

Keeping an eye on
Maidstone

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Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2012-13

Foreword from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Chairmen



**Councillor David Burton,
Chairman Regeneration
and Economic
Development Overview
and Scrutiny Committee
2012-13**

The regular meetings were held bi-monthly this year and although we did hold interim meetings as required I am sure that this schedule meant momentum was lost and I sincerely hope that next year will return to the certainty of regular monthly slots.

We also spent a significant part of our year assisting with discussions to help shape the Core Strategy and associated ingredients including Transport Strategy.

On behalf of the RED Committee I would like to thank the O & S support team for all of their hard work and assistance over the last year.



**Councillor Annabelle
Blackmore, Chairman
Communities Overview
and Scrutiny Committee
2012-13**

During 2012/3 the Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee have contributed to a variety of health consultations. The Committee also provided feedback to the Kent Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy and the Kent Community Health NHS Trust. The impact of these changes will be felt across the borough and should provide

better integration of health services for all residents.

Following the move of the CCTV control room from the Town Hall to Medway a six month review was undertaken. It was pleasing to learn that there were no problems relating to the transfer and all operations were running effectively.

The impact of the anticipated Welfare Reform was considered by the committee. This will need to be reviewed again as further changes relating to benefit payments come into effect.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to all members and substitute members of the committee for their input and energy.

Our scrutiny officer Orla Sweeney deserves particular thanks for arranging additional meetings, ensuring agendas are produced in a timely fashion and making sure all recommendations are followed up.



**Councillor Fay Gooch,
Chairman Corporate
Services Overview and
Scrutiny Committee 2012-
13**

Performance Monitoring and the Monitoring of Complaints are the

The work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees this year has been against the backdrop of the Governance Review which concerns itself with the very essence of how best to involve as many Councillors as possible in both policy development and investigation. The RED Committee chose, as its main topic, to consider the location of Maidstone's Visitor Information Centre and this subject became implicitly intertwined with considerations about the future of the Town Hall. Such a subject roused Members to participate in such numbers that are rarely seen! There must be a lesson here somewhere about choosing topics that really matter?

Committee's regular areas of work, and required our particular attention during 2012/13 as changes to the Benefits and Council Tax systems brought pressure to bear on staffing. Regular Budget updates from the Finance team were invaluable in keeping the Committee in step with the Government's intentions as they gradually unfurled throughout the municipal year.

The Committee's tasks varied from keenly following the progress of the new Complaints System, finally launched mid-year, to examining the initial stages of the far-reaching Customer Services Improvement Strategy; from examining the Asset Management Strategy, to making amendments and additions to the refresh of the Strategic Management Plan. Our input in developing the new Commissioning and Procurement Strategy was particularly welcomed by the Cabinet Member.

Our main focus was the Review of the Capital Strategy. Despite loss of momentum mid-stream, the final report produced a swathe of constructive recommendations which we look forward to being taken on board in due course.

I warmly thank the Members of the Committee for their contribution to a good year's work, and I highly commend the unfailing support of Scrutiny Officer Orla Sweeney.

Introduction

What is Scrutiny?

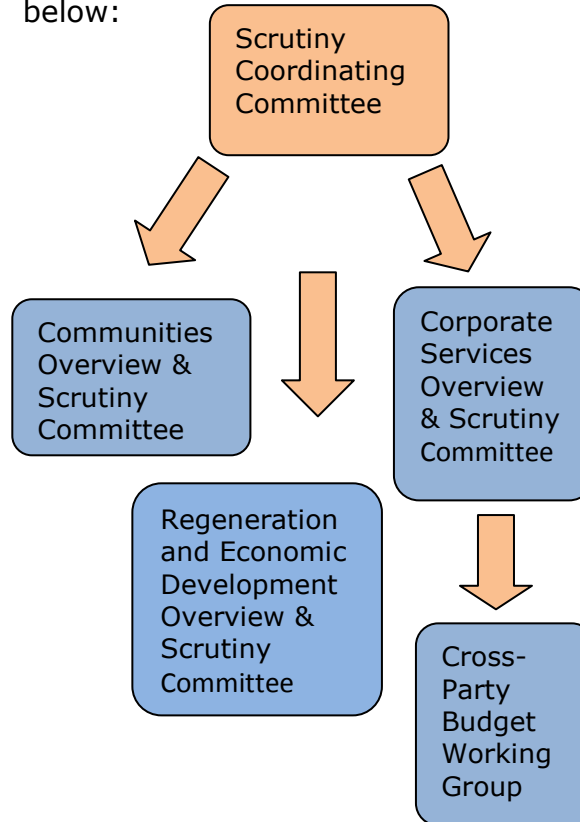
All local authorities operating a Cabinet and Scrutiny model have a Cabinet made up of the Leader of the Council and up to nine members of his Group. All executive decisions (i.e. those needed to implement the Policy Framework and Budget approved by the County Council) are taken by the Cabinet.

Overview and Scrutiny bodies are not "decision making" bodies but are bodies which monitor and influence those that are. The Overview and Scrutiny role, carried out by non-Cabinet members, is designed to support the work of the Council in the following ways:

- Reviewing and scrutinising decisions taken by the Cabinet (sometimes known as acting as a "critical friend");
- Considering aspects of the Council's performance;
- Assisting in research, policy review and development;
- Involving itself with external organisations operating in the borough to ensure that the interests of local people are enhanced by collaborative working; and

- Providing a means of involving the community in the Council's work.

The Structure of the Overview and Scrutiny system in Maidstone is set out below:



The Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee comprises of the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of all three Overview and Scrutiny Committees. It has overall responsibility for overview and scrutiny including terms of reference, budget and progress of reviews. It is also

responsible for addressing cross-cutting issues and to prevent duplication in the work of individual committees. The Corporate Services, Communities and Regeneration and Economic Development Overview and Scrutiny Committees scrutinise the Council's functions in relation to the relevant departments, as appropriate to the Committee's term of reference which are each aligned to one of the Council's three corporate priorities. The Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee also scrutinises the activities of NHS bodies which has responsibility for commissioning and providing health care services.

The Budget Working Group was a recommendation of the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee in 'the Council as a business?' review undertaken during the 2011/12 Municipal Year. It was felt that a cross-party Budget Working Group, appointed from the membership of the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee would help improve the Committee's understanding of ongoing budgetary issues and allow the Committee opportunity for greater input in developing the budget strategy and the budget setting process looking in depth at certain aspects.

Key Outcomes from work undertaken during the past year

Governance Review

The Scrutiny Coordinating Committee at the end of the 2011/12 Municipal Year considered a review of the overview and scrutiny structure. In light of the wider implications of the Localism Act 2011 and a view of backbench member engagement in decision making a motion was put to council to review returning to the committee system. It was agreed that there should be a review of the governance model for the council.

The Coordinating Committee considered whether there should be a scrutiny led review of governance and set up a joint working group to carry this out.

The review included in depth research and evaluation of alternative governance arrangements at other local authorities as well as interviews with Cabinet Members, Senior Officers and a broad cross section of Members.

In February 2013 the working group gave a presentation at Council with four options for consideration. It was agreed that option C, Retain Cabinet System with enhanced Scrutiny be taken forward. Furthermore it was requested that the Scrutiny Coordinating Committee develop the model and proposals for implementation to be considered at the April Council meeting.

In developing an enhanced scrutiny model the Coordinating considered and investigated the following areas:

- The Overview and Scrutiny Model;
- Vision for Scrutiny;
- Cabinet Member Accountability;
- The role of Scrutiny Chairmen;
- Pre and Post decision Scrutiny;
- Continuous Professional Development;
- Approach to the Work Programme; and
- Support for Scrutiny.

It considered different options for an enhanced scrutiny secure but resolved that an extra Committee should be created so that each Cabinet Portfolios could be aligned to a Scrutiny Committee, providing its terms of reference. A key recommendation made

by the Coordinating Committee in its proposal was that the Spatial Planning Advisory Group and the Housing Consultative Board be subsumed into scrutiny to avoid duplication and strengthen the scrutiny process. Looking ahead to the 2013-14 Municipal Year it has been agreed that there will be four new Overview and scrutiny Committees and the Spatial Planning Advisory Group and the Housing Consultative Board will cease to exist.

Scrutiny of Health Bodies

In April 2013 the structure of the NHS changed dramatically. The Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee identified Health as a key area to look at during the 2012/13 Municipal Year. From April 2013 Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) commission health services including General Practitioner (GPs) and community and hospital services. These services had historically been commissioned by Primary Care Trusts (PCTs).

The Committee invited key representatives from the West Kent Clinical Commissioning Group to update it on key changes.

The Committee felt it was important that

organisations worked together with the Council to determine local priorities and recommended that Maidstone Borough Council take the lead on this by engaging with all GPs as early as possible.

The Committee responded to two key consultations; the Kent Community health NHS Trust's Consultation on becoming an NHS Foundation Trust and the Draft Kent Health and Well-being Strategy. The Committee's response to the Kent Community Health NHS Trust Consultation was included as part of its application to the Secretary of State in support of its application to become a Foundation Trust.

The Committee's response to the draft Health and Wellbeing Strategy Consultation was submitted, in full, in the consultation engagement report to the Kent Health and Wellbeing Board in January 2013.

Capital Programme Review

The Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee undertook a review of the Council's Capital Programme.

Its starting point was to establish what the Council's policy was for developing a Capital Programme and how it contributed to the priorities and

outcomes set out in the Council's Strategic Plan.

The Working Group sought to establish a means by which the Council could continue to deliver an ambitious Capital Programme through exploring borrowing options and innovative ways of utilising the Council's available finances and assets.

Its investigations naturally progressed to considering the Council's involvement in development which contributes to and promotes economic growth. These included Woking Borough Council's ventures as Woking Borough Homes Ltd and Wolsley Place Shopping Centre. The Trafford Centre and Maidstone's Fremlin Walk Shopping Centre were also evaluated.

The Working Group explored the concept of land assembly and acquisition in relationship to Maidstone so that it could establish whether or not Maidstone Borough Council should have a future role in shaping Maidstone, seeking expert advice from Smiths Gore, chartered surveyors and property consultant.

Having considered the evidence, the Committee approved a wide range of recommendations that would help enable transparency, continuity and forward planning in the Council's Capital Programme. There was a definite focus on making efficient and effective use of

the Council's and Maidstone's assets which includes land and property and the knowledge and innovation of both staff and residents. The recommendations embodied a sense of belonging and community that would shape the future of Maidstone, with the people of Maidstone, for the people of Maidstone.

The report and recommendations were considered by Cabinet in June 2013. The Cabinet Member is scheduled to update the Committee on the progress of its recommendations in December 2013.

Brunswick Street Call-in 2011 Update

The Economic and Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee held an important follow-up meeting on a call-in from the previous Municipal Year in order to establish what progress had been made on the recommendations made by Overview and Scrutiny.

The suspension of the original decision still stood and the car park remained operational. The original intention had been to declare the site surplus and release it for regeneration but since the decision was suspended the tenant in the adjacent building had vacated and subsequently the Council had lost the income from this site. The Committee agreed that the Council should seek to

find another tenant, if only short term, due to the loss of income.

The Committee made a number of recommendations to help improve residents parking options in the area which was identified as an issue and Resolved that the original decision to declare Brunswick Street Car Park surplus be revoked and the process restarted.

Visitor Information Centre Review

The Economic and Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee undertook a review on the Visitor Information Centre. The Visitor information Centre, once housed in the foyer of the Town Hall, moved to Maidstone Museum in 2011 as part of the East Wing extension project.

The empty space left in the foyer of the Town hall was offered to Volunteer Action Maidstone (VAM) as a customer point.

Since the moving of the Visitor Information Centre (ViC), Jubilee Square, part of the High street regeneration project has been completed and while VAM have played a valuable role in keeping the Town Hall open and in use there was evidence that visitors were confused about where to go for visitor information.

The Committee visited Visitor Information Centres in Rochester and Bexley as well as the ViC in the Museum. It considered the role of the Gateway and the future use of the Town Hall and the Maidstone's approach to tourism as whole.

Whilst the review found no conclusive evidence to support returning the ViC in full to the Town Hall, it made a number of recommendations to support a more holistic approach to 'Visitor Information'.

Public Gypsy & Traveller Site: site selection

The Communities and Joint Regeneration and Economic Development Overview and Scrutiny Committees formed a Joint Committee to consider this cross-cutting topic.

The report considered by the Joint Committee was an exempt report and therefore considered under Part II. The Joint Committee recommended that it was in support of the recommendation outlined in the report.

Local Council Tax Discount Scheme & Welfare Reform

The Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the Council's Local Council Tax Discount Scheme prior to a

decision by Cabinet and its public consultation.

The Committee recommended that Cabinet supported Option 6 in the Localisation of Council Tax Support report: Local variation within the framework for scheme in Kent which recommends that the Council applies a standard deduction of 13% on all non-pensioner claimants, removes the 10% discount currently applicable to second homes and reduces the exemption on Class C empty properties from 6 months to 1 month.

It also recommended that actively assisted vulnerable groups affected by the Local Council Tax Discount Scheme and the wider impacts of Welfare Reforms through continued engagement with stakeholders and the voluntary and charity sector.

The Committee went on to examine the impact of Welfare Reforms in more depth with registered social landlord, Golding Homes, who own and manage approximately 6,500 properties in Maidstone and Tunbridge and Malling.

As well as the impact of Welfare Reform the Committee explored whether or not this, combined with the Department of Communities and Local Government's (DCLG) Social Housing Fraud consultation (published in January 2012) provided an

increased impetus for change within social housing with regards to unlawful occupation including subletting and the ability to introduce flexible tenancies under new legislation in the Localism Act 2011.

The Committee saw the introduction of flexible tenancies as a way forward for making social housing available to those with a genuine need and offered its support and input into Golding Homes' review of this in a year's time.

Housing Allocation Scheme

The Communities Overview and Scrutiny considered the Council's new Housing Allocation Scheme, pre-decision.

The Committee examined the Council's draft Housing Allocation Scheme to determine whether or not it supported the message of Welfare Reform 'better off in work' and was clearly aligned to the Council's strategic priorities with the ability to deliver.

The Committee made a number of key recommendations including the following:

- That Section 14 of the Allocation Scheme, Bedroom Allocation, be brought into line with the guidance and specifications given under Welfare Reform; and

- That clarity be given within the document on Community Contributions; whether or not contributions must be made locally.

A Member of the Committee also volunteered to undertake some follow up work with officers on the scheme to ensure concerns regarding the inclusion of fostering under Community Contributions and the possibility that this could encourage applicants to foster children for the wrong reasons could be addressed and appropriate changes made.

Policy Framework documents

Policy development was undertaken by the Corporate Services by the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee in its consideration of the following Budget and Policy Framework documents:

- Budget Strategy;
- Refresh of the Strategic Plan; and
- Asset Management Plan.

Overview and Scrutiny Committees are constitutionally bound to consider a number of plans and strategies, some of these are statutory, others have been

chosen by the Council to form part of its policy framework.

The Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee act as the 'critical friend', holding the Council to account in its quarterly monitoring of the Council's Performance and Complaints.

Customer Focused Services Review & Customer Services Improvement Strategy

The Customer Services Improvement Strategy was the outcome of the Customer Focused Services review undertaken by the Business Transformation team. The Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee were involved in its development, undertaking pre-decision scrutiny on the outcomes of the review at its meeting in February 2013.

The Committee agreed a set of principles that would underpin the development of the customer service delivery model which were that it should:

- Enable as many customers as possible to be self sufficient ;
- Be affordable;
- Ensure services are accessible to the most vulnerable;
- Have high quality service standards consistently applied; and

- Be sustainable and adaptable for the future.

When presented with the Strategy in April 2013 the Committee had one main concern which was ensuring that vulnerable people were not disadvantaged by more ICT focused services. It recommended that a contact list of partner organisations (including the private sector) offering support and training in ICT be compiled, including organisations with the ability to support individuals with low literacy, learning difficulties and mental illness. It specified that the information should be specific to the type of support on offer i.e. 1 to 1 and be used to signpost residents to these services.

CCTV Update

The decision to move CCTV monitoring from Maidstone to a central monitoring centre in Medway was a contentious one.

Maidstone Borough Council took the decision in November 2011 to award the contract for the CCTV monitoring service to Medway Council Control Centre.

This decision was called in and considered by the Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Committee resolved that the decision should stand

but recommended that 'both the Cabinet and officers ensure that stakeholders are fully engaged throughout all stages of the transfer of the CCTV service and its continued ongoing operation.'

It was on this basis that Committee resolved that a review of the implementation of the CCTV monitoring service at the Medway Control Centre should be included in its work programme for the 2012/13 Municipal Year. A meeting was held in October 2011 and the Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee acting as the Crime and Disorder Overview and Scrutiny Committee interviewed key witnesses from Kent Police, the Community Safety Unit alongside with Vikram Sahdev, Head of Business Development at Medway Council and Lynne Goodwin, Operations Manager, Medway Council.

The Committee were satisfied with the services being provided at Medway and that contract specifications had been deliver. Recommendations were made to ensure continuous improvement of the service.

Legislative and Constitutional Changes

The Coordinating considered amendments that were required to the Constitution in relation to Overview and

Scrutiny. It agreed that as a consequence of the Localism Act, the following parts of the constitution relating to scrutiny were amended during 2012/13:

- The Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules, section 9, Agenda Items and section 20 procedure at Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meetings; and
- Councillor Call for Action Protocol.

The Future...?

As the local government landscape continues to change at a rapid pace, Scrutiny will need to be more adaptable than ever before in order to maintain a robust check and balance on service delivery. We have encountered a number of challenges this year.

With the election of the new Police and Crime Commissioner in November 2012 came entirely new arrangements for Police accountability at a County Level.

In April 2013 public health were transferred to functions the County Council. There will be new opportunities to ensure that the Council's activities reflect the Health and Wellbeing Strategy and its aim to improve the quality of residents' lives.

The Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee has endeavoured to stay abreast of changes in both health and crime.

There are existing scrutiny protocols in place in crime and health which help ensure that at a district level there is an input. However these will need to be refreshed in light of recent changes in order for scrutiny to continue to have a meaningful impact.

The Kent Police Crime Commissioner is scheduled to attend Scrutiny in October 2013 which will be almost a year in to her term of office, providing a timely opportunity to evaluate the past year.

Maidstone Borough Council has representation on the Local Health and Well Being Board from a long serving Overview and Scrutiny Member which will provide an opportunity for future engagement.

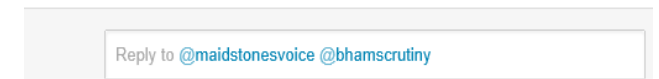
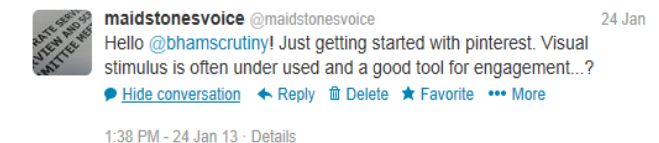
Social Media...a tool for public engagement?

How do we ensure that scrutiny is examining the issues that matter most to our residents, are we adapting a methods of communications appropriately?

The Overview and Scrutiny team continue to explore the challenges of finding new ways to engage with residents and have implemented a variety of social media tools which can be utilised and developed by Scrutiny Members. Twitter is used to communicate when Overview and Scrutiny meetings will take place and engage with residents.

Pinterest and Instagram are both useful, visual tools for sharing information. Pinterest could be a useful tool for reviews as information and articles can

be 'pinned' on a virtual notice board. Advocated include 10 Downing Street and a number of Government departments including the Department for Communities and Local Government. We were complimented by leading a Scrutiny authority, who are affiliated with Birmingham University, in our innovative use of Pinterest for Scrutiny. See below:



These tools are in place and Members are most welcome to come and learn about the possibilities from the team who would be happy to offer training or advice.

Training

Continued member training and development is organised by the Council's Learning and Development team. The Scrutiny team organised training in Performance Management and

the Budget for members of the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee to prepare them for their role as the year commenced.

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



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.

Gypsies and Travellers, National Awareness Training Programme

In November 2012 a training session was offered on Gypsy and Traveller awareness. The programme was devised by the Local Government Association (LGA) and Planning Advisory Service (PAS) with direct support from Communities and Local Government (CLG). It explored the challenging issues surrounding Gypsies and Travellers in the UK and looked at the potential solutions that councillors, their officers and local partners can put into practice in their area.

The training covered the following:

- The current Government's position and policies particularly on planning and enforcement;
- The history of Gypsies and Travellers in the UK;
- Discussion on inappropriate encampments and unauthorised developments;
- The issues in the light of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), Localism Act 2011 and the abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS);
- The cultural, equalities, education and health issues;
- The highly contentious issue of community opposition;
- Funding availability for provision; and

- The options available for making provision and the financial consequences of both action and inaction.

Continued Professional Development

An outcome of the Governance review was that each individual Committee should consider its 'Continuous Professional Development' at each meeting so that appropriate training sessions can be arranged. This will be taken forward during the 2013-14 Municipal Year.

Get in Touch!

The following Officers are available to discuss your Overview and Scrutiny issues:

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