

**MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW AND  
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 10  
JANUARY 2012**

**PRESENT:** Councillors Beerling, Black, Burton, English, Mrs Gooch (Chairman), Hogg and Paine (Vice-Chairman).

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

**It was resolved** that all items be webcast.

**85. Apologies.**

Apologies were received from Councillors Mrs Gibson, Pickett, de Wiggondene and Mrs Wilson.

**86. Notification of Substitute Members.**

Councillor Beerling substituted for Councillor Mrs Wilson, Councillor Black substituted for Councillor Mrs de Wiggondene and Councillor Burton substituted for Councillor Mrs Gibson.

**87. Notification of Visiting Members.**

There were no Visiting Members.

**88. Disclosures by Members and Officers:**

There were no disclosures.

**89. 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.

**90. Minutes of the meeting held on 1 November 2011**

**It was resolved** that the minutes of the meeting held on 1 November 2011 be agreed as a correct record of the meeting and duly signed.

**91. The Budget Strategy**

The Chairman introduced Paul Riley, Head of Finance and Customer Services, Councillor Chris Garland, Leader of the Council, Alison Broom, Chief Executive, Ellie Kershaw, Policy and Performance Manager and Georgia Hawkes, Head of Business Improvement.

Mr Riley introduced the Budget Strategy. He informed Members that the two reports had been taken to Cabinet since he last attended Scrutiny; The Budget Strategy 2012/13 onwards and the Budget Strategy 2012/13 Fees and Charges which covered the changes to the budget to date. On 8 November 2011 the Council informed of the Revenue Support Grant they would be receiving in 2012/12. The details confirmed the assumed figure of £5.7 million detailed in the Budget Strategy.

It was explained that the report included updates on the changes to date to the strategic revenue projections and savings proposals to achieve a balanced budget. In relation to strategic revenue projections changes included the proposal that the three temporary posts in Economic Development should be made permanent in order to achieve growth in tourism, a priority for Maidstone. Changes to savings proposals included bringing forward savings that had been identified for 2013/14 in Democratic Services and Overview and Scrutiny as they had been achieved early.

Members were informed that the Budget Strategy for the medium term included an assumed 2.5% Council Tax increase in its projections. In 2011/12 the Council had taken a four year grant in place of a rise in Council Tax. It was explained that the grant on offer from Government for 2012/13 was a one year, one off grant of £339,000 and there was no ongoing financial recompense being offered by Government after that year. In accepting the grant the Council would be accepting a freeze on Council Tax for 10 years. In 2013/14 and thereafter the Council would have to find additional savings of £339,000. Mr Riley highlighted that the Budget Strategy Savings Proposals forecast in the Medium Term Financial Strategy for 2013/14 was calculated without taking into account the impact of the grant freeze and were in excess of £600,000 of savings to find. In 2013/14 without a Council Tax rise and without the grant the Council would have to find over £1million in savings with only £305,830 identified so far.

Members were informed that the if the Council were to refuse the grant from Government and opt to raise Council Tax by 2.5% this would equate to a 0.38% rise to a band D Council Tax bill or £5.56 for the year.

The Committee questioned Maidstone's Band D average Council Tax bill in comparison to other authorities in Kent. They were informed that it was the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest in Kent. It was clarified by Officers that Maidstone received more in Council Tax than Government Grant. Members considered the position of other Kent Authorities and were informed that Gravesham Borough Council would not be accepting the Council Tax freeze grant.

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Garland, told the Committee that in 2012/13 he expected the Council to benefit financially from proposed changes to Business Rates and that Cabinet would be recommending that Maidstone Borough Council accept the Council Tax freeze grant. He

estimated that residents would save approximately £70 on their Council Tax over the next ten years as a result of Cabinet's decision.

The Committee considered the options and felt it was difficult to make a calculation in terms of savings to the resident or the deficit faced by the Council. A Member was concerned that the authority could find itself in position that would be difficult to recover from as a result of accepting the freeze grant. The Committee were sympathetic to the 2.5% rise but felt that the debate should go on to full Council.

The Committee considered ways in which further savings could be found or income generated. Suggestions included:

- Abolishing the Park and Ride service in Maidstone;
- A reduction in elected Members;
- Income generated by departments such as Building Control and Development Control from fees and charges; and
- The commercial viability of the crematorium.

The Chief Executive informed Members that work had begun on looking at the size and shape of the organisation. With regards to the Park and Ride she identified that the structure of car parking charges in Maidstone as the issue, confirming that the current charging structure did not enhance the Park and Ride service. In response to the suggestion that the number of elected Members could be reduced, it was clarified that recent consideration had been given to this option when the Council had the opportunity to take part in the Boundary review but this had not been pursued.

It was explained that Building Control could not make a profit and had to break even over a three year period. With regards to Development Control it was explained that Government Legislation which would decentralise responsibility for setting planning application fees to the local planning authority had not yet come into effect. The Council had done a great deal of work on benchmarking in this area in preparation for this change.

Finally, with regards to the Crematorium, the Chief Executive explained that on the basis of its performance this year the Crematorium had exceeded its targets and there was a recent agreement to change the Crematorium's commercial viability in auxiliary areas such as with memorials. She explained that the surplus profit made benefitted other council services and it would continue to do this. Some Members raised questions about the state of repair of buildings on the Crematorium site. They were informed that the buildings on the road frontage had been disposed on and the chapel had been closed due to its current state. The Committee were advised that they were at liberty to recommend an alternative course of action such as including the repair of the chapel in the Capital Programme. It was confirmed that relation to commercial activity the Crematorium and Bereavement Services was an area that had already been identified by the Council. Housing was also being looked at in depth with a visit to Wokingham Borough Council planned.

The Leader of the Council felt that the savings and income generation would be achieved by a combination of measures with the Council ceasing to provide certain services and moving into partnerships with other authorities via the Mid Kent Improvement Partnership in order to generate an income.

Some Members felt that there was an opportunity to build on the successes of the environmental enforcement team's litter enforcement expanding a self funding service to other areas of the borough. The Leader of the Council informed members that the Cabinet Member for the Environment, Councillor Mrs Ring, was investigating this at present. It was agreed that this was an area that should be explored more fully.

A Member felt there would be benefit in looking at parking enforcement and in particular non-compliance with residents parking across the borough to ensure that there was a fair and consistent approach taken. Officers agreed that this was something that could be investigated and adjustments could be made to service delivery but in terms of the budget for parking enforcement this could not be increased.

Officers informed Members of the Council's policy on setting fees and charges detailed in the budget strategy report on fees and charges. This informed the range of issues considered by Officers in considering fees and charges and areas of income generation of which £140,000 had been identified. Members observed that proposed increases were in areas where they could be sustained.

A Member of the Committee highlighted that Maidstone Borough Council was not enforcing mooring charges along the river and were informed that these were enforced at certain times of the year when it was considered financially viable to do so. Members felt that this was an area that could be explored further and an opportunity could be being missed in promoting Maidstone via boating and tourism organisations as a place to come and moor boats free of charge.

Mr Riley moved on to the Council's Capital Programme and other areas of the Medium Term Financial Strategy. He explained that the New homes Bonus would be used in lieu of assets for the Council's Capital Programme. This was due to one property remaining unsold and a key proposal within the budget strategy was to delay the sale of this asset in order to get the best price.

The Infrastructure Delivery Plan was discussed and the Community Infrastructure Levy which would replace Section 106 agreements. The Capital Programme for 2015/16 remained blank and would be informed with the information from the Infrastructure Delivery Plan which would provide the details of the infrastructure required to deliver the Core Strategy.

Finally Mr Riley explained the recent consultation with residents to establish which statutory services were important. Residents had been asked to consider levels of customer services provided in areas such as

the Gateway and in relation to Officer response times by email and letter. It was explained that the information gathered would be used to inform work being undertaken on a customer programme and was not being used to make immediate savings. Members were informed that if changes were to be made to achieve savings to customer service the intention would be to direct the saving to another 'channel' and increase its resources. Mr Riley gave the example of the website and work being carried out to utilise it as a customer services tool.

With reference to the consultation some Members sought clarification on the way in which responses was gathered from residents and were informed that a day had been spent at the Gateway and a further two days in the Mall. There were concerns that the results were overly simplistic and not fully representative of the residents of Maidstone. They were told that the responses had been kept separate. The Committee were informed that the respondents would be mapped by postcode to help evaluate the responses.

Ms Kershaw, Policy and Performance Manager, explained that a recent Overview and Scrutiny review had also helped identify that the Gateway was poorly used during its extended opening hours on a Thursday evening and a Saturday morning.

**It was recommended that:**

- a) It be noted that the Committee supports the work being carried out by Councillor Mrs Ring to expand a 'self funding' litter enforcement team to other areas of the borough;
- b) The appropriate Officer be contacted to provide feedback to the Committee on the way in which parking and litter enforcement is apportioned across the borough and in doing so provides an answer to the following questions:
  - i. Are Parking and Littering enforcement resources concentrated in the Town Centre? and
  - ii. Could the deployment of enforcement officers be re evaluated for overall effectiveness in all areas of the borough.
- c) That the Head of Finance and Customer Services investigate the financial benefits of enforcing Maidstone's river mooring fees. That the viability of promoting, via boating and tourist organisations, that mooring fees are not enforced in Maidstone is investigated as an alternative course of action.

**92. Strategic Plan Refresh**

The Leader of the Council explained that the Strategic Plan had three main priorities and approximately 60 Key Performance indicators (KPIs), informing Members that KPIs had been significantly reduced by the Coalition Government. He explained that the Strategic Plan offered a

detailed breakdown of what the Council sought to achieve from the outcomes of the Priorities set:

**1. For Maidstone to have a growing economy**

Outcomes:

- A Transport network that supports the local economy; and
- A growing economy with rising employment, catering for a range of skill sets to meet the demands of the local economy.

**2. For Maidstone to be a decent place to live**

Outcomes:

- Decent, affordable housing in the right place across a range of tenures;
- Continues to be a clean and attractive environment for people who live and visit the Borough; and
- Residents are not disadvantaged because of where they live or who they are, vulnerable people are assisted and the level of deprivation is reduced (*previously an outcome of Corporate and Customer Excellence*).

**3. Corporate and Customer Excellence.**

Outcome:

- The Council will continue to have value for money services that residents are satisfied with.

Councillor Garland explained that work had been undertaken to refresh the current priorities with a newly defined focus on the outcomes and the action plan had been updated to show the progress made from April- November 2011.

Ms Kershaw, Policy and Performance Manager, explained that the outcome 'residents are not disadvantaged because of where they live or who they are, vulnerable people are assisted and the level of deprivation is reduced' had been moved to become an additional outcome of the priority 'For Maidstone to be a decent place to live'. As a result an additional outcome was required to address 'customer excellence' for the priority 'Corporate and Customer Excellence.'

Members told the Officer that they found the Strategic Plan to be bold, ambitious and succinct. They questioned the progress of the Leisure and Tourism Strategy which had an original target date of April 2011 as its importance as a strategic priority had been reflected in the Budget Strategy. Ms Kershaw informed Members that important decisions had been made in relation to the Museum and Hazlitt Theatre which had delayed the action but the relevant paperwork had been completed to move the target date to a more pertinent date in the future.

The Committee questioned the budget savings associated with Planning in relation to its importance to the Council in meeting its priority outcomes. They considered how quality could be maintained when the cost of delivering the service was being reduced.

Officers explained that Planning remained a high priority area for the Council but it was not immune from efficiency savings. Ms Kershaw

clarified that KPIs were measured by specific areas that could be monitored in the same way each year. She explained that quality was measured in a different way i.e. through complaints monitoring.

Members highlighted the KPIs relating to the Museum East Wing project and the High Street Project. It was felt that an update or comment on the Museum would be helpful. They felt that the rising cost of the High Street Project and the work being done to find savings to offset this should have been highlighted more clearly in the Budget Strategy. They were satisfied that any concerns would be identified and considered as part of the quarterly budget monitoring report. Members also agreed that a brief update on the Museum should be sought from responsible Officers.

The Committee raised a final concern regarding the focus of the Strategic Plan on families with multiple needs and the Council's ability to deliver this effectively. The Chief Executive explained that this was at a formative stage as the Locality Board had met for the first time in November 2011. She explained that Maidstone role would be to provide Community Leadership and this would be delivered efficiently and effectively as it would be spread across the public sector with marginal costs to the authority as a result of joined up working.

**It was recommended that:**

- a) The Scrutiny Officer seek a brief update on the Museum East Wing extension as highlighted by Members in the Key Performance Indicators identified in the Strategic Action Plan;
- b) That the report be noted by the Committee; and
- c) That attention is given to the grammatical consistency in the report in relation to the tenses used.

**93. Draft Improvement Plan**

Georgia Hawkes, Head of Business Improvement, introduced the Draft Improvement Plan 2012/15

It was explained that this was a first attempt by the authority at taking a comprehensive approach to governance arrangements as detailed in the Strategic Plan and the Medium Term Financial Strategy. It was explained that the Draft Improvement Plan detailed the key pieces of work and projects carried out to deliver the council's priority outcomes and savings.

Members questioned whether the plan was for public consumption, observing that the inhouse performance management system 'Covalent' referenced in the plan required a definition. It was felt the plan would benefit from a glossary.

Members felt that the plan provided a good starting point and would provide something from which comparisons could be drawn in the future.

**It was recommended that:**

- a) A glossary be added to accompany the Draft Improvement Plan; and
- b) The report be noted.

**94. Local Strategic Partnership - Written Update**

The Committee considered the written update from the Local Strategic Partnership.

The Committee acknowledged that the Locality Boards were at an extremely formative stage. It was felt that the Committee should keep a watching brief on Locality Boards until they were established.

**It was recommended that** written updates should be provided to the Committee to keep them informed on the progress of the Locality Boards.

**95. Forward Plan and Scrutiny Officer Update**

The Committee considered items on the Forward Plan for 1 January to 30 April 2012.

Members agreed that the Committee should revisit the Parish Services Scheme as the Joint Corporate Services and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee. It was agreed that the Committee's February meeting should be cancelled and the Joint Committee meeting should be arranged in its place.

The Committee considered its future work programme and agreed to meet as a working group to progress 'The Council as a Business?' Review before the next scheduled meeting in March. It was agreed that the Scrutiny Officer would contact Members by email to arrange a time for the working group to meet.

**It was resolved that:**

- a) The Committee should meet as the Joint Corporate Services and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 7 February 2012 to revisit the Parish Services Scheme; and
- b) The Scrutiny Officer should liaise with Committee Members via email to arrange an informal working group meeting to progress the 'Council as a Business?' Review.

**96. Duration of Meeting**

6.31 p.m. to 9.09 p.m.