



Keeping an eye on  
Maidstone

# Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2011-12



## **Chairmen's foreword**



**Councillor Fay Gooch**

**Chairman, Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 2011-12.**

Our first meeting of the 2011/12 municipal year triggered the consequent debate at full council on who should chair Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee: the best person for the job, or a representative from a political group not represented on the executive? The latter won the day, and so it was that I became Chairman.

Many of the Committee members were also fairly new to their roles. As their ideas for the future work programme flowed, they were unanimous in selecting their main focus for the year: 'The Council as a Business?' Given the enormous pressures on the Council to make ongoing savings, we felt this question would help us draw out how savings and income generation could be achieved in a more innovative manner by looking outside local government

Most unusually, a non-scrutiny member exercised his right under the Constitution to place an item on the Scrutiny agenda. Concerned by the lack of transparency in the sale of a council owned property, he asked that we satisfy ourselves that procedures had been correctly followed, which we did. What a pity that members tend not to exercise this right; I strongly encourage them to do so.

Key standard areas of work including the budget (for which a small working group was established), the complaints procedure and performance monitoring, were scrutinised. Of particular concern was the Government's Welfare Reform and its impact on Maidstone, and the freeze on Council Tax.

The Committee could not function effectively without the invaluable support of the Scrutiny Team, whom I thank most warmly.



**Councillor Annabelle Blackmore**

**Chairman, Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 2011-12.**

For the 2011/12 municipal year waste was at the top of the list for the members of the Communities Committee. The waste contract was due for tender at the end of 2012 with the new contract coming into effect in August 2013. Members visited the Closed Loop plastics recycling at Dagenham, Maidstone prison,

Aylesford Print and also Allington MRF to assess the evolving technology of waste collection options and recycling which are currently available.

The Committee considered Park Wood Neighbourhood Action Plan which was created using the tool "Planning for Real". Representatives from Parents is the Word and R Shop came to the Committee and through the ensuing discussion it was clear Maidstone Borough Council could provide practical assistance to the group. Officers from Maidstone Borough Council have assisted with the design and production of the newsletter which is distributed to Park Wood residents.

The Committee received a presentation on the new Kent Policing Model which indicated an increase in the number of neighbourhood police staff. The crime performance statistics showed a small reduction; however anti-social behaviour and domestic violence may not be tackled by the changes and would need to be maintained



**Councillor David Burton**

**Chairman, Regeneration and Economic Development  
Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 2011-12.**

2011/12 was a busy year for the RED Committee. Our major investigation was to do with the issue of traffic congestion. As part of our call for evidence we asked members of the public for their views and ideas about the issues and we received an excellent response. This is surely indicative of the level of importance and priority of concern that the people of Maidstone attach to the subject. We also received a lot of media interest and coverage. No need to go into the details of the findings here as they are all well documented in the final report and evidence pack. Needless to say it is a complex subject with issues ranging from the advent of electric vehicles, parking strategy, road building, park and ride and modal shift being set to provide more than ample challenge to producing an 'Integrated Transport Strategy' for Maidstone.

Other work included reviewing the Museum Business Plan, a Call-In concerning Brunswick Street Car Park and looking at employment and skills training. My sincere thanks to all the Officers and especially the Overview and Scrutiny team for their support and to the Members of the Committee for their contributions throughout the year.

## **Introduction**

Overview and Scrutiny has been established at Maidstone Borough Council for 11 years and during that time it has achieved an excellent reputation nationally. It has a responsibility, as part of the Council's governance arrangements 'to hold to account'. Committees are part of formal constitutional arrangements and are consulted on Budget Strategy and Policy Framework documents which includes the following:

<b>Development Plan</b>	<b>Sustainable Community Strategy</b>	<b>Crime and Disorder Reduction strategy</b>
<b>Strategic Plan</b>	<b>Housing Strategy</b>	<b>Asset Management Plan</b>

Overview and Scrutiny is an important sounding board for all council departments. It offers an opportunity to consult with a large proportion of backbench members who can help shape and develop bodies of work, offering input at an early stage which leads to an important 'buy in' to plans and strategies which will affect residents of Maidstone when delivered. Overview and Scrutiny is often described as the 'critical friend' in this capacity. Scrutiny Committee meetings serve as an excellent platform for discussion with statutory powers available to call witnesses from a wide range of public bodies.

In recent years Member involvement and belief in the effectiveness of the scrutiny process has begun to diminish. Alternative scrutiny structures were considered by the Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee during the 2011-12 municipal year. The Committee came to the conclusion that a decision of this magnitude should be made with all member involvement and a Governance Review was recommended.

### **FACTFILE**

- **33 formal meetings**
- **13 Councillors interviewed**
- **52 officers interviewed**
- **34 external witnesses interviewed**
- **3 major reviews**
- **27 one-off topics**
- **11 opportunities to comment and developing Budget, Policy and Strategy Documents**
- **2 call-ins**
- **1 Task and Finish Group**

## **Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

This Committee has responsibility for Cabinet Scrutiny, Performance, Complaints and the Budget. Its extensive remit is closely aligned to the Council's priority ***'Corporate and Customer Excellence.'***

### **Reviews**

The Committee considered the 'Council as a business?' as its major review topic for 2011/12, investigating the plausibility of trading arms and other viable commercial activity. It sought advice from local business leaders and the Council's executive and evaluated the perception of the council as a business; its function, role and responsibility to residents. Its recommendations in the final report to Cabinet were derived from its wide engagement with members of the public, staff and councillors through its undertaking of questionnaires, surveys and witness sessions. All its recommendations were approved by Cabinet and delegated to the appropriate Cabinet Member to own and take forward.

### **One off topics and pre-decision scrutiny**

<b>Parish Services Scheme</b>	<b>The marketing of council buildings</b>	<b>The complaints annual review</b>	<b>Complaints policy</b>
<b>Performance monitoring</b>	<b>Complaints monitoring</b>	<b>Strategic plan refresh</b>	<b>Draft improvement plan</b>
<b>Equalities objectives,</b>	<b>Budget strategy</b>	<b>Fees and Charges</b>	<b>Welfare Reform</b>

The draft parish services scheme was the focus of an inquiry by a Joint Corporate Services and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Parish Councils were invited to attend the meeting and given the opportunity to speak by the Chairman. Officers and a Parish Councillor from a neighbouring authority were invited to provide an alternative perspective and scheme for comparison. The meeting was held at the end of the consultation period with Parish Councils and before the consultation responses had been considered. It was therefore recommended that the Cabinet Member delay his decision until a second meeting could be held to consider the revised framework of the draft scheme, reflective of the consultation responses received.

The marketing of council buildings was placed on the agenda of the Committee after a Member utilised the Overview and Scrutiny procedure rule<sup>1</sup> allowing any

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<sup>1</sup> This procedure has now been revised from 'any Member of an Overview and Scrutiny Committee or Sub Committee' to 'any Member of the Council'. For full details of this procedure rule please see the Maidstone Borough Council Constitution, Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules, Item 9, Agenda Items.

member of an Overview and Scrutiny to put an item on the agenda of the next available meeting.

The Member attended the meeting to present the item, explaining that the recent marketing of council properties in Mote Park had taken place in a manner that was not transparent and had attracted negative publicity. The responsible Cabinet Member was invited as a witness to respond to the questions raised. The Committee established that media coverage had not reflected well on the authority and despite there being no wrong doing the result of the action taken did not demonstrate transparency and good governance.

### **Evaluation of the year**

The Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee are tasked with topics of great magnitude. The Budget Strategy, Cabinet Scrutiny and Complaints and Performance monitoring are all within this Committee's remit. A continued and enhanced member training programme would improve member's confidence in dealing with these topics.

## **Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

This Committee has responsibility for Housing, Revenues and Benefits, Health, Crime and Environmental issues including Waste and Recycling. The Committee's broad remit is closely aligned to the Council's priority ***'For Maidstone to be a decent place to live.'***

### **Reviews**

The Committee undertook two reviews; Waste and Recycling and Neighbourhood Action Planning.

The Waste and Recycling review was closely aligned to the tendering strategy for the waste and recycling contract 2013. The Committee was focused on ensuring that technological advances, which would occur during the lifetime of the 10 year contract, were considered and provisions made within the contract for their introduction. With the success of the food waste collection the Committee addressed the obstacles that remained for the service such as providing a service for flats and terraced housing.

Members sought innovative ways to reduce or reuse waste. The Committee visited Closed Loop recycling facility which produces food-grade recycled PET and HDPE from plastic bottle waste. Its Dagenham plant reprocesses 35,000 tonnes per year of mixed plastic bottle waste which would otherwise be exported for recycling, or sent to landfill. Plastics were described as 'an untapped natural resource for local authorities.' The Committee also considered Noah Enterprise's model for the collection and reuse of furniture as part of its social enterprise. The Chief Executive and Director from the organisation based in Bedfordshire attended a Committee meeting to provide evidence to the review.

All the Committee's recommendations made in its review of Waste and Recycling were approved by Cabinet and delegated to the appropriate Cabinet Member to own and take forward.

### **One off topics and pre-decision scrutiny**

<b>Housing Strategy</b>	<b>Tendering Strategy – Waste and Recycling Contract from 2013</b>
<b>Parish Services scheme</b>	<b>Residents Satisfaction Survey</b>
<b>Local Bio diversity Action Plan</b>	<b>Community Development Strategy</b>

### **Call-in**

The decision on the future provision of the CCTV monitoring service was called in in November 2011. The Cabinet along with the Head of Finance and Customer Services, the Director of Regeneration & Communities and officers with expertise in procurement were called as witnesses. Having evaluated all the evidence at the call-in the Committee resolved that the decision should stand but recommended that both Cabinet and officers ensure that stakeholders were fully

engaged throughout all stages of the transfer of the CCTV service and its continued operation.

### **Follow up on previous inquiries**

Fulfilling its statutory role as the Crime and Disorder Overview & Scrutiny, the Committee revisited Youth Offending and Domestic Violence, calling witnesses from the Youth Offending Service, Youth Services, Women's Support Services, Kent Police and the Safer Maidstone Partnership. Funding issues were identified as an ongoing issue. It was felt that Maidstone Borough Council could offer support and guidance to struggling organisations by offering its assistance with applications for funding bids.

CCTV and the CCTV call-in was part of a follow up enquiry as the Committee had been involved in the consultation process as changes to the monitoring service were being proposed and evaluated. Members of the Committee, the previous municipal year, had visited the Medway Control Centre and attended stakeholder consultation events.

### **Evaluation of the year**

The Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee has one of the broadest remits of the three Committees. The Committee sets out to achieve a great deal each year. A more focused work programme could help enable the Committee to achieve improved outcomes.

## **Regeneration and Economic Development Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

This Committee has responsibility for Transport, Economic Development and the Local Development Framework and Core Strategy. Its remit is closely aligned to the Council's priority ***'For Maidstone to have a growing economy.'***

### **Reviews**

The Regeneration and Economic development Overview and Scrutiny Committee identified the negative impact congestion issues had on the quality of life for those who live and work in the borough. It was felt that traffic congestion needed to be addressed and managed in order to enable economic growth. The Committee's evidence gathering included witness sessions with officers from Maidstone Borough Council and Kent County Council as well as site visits to Goldstone Traffic Control Centre and Chelmsford and Medway Councils. The Committee sought the opinion of residents by advertising its review on local bus routes and in the local press.

The recommendations in the final report to Cabinet were derived from its wide engagement with members of the public. The Committee included an extensive evidence pack with its final report. Its recommendations were approved by Cabinet and delegated to the appropriate Cabinet Member to own and take forward.

### **One off topics and pre-decision scrutiny**

The Committee examined the Museums' Business Plan 2011-19 which reflects the Council's commercial approach to how the museums are run; generating more revenue to reduce costs and in turn reduce the Council's overall financial contribution to the museums.

The Committee also considered Employment and Skills training in Maidstone and as part of this evaluated the worklessness stakeholder event in March 2012 which was organised jointly by Maidstone Economic Development and Regeneration Delivery Group and Connexions Kent and Medway and brought together expert speakers and practitioners to address the key challenges in helping people access training, support, apprenticeships and employment. As part of its investigation the Committee identified that a barrier to employment was a lack of knowledge of the type of skills that were required in the local area.

### **Call-in**

The decision that Brunswick Street pay and display car park and adjoining garage premises be declared non-operational and surplus was called-in. The call-in aired concerns relation to the loss of income and loss of parking spaces for local residents. As a result the Committee recommended that the decision be referred back to the Cabinet Member for Environment. It requested that additional information be provided. If the additional information satisfied the Cabinet Member that businesses and residents could be provided for with no adverse impact then it was felt that the decision should stand.

### **Evaluation of the year**

This Committee conducted a number of focused inquiries and identified key issues in its findings. In order to improve its outcomes in the future the Committee will need to turn its findings into quality recommendations by clearly stating what it wants and making the recommendation to the person or organisation best placed to deliver it.

### **Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny**

In 2011-12 the Joint Committee followed up on its successful Adult Mental Health Services review with an event at the Blackthorn Trust in Maidstone. This was the last in the series of mental health events that had been organised following the launch of the review report to cover the many aspects of mental health that had continued to provoke discussion and interest.

The event at the Blackthorn Trust showcased the excellent work of the trust in the field of mental health recovery and employment. The gardens were utilised for networking opportunities for the community and voluntary sector. Delegates were able to walk around the gardens and view stands whilst sampling the homemade cake made by the trust's in-house cafe.

The Blackthorn Trust's Employment Support Officer kicked off the afternoon's proceedings with a short film about the Blackthorn Trust. Speakers included Stuart Rayner Mental Health Co-ordinator from Job Centre Plus, Lynn Marchant Kent and Medway NHS and Social Care Partnership Trust, Service User Employment Manager and lead for Kent Mindful Employer, Kerry Turner, Deputy Service Development Manager, Mental Health, Employment & Community from MCCH.

Stuart Rayner and Lynn Marchant presented a joint initiative called the Integrated Pathways Passport. The Passport would help support a customer from Clinical Care and Employment/ Vocational Support through to employment by identifying the adjustments that would need to be made for the customer to return to work with adequate support which would benefit them and their employer. The Shaw Trust, present at the meeting, had piloted the initiative and informed delegates that it had helped with 35 job retentions. They praised the document describing it as a 'fantastic tool'. Kerry Turner from MCCH presented the Individual Placement and Support Model (IPS) used by MCCH and Stuart Rayner covered all aspects of Job Centre Plus's offer to those seeking employment with a mental health need.

The discussion was chaired by Dr Kulvinder Singh, Chairman of the GP consortium. Helen Grant MP and Councillor John A Wilson, Cabinet Member for Communities and Leisure Services attended to support the event. Helen Grant MP said, "This event, like the two previously held in Tunbridge Wells, offers an excellent opportunity for people with an interest in mental health to come together to discuss their work. It also gives agencies the chance to consider new ways of working in these challenging times. The joint Review offered the impetus for these meetings to start as they have proved popular and productive we hope they continue."

### **The Local Development Document Advisory Group**

The Local Development Document Advisory Group was disbanded at the start of the municipal year and responsibility for this area of work was given to the Regeneration and Economic Development Overview and Scrutiny Committee. A task and finish panel comprising of 8 members; 4 Conservatives, 3 Liberal

Democrats and 1 independent were appointed with the opportunity to co-opt members of the public and other interested parties. The task and finish panel examined draft Core Strategy documents and the annual monitoring report.

### **Local Strategic Partnership**

The Local Strategic Partnership was dissolved in November 2011 and was replaced with the Locality Board. The Locality Board was in a formative stage during this municipal year however written updates were provided. The Local Strategic Partnership had five delivery groups and each Committee had in the past invited representatives from each to scrutiny as applicable to the topic being investigated.

### **Site Visits**

Scrutiny members undertook specific site visits as part of their review inquiries:

<b>Goldstone Traffic Control Centre</b>	<b>Chelmsford City Council</b>	<b>Medway Council</b>
<b>Close Loop Recycling Facility, Dagenham, Essex</b>	<b>Maidstone Prison – Recycling Unit</b>	<b>Maidstone Prison – Print Unit</b>
<b>Blackthorn Trust</b>	<b>The Freighter Service (followed the service on its route)</b>	<b>Mela, Mote Park</b>

### **Spreading the Word**

Members of the Corporate Services Committee had a stand at the Mela in Mote Park, armed with questionnaires and seeking the opinion of Maidstone's residents, they conducted over 40 in depth surveys on their review topic, 'the Council as a Business?' An information leaflet on the Overview and Scrutiny function was produced and distributed to residents at the event to encourage resident involvement in the scrutiny process.

Councillor Burton, Chairman of the Regeneration and Economic Development Overview and Scrutiny Committee was interviewed by local radio on the Traffic Congestion Review. All scrutiny reviews were reported on in the local press.

### **Member training**

Continued member training and development is organised by the Council's Human Resources and Learning and Development team. Members of the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee were offered additional training by the Scrutiny team in Performance Management and the Budget to prepare them for their role on the Committee as the year commenced.

## **Looking ahead**

Overview and Scrutiny Members started the new municipal year with a Member led workshop on making 'Quality Recommendations'. Quality recommendations fulfil the following criteria:

<b>Affect and make a difference to local people</b>	<b>Result in a change in policy that improves services</b>	<b>Identify savings and maintain/improve service quality</b>	<b>Objectively identify a solution</b>
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Chairman of the Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Annabelle Blackmore, led the workshop, facilitated by the scrutiny team. Members looked at recommendations from recent and past reviews and identified 'good' and 'bad' recommendations that had been made.

The impact of a bad recommendation was quickly realised. If the recommendation was unclear and non specific in what it was asking, and of whom, it was unlikely that it would have any impact and therefore would not achieve an outcome. It was also found that a recommendation needed to be evidence based; the report should provide the background and investigation to support the recommendation being made and therefore enable the person being asked to deliver it.

## **Social Media**

The Overview and Scrutiny team will be raising its profile in 2012/13 with the use of social media to encourage public engagement with the scrutiny process.

The use of social media is widely advocated by senior politicians and is used to update the public on parliamentary activity as well as in a local context. As well as following the tweets of @tweetminster, @UKParliament and @HelenGrantMP the scrutiny team are following local community groups including @ParentstheWord and @st\_stonestudios. Follow us @maidstonesvoice and see who we are following and who follows us!

The team are also trialling the use of pinterest. Using pinterest, you can create online notice boards, pinning articles, news stories, quotes and images to a virtual pin board. This creates a wonderful visual stimulus when gathering research and evidence as part of a scrutiny inquiry. In the run up to the presidential elections in the United States, the First Lady, Michelle Obama, joined pinterest; news of this was reported across the world!

If you are interested in finding out more about social media or you would like to contribute by writing a piece on a scrutiny meeting or a topic you feel passionate about please contact a member of the team. We would love to hear from you; your involvement and contributions will help make this a successful venture.

The team can be contacted at [osc@maidstone.gov.uk](mailto:osc@maidstone.gov.uk), on 01622 602534 or for more information visit: [www.maidstone.gov.uk/scrutiny](http://www.maidstone.gov.uk/scrutiny).