

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**MINUTES OF THE REGENERATION & ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MEETING HELD ON THURSDAY 6 DECEMBER 2012**

PRESENT: Councillor Burton (Chairman)
Councillors Butler, Cox, Cuming, Mrs Gooch, Black,
Mrs Joy, Springett and Paterson

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

It was resolved: that all items be webcast.

54. Apologies.

Apologies for absence was received from Councillors Beerling, Newton and Ross.

55. Notification of Substitute Members.

It was noted that Cllr Joy was substituting for Cllr Beerling, Cllr Gooch was substituting for Cllr Newton and Cllr Butler was substituting for Cllr Ross.

56. Notification of Visiting Members.

Councillors English, Mrs Parvin, Vizzard and Nelson-Gracie attended as visiting members with an interest in Item 8.

57. Disclosures by Members and Officers:

There were no disclosures.

58. To consider whether any items should be taken in private because of the possible disclosure of exempt information.

It was agreed that all item be taken in public as proposed.

59. Minutes of the meeting held on 27 November 2012

It was noted that it was a special meeting of the Committee and the minutes of the meeting held on 27 November were held over till the next meeting of the Committee.

60. Visitor Information Centre Review

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Greer, Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Commercial Development and Brian Morgan, Assistant Director of Regeneration and Cultural Services. Mr Morgan gave the

Committee a brief presentation highlighting that the reason for the Visitor Information Centre (ViC) moving to the Museum was that this identified as key aim of the improvement works at the Museum to provide a better service and increase visitors to the Museum, this was set out in the Heritage Grant application.

It was further clarified by Mr Morgan that the contract that was signed in 2009, with a term of 25 years, stated that the Council was only use the space at the Museum as defined by the Heritage Grant application. He advised the Committee that if the Council took the decision to move the ViC back to the Town Hall then the Heritage Lottery Fund would need to be consulted.

The Committee noted that there had been an increase in footfall and income since the ViC was moved to the Museum, with income now higher than that of the old ViC shop and museum shop combined.

The Committee queried the value of the tourism to Maidstone's economy and was informed that it supplied over 5000 or 7.3% of jobs in the borough. In response to a question about the function of the Visitor Economy Business Unit (VEBU) it was clarified by the Officer that was 3 main work streams, ensuring that the information and media was up to date, the conference bureau and the front facing element of giving visitor information.

Mr Morgan conceded that the ViC could benefit from improved signage and that there was a project in place to address this. However; he referred the Committee to the Mystery Shopping exercise which was undertaken earlier in 2012 which showed that positive comments from the assessor on location and signage. The Committee also noted that the training issues outlined in the Mystery Shopping report had been addressed: all ViC staff have attended Welcome to Kent training.

When discussing the location of the Museum versus the Town Hall, Mr Morgan explained the Committee that the centre of town was not fixed and that development at the Maidstone East end of town could impact of people perceptions of where the town centre is and that the Museum did fall in the Town Centre boundary as defined by the Core Strategy.

In response to a question from members on the Heritage Lottery funding contract it was further clarified that the contract did not exclude the Council from providing more than one Visitor Information Point. It was noted that there had been more than one ViC operating at once when there was an offer at the M20 services. Members heard that there were plans for visitor brochures to be available at the Town Hall.

Cllr Greer told the Committee that the benefit of the tourism in Maidstone had not yet been realised, Maidstone has brilliant heritage and that more was being done to raise its profile including the procurement of an Events Manager.

Resolved:

a) That the Committee be provided with the following background information to consider as part of the evidence for the Committee's review of the Visitor Information Centre:

- Copy of the original brief for the Museum extension project;
- Museum's Business Plan;
- Budgets and Costs for Town Hall, Museum and Visitor Economy Business Unit; and
- Copies of the figures used by Mr Morgan in his presentation.

b) That the Committee notes the interview as part of their review on the Visitor Information Centre.

61. Future Work Programme

Resolved: That Item 9 Future Work Programme be deferred until the next ordinary meeting of the Committee in January 2013.