 1ST QUARTER FINANCIAL UPDATE & PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT 2022/23

Councillor Russell, the Lead Member for Leisure and Arts, introduced a report setting out the financial and performance position for the services reporting into the Committee as at 30 June 2022 (Quarter 1). It was noted that:

- In terms of the Revenue Budget, significant variances to budgeted income levels had emerged in certain areas during the first quarter of the year. There was a projected overspend of £370,000 in respect of the Innovation Centre and Lockmeadow against budgets for the year.
- Business rates were being incurred in respect of empty offices at the Innovation Centre, but new tenants were starting to move in. Occupancy had been delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- The Council was still supporting some Food Hall tenants at Lockmeadow through a difficult period of trading. It was hoped that the position would improve during the Christmas period.
- Although an overspend was predicted, a balanced budget was projected for the year, but the prospects for 2023/24 were very challenging.

- There was a projected capital overspend of around £150,000 in relation to the Mote Park Visitor Centre due to contractual delays and delays in putting in services (water and electricity etc.). This was partly offset by an underspend on the Mote Park Lake dam works.
- Performance indicators showed that footfall in the town centre and unemployment rates were still failing to achieve targets, but the situation was gradually improving.

In response to questions, the Officers explained that:

- With regard to the Mote Park Visitor Centre, practical completion of the building was expected in either late October 2022 or early November 2022. The Visitor Centre was being constructed as a “shell and core” in readiness for the business operator who would fit out the kitchen etc. It was anticipated that the facility would open to the public early in the New Year depending upon when these works were completed. The estate services’ building, office facilities and public toilets would be ready at the end of October/early November 2022.
- There were underspends in other areas of the Council which offset the projected overspend by this Committee. If that position changed it would be necessary to look at other measures to bring the budget back into balance. Additional provision of £1.3m had been made within the 2022/23 budget for the expected impact of higher inflation on the Council’s input costs and some service areas were performing better than budget. The position would be monitored closely and, if, at any stage, it appeared that an overspend was likely, measures would need to be taken to prevent that happening.
- In terms of trends in house prices, since the figures from the Office for National Statistics were usually three to four months out of line, the figures in the report did not align directly with Quarter 1. However, no long-term change in trends had been identified yet; this would start to be seen throughout the year. A graph with prices could be included in future showing the position over the last twelve months to enable comparisons to be made.

During the discussion, Members indicated that it would be useful for the Policy Advisory Committees to receive informal briefings on the preparation of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy in November 2022 and the detailed budget proposals in January 2023.

RESOLVED:

1. That the Revenue position as at the end of Quarter 1 for 2022/23, including the actions being taken or proposed to improve the position, where significant variances have been identified, be noted.
2. That the Capital position at the end of Quarter 1 be noted.
3. That the Performance position as at Quarter 1 for 2022/23, including the actions being taken or proposed to improve the position, where significant issues have been identified, be noted.

Note: Councillor Hastie entered the meeting at the start of this item (6.40 p.m.). She said that she had no disclosures of interest or of lobbying.

46. TOWN CENTRE STRATEGY - PROCUREMENT OF PROFESSIONAL TEAM

Councillor Burton, the Leader of the Council, introduced a report seeking agreement to the allocation of funding for a professional team to support the Council in the preparation of the Maidstone Town Centre Strategy and delegated authority for the appointment of the preferred supplier. It was noted that delivery of the Strategy needed a wide range of expertise. The Council had established a project team but experience with other projects had demonstrated the benefits of complementing the internal team with external professional expertise to provide specialist knowledge, skills and capacity. The proposal was to select a professional team with recent expertise in delivering such a piece of work. Funding was already in place for work on and delivery of the Strategy. Since some of this funding was time-limited, it was necessary to progress the procurement process time-efficiently whilst equally ensuring good quality.

In introducing the report, the Leader of the Council advised the Committee that he was minded to amend the scope of the brief for the work particularly around improved access to the Lockmeadow area to provide flexibility.

In response to comments and questions:

The Leader of the Council explained that:

- Subject to the allocation of funding, the subsequent procurement process evaluations would emphasise quality and recent relevant experience as to what would be best for Maidstone.
- Market engagement had provided a range in the cost of the professional expertise required to produce the Town Centre Strategy and a delivery plan which varied depending on several factors. There needed to be engagement with the public and key stakeholders such as Kent County Council, Mid-Kent College, local businesses and the Police to develop ideas for the Strategy which would, for example, inform strategic planning policy.

The Director of Regeneration and Place advised the Committee that there would be a full procurement process teasing out the ideas of people in the market who would be undertaking the work. It was important not to enter this with pre-defined ideas; the brief would change realistically.

During the discussion, Members supported the proposals to secure extra expertise to progress the Town Centre Strategy to complement that of the internal team and emphasised the need to deliver the Strategy in a time-efficient manner to bring about improvements and grow the economy.

RESOLVED TO RECOMMEND TO THE EXECUTIVE:

1. That the existing resources contained in exempt Appendix B to the report be allocated for funding professional expertise needed for development of the Maidstone Town Centre Strategy.

2. That, following the procurement evaluation process, delegated authority be given to the Chief Executive for appointment of the professional team in consultation with the Leader (who is the Lead Member with responsibility for Economic Development).
3. That delegated authority be given to the Head of the Mid-Kent Shared Legal Service to enter into a contract with the preferred supplier.

47. DURATION OF MEETING

6.30 p.m. to 7.20 p.m.