

**MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW AND  
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 6  
NOVEMBER 2012**

**PRESENT:** Councillors English, Mrs Gibson, Mrs Grigg, Mrs Gooch (Chairman), Hogg, Pickett, Moss, Mrs Stockell, Mrs Wilson and Yates.

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

It was resolved that all items be webcast.

**37. Apologies.**

There were no apologies.

**38. Notification of Substitute Members.**

There were no Substitute Members.

**39. Notification of Visiting Members.**

Councillor Mrs Wilson attended as a Visiting Member with an interest in Item 10, Use of 2011/12 Underspend.

**40. Disclosures by Members and Officers.**

There were no disclosures.

**41. 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.

**42. Minutes of the meeting held on 7 August 2012**

It was resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 7 August 2012 be agreed as a correct record of the meeting and duly signed.

**43. Review of Complaints April-June 2012**

Following an overview of the complaints report by Ellie Kershaw, Policy and Programmes Manager, and in response to Members questions it was confirmed that the issues highlighted by residents through complaints did feed into changes to the way in which the Council delivered its services.

Dave Lindsay, Head of ICT was invited to attend the meeting to provide an update on the new complaints system. Responding to questions raised by Members at previous meetings, he explained that it was a generic correspondence system and a customer database. The complaints module had gone live first, in August 2012. Mr Lindsay explained that the issues with its delayed implementation had been the result of a lack of resources in the IT team.

With regards to the capabilities of the system Mr Lindsay informed Members that:

- The system would help identify vexatious complainants; and
- It was an event based system and would therefore an email would be generated to the relevant office if there was something to act on.

He explained that there had been an issue with complaints reporting but work to remedy this was taking place the following Monday.

The Committee raised questions about front line staff making a distinction between complaints and suggestions or queries and were informed that checks were being carried out to ensure this was being done effectively. It was stressed that if a customer wanted to lodge a complaint, even if strictly speaking it was not a complaint, it would be accepted.

Members considered whether the preferred method of reporting complaints had been investigated so that the council could identify the preferred method of communication used by residents. The Committee felt that this was an area that should also be reported on in the quarterly report.

**It was resolved that** the Head of ICT identify, through complaints reporting, the methods of communication used by residents when reporting complaints. The results should be included in the quarterly complaints report.

#### **44. Quarter 1 Key Performance Indicator Report 2012/13**

Ellie Kershaw, Policy and Programmes Manager, provided an overview of the Quarter 1 Key performance Indicator Report 2012/13. The Committee were informed that the report now included a section on good news and/or improvements and that the Quarter 2 report would include Strategic Plan updates.

Members observed that some of the terminology used in the report could be clearer. It was suggested that the readability of the report could be improved if the term 'direction of travel' was replaced with the word 'trend'.

The Committee considered the performance indicators (PIs) highlighted in the report 'where performance had declined and further monitoring was required' and in particular PI DCE 001 which related to the percentage of

planning enforcement cases signed off within 21 days. Members felt that further information was required in order to give this their full consideration. It was felt that a breakdown of the enforcement case were needed, rather than a percentage figure, showing how many cases were outstanding and for what length of time. A member of the Committee also suggested that a recent presentation given by the Head of Development Control and Spatial Planning would be helpful to circulate to the Committee.

The Committee felt that it would be helpful to compare the Council's performance in relation to PI WCN001, 'percentage of household waste sent for reuse, recycling and composting,' with that of other local authorities.

Neil Coles, Housing Manager, was invited to update the Committee on Housing's performance. Mr Coles made reference to PI HSGPS002, 'number of homes occupied by vulnerable people made decent'. He told the Committee that this indicator was outdated and no longer measurable. Members were informed that there was a need to alter the definitions of this indicator. The Committee agreed with the officer and suggested that the he investigate the issues with this indicator and identify the process for adopting an alternative definition.

With reference to PI HSG005, 'number of households prevented from becoming homeless through the intervention of housing advice,' the difficulty identified was that it was hard to reach people in the early stages and therefore there was a need to refocus services to allow for an early intervention. Mr Coles cited households struggling with mortgages as an example of this.

**It was recommended that:**

- a) The term 'direction of travel' should be replaced with 'trend' in the quarterly performance report;
- b) In response to PI DCE 001, the Planning Enforcement team provide the Committee with a breakdown of all outstanding enforcement cases; providing details of the number of cases and the length of time outstanding;
- c) The Waste Manager provides the Committee with further information showing Maidstone's performance in comparison to other local authorities in relation to PI WCN001, 'Percentage of household waste sent for reuse, recycling and composting;' and
- d) The Housing Manager investigates the issues relating to the performance indicator PI HSGPS002, 'number of homes occupied by vulnerable people made decent' which was described as outdated and no longer measurable and identifies the process for adopting an alternative definition. The results should be presented in a report to the appropriate Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

#### **45. Use of 2011-12 Revenue Underspend**

The Leader of the Council introduced the report and details of his decision made on the 26 October 2012 which was that 'the remaining proposals for the use of the net revenue under spend be referred to the Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee for consideration' and recommendation back to the Leader.

He expressed his wish to engage further with the scrutiny process by referring more decisions of a strategic nature to the Committees.

The Committee felt it was important to give each of the twenty-two proposals its consideration with the officers present offering supporting background information for the outline proposals. It was explained that each proposal was aligned to one of the Council's priorities; Growing Economy, Decent Place to Live and Corporate and Customer Excellence. It was decided that the proposals should be considered by priority area starting with Growing Economy first. It was found that there was an obvious relationship between some of the proposals put forward with relating outcomes, such as the employment of a project manager for the second phase of the high street and the promotion of business opportunities/inward investment. Where appropriate the connection was made by officers to aid the Committee's understanding.

The Head of Finance and Customer Services contextualised the revenue underspend, explaining that it was the result of one off savings that had occurred earlier than expected, citing the Revenues and Benefits Partnership and staff vacancies that had been held earlier than needed, as examples of this.

The Committee raised concerns about the sustainability of projects and the impact that could be made with a single year's investment. The Chief Executive, Alison Broom, helped allay the concerns raised by explaining that there were no fixed timescales for the investments as they were outline proposals. The suggested sums could be invested over a 3 year period, for example. With regards to sustainability, a point that was raised by Members many times throughout the discussion, the Chief Executive said that in the current financial climate this was not something that could be guaranteed but it was better to have a pragmatic approach, taking a leadership role which would encourage others to invest. The relevance of this approach was supported by the proposed funding for supporting the Don't Abuse the Booze alcohol misuse funding of £90k, that already been secured.

The following specific points were made by the Committee in relation to two of the funding suggestions put forward:

- Item 14 – The Committee felt that the outcome relating to funding for the fuel poverty project should be extended to all residents in the borough and associated income generation possibilities be investigated. A further outcome for this proposal was a Literacy

Project. The Committee considered this to be the responsibility of Kent County Council and requested that this be investigated; and

- Item 19 – Should additional funding be secured for the Troubled Families Programme, that an additional Family Intervention Project officer be appointed, in addition to the three posts discussed, as the Committee felt that family breakdown had a direct impact on homelessness and making an impact in this area would reduce costs to the Council and improve the performance of the Housing team.

All the proposals (**Appendix A**) put forward were agreed by the Committee with the exception of proposal 11 which was taken to the vote and determined by a majority vote of 5 to 3 with one abstention and proposals 4 and 5 which the Committee agreed should be put on hold pending a current Cabinet decision.

The Committee noted that the proposals put forward amounted to £815k. Members asked the Leader of the Council whether he would be open to further suggestions for the use of the revenue under spend. Councillor Garland informed the Committee that Councillors had already approached him and he was open to further proposals but stipulated that proposals had to adhere to the Council's priorities and would be subject to evaluation against them. The Leader also informed the Committee that proposals had to be revenue neutral.

Members discussed suggestions put forward for the future of the Town Hall and issues surrounding this but felt that it was premature to consider these in light of the Regeneration and Economic Development Overview and Scrutiny Committee's Visitor Information Centre review and its pending outcome.

**It was resolved that:**

- a) The report be noted;
- b) All proposals, with the exception of 4 and 5 be recommended to the Leader of the Council for funding from the revenue underspend 2011/12; and
- c) The Committee would like the following points noted:
  - i. Item 14 – The Committee felt that the outcome relating to funding for the fuel poverty project should be extended to all residents in the borough and associated income generation possibilities be investigated. A further outcome for this proposal was a Literacy Project. The Committee considered this to be the responsibility of Kent County Council and requested that this be investigated; and
  - ii. Item 19 – Should additional funding be secured for the Troubled Families Programme, that an additional Family Intervention Project officer be appointed, in addition to the three posts discussed, as the Committee felt that family breakdown had a direct impact on homelessness and making

an impact in this area would reduce costs to the council and improve the performance of the Housing team.

#### **46. Budget Setting Update**

The Head of Finance and Customer Service gave a presentation which outlined changes to the proposed Budget for 2013/14. These included:

- The uncertainty surrounding future funding for the Safer Maidstone Partnership from the Police Crime Commissioner;
- Tax base growth – there had been a provision in the Budget for a 2.5% increase. A referendum would be required if the Council raised Council Tax to 2.5% so 0.5% had been taken off the figures currently being used;
- The Localisation of Council Tax Benefit and the 1 year Transitional Grant on offer from Government
- There were £100,000 of savings to find in the Budget, assuming a 2% Council Tax increase; and
- Fees and Charges were not delivering to target at present.

Mr Riley explained that the actual monetary impact of a 2% rise in Council Tax was £5.50 a year for a Band D Council Tax payer. The committee were informed that the Council Tax freeze grant given by Government was a 'short term receipt of funds' as opposed to an increase in Council Tax which was 'permanent and annual'. The Council had already accepted two years freeze grant which by 2020/21 would equate to £8.8 million in foregone Council Tax.

Mr Riley updated the committee on Government plans to localise Council Tax Benefit, the Committee had previously considered the Council's Local Council Tax Scheme. He explained that Government were now offering a one year transitional grant Kent were in favour of. He explained that it was unclear what would happen after the first year of the grant.

**It was resolved** that the presentation be noted.

#### **47. Future Work Programme**

The Committee considered its future work programme and noted that the Forward Plan of Key Decisions, always included at Appendix B to this report item, had been replaced with the List of Forthcoming Decisions.

**It was resolved** that the List of Forthcoming Decisions be noted and any suggestions for the future work programme be put forward to the scrutiny officer.

#### **48. Duration of Meeting**

6.30 p.m. to 10.40 p.m.