

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COMMUNITIES, HOUSING AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 30 NOVEMBER 2021

Present: Councillors Bartlett, Joy, McKenna, Mortimer, Newton, Parfitt-Reid, Purle (Chairman), M Rose and S Webb

Also Present: Councillors English and Naghi

106. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Young.

107. **NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

Councillor Parfitt-Reid was present as a Substitute Member for Councillor Young.

108. **URGENT ITEMS**

There were no urgent items.

109. **NOTIFICATION OF VISITING MEMBERS**

Councillors English and Naghi were present as Visiting Members for the following Items:

- 17 – Future Use of Community Grants;
- 18 – Development of the Maidstone Town Centre Strategy; and
- 20 – Brenchley Gardens – Follow-up Report

Councillor English was also present as a Visiting Member for Item 19 – Parks Delivery Plan for Biodiversity.

110. **DISCLOSURES BY MEMBERS AND OFFICERS**

Councillor Rose disclosed an Other Significant Interest with regards to Item 17 – Future Use of Community Grants, as the Vice-Chair of Maidstone Mediation, and would therefore leave the meeting during the debate and vote.

111. **DISCLOSURES OF LOBBYING**

There were no disclosures of lobbying.

112. EXEMPT ITEMS

RESOLVED: That all items be taken in public as proposed.

113. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 2 NOVEMBER 2021

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 2 November 2021 be approved as a correct record and signed.

114. PRESENTATION OF PETITIONS

There were no petitions.

115. QUESTIONS AND ANSWER SESSION FOR MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

There were no questions from members of the public.

116. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO THE CHAIRMAN

There was one question from a Member to the Chairman.

Councillor Russell asked the following question to the Chairman of Communities, Housing and Environment:

'One family in my ward in Nettlestead live in a Golding house, pay rent and have disabilities. Their wet room was not working which given their disabilities was a major issue. The issue began in August and as at this date we are still not at a point where it has been fully resolved. There have been a catalogue of issues with communication between my residents, Golding and their subcontractors Betaco which I won't go into, but these culminated in my residents being moved into a hotel for a week. They got no allowance, got turfed out to roam the streets during the day and finally got checked out on a Friday to finally arrive home where they found the wet room had been ripped out and not re-fitted and they didn't even have a functioning toilet. Late into the evening on a Friday night I was repeatedly contacting both Golding on their emergency line and my residents to get the issue temporarily resolved. This should never have been allowed to happen and was purely down to poor communication. My question to this committee is what new communication or work checking procedures (or similar) can the CHE committee put in place with Golding to make sure that a situation such as this never happens again?'

The Chairman responded to the question.

Councillor Russell asked the following supplementary question to the Chairman of Communities, Housing and Environment:

'If you have a future meeting where Golding attends, would you mention the issue to them so that it keeps it on their radar?'

The Chairman responded to the question.

The full responses were recorded on the webcast and made available to view on the Maidstone Borough Council website. To access the webcast recording, please use the link below:

[Communities, Housing and Environment Committee - 30 November 2021](#)

117. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair informed the Committee that a reference had been received from the Policy and Resources Committee for the review of the temporary property portfolio regarding the management of problems identified. Additionally, a presentation from a social housing provider would be arranged.

RESOLVED: That the Committee Work Programme be noted.

118. REPORTS OF OUTSIDE BODIES

There were no reports of Outside Bodies.

119. 2ND QUARTER FINANCIAL UPDATE & PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT

The Head of Finance introduced the report and explained that an underspend was forecast against the revenue budget for the Committee. This was largely due to grant funding received for environmental health services and underspends within homelessness services, combined with an income surplus at the crematorium. At least £16.7 million slippage was predicted on the capital programme, principally as a consequence of delays to the private rented sector housing programme, and £10 million expenditure was forecast for the year.

The Senior Business Analyst introduced the performance monitoring report and explained that one of the targetable quarterly key performance indicators (KPIs) had achieved its target, and two had missed their target within 10%. A significant improvement was noted however for the percentage of successful Relief Duty outcomes compared to the last quarter and was above the national average.

In response to questions, the Senior Business Analyst explained that housing targets had been set and agreed by the Committee in February 2021, however prevention of relief duty was set before national data was available, and a more appropriate target would be set for this KPI in the future.

RESOLVED: That

1. The Revenue position as at the end of Quarter 2 for 2021/22, including the actions being taken or proposed to improve the position, where significant variances have been identified, be noted;

2. The Capital position at the end of Quarter 2 be noted; and
3. The Performance position as at Quarter 2 for 2021/22, including the actions being taken or proposed to improve the position, where significant issues have been identified, be noted.

120. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY

The Head of Finance introduced the report for the Committee's consideration and comment. It was highlighted that the Strategic Plan was still considered to be relevant, although emerging priorities had been identified including the Town Centre Strategy and the proposals for 1000 additional affordable homes. Key assumptions included a council tax increase of 2% and inflation of 2%, with some higher inflation assumptions for items such as energy costs. A further £500,000 had been allocated to cover any unforeseen pressures caused by high inflation.

In response to questions, the Head of Finance confirmed that the council tax revenue projection was different to the 2% council tax base increase assumption. There was a reasonable level of confidence in the next year's growth and although there was less certainty beyond that, the strategy would be revisited every year which allowed fluctuations to be corrected.

RESOLVED: That the Committee's comments on the draft Medium Term Financial Strategy be noted.

121. FEES AND CHARGES 2022-23

The Head of Finance introduced the report and explained that this would contribute to the setting of the following year's budget. There was a requirement for charges to be reviewed annually, and information around income budgets had been included for context. Key points were highlighted within the charges for parks and open spaces, bereavement services, recycling and refuse collection and commercial waste.

The Committee felt that it was unreasonable to increase the Gypsy and Traveller Site Fees due to the refurbishment works required to bring the sites to a modern standard.

In response to questions, the Head of Environment and Public Realm clarified that whilst there was no current pressure on the supply of burial plots, it would be prudent to further consider their provision in the long term. Non-residents paid increased burial fees but there was the potential for this to be written into policy.

RESOLVED: That

1. The fees and charges set out in Appendix 1 to the report be agreed, with the exception of the increase in gypsy and traveller site plot fee which should not be increased for the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023; and

2. The expected statutory fees and charges, set out in Appendix 1 to the report, be noted.

122. CHANGE TO THE ORDER OF BUSINESS

Item 20 – Brenchley Gardens – Follow-up Report would be taken before Item 17 – Future Use of Community Grants.

123. BRENCHLEY GARDENS- FOLLOW-UP REPORT

The Community Protection Manager introduced the report which had been requested by the Committee. The potential actions were outlined, including improvements of the CCTV in Brenchley Gardens, which could be undertaken under the existing budget. The planned structural works which would take place over the next year could include the reinstallation of the bandstand frill. Motion alarms could be installed to identify when people were in the park at night, and lighting could be improved although this would be subject to planning permission.

The Committee's request to close the park at night presented challenges and would not prevent antisocial behaviour and crime. Recently reported incidents had happened in daylight and therefore the night time closure of the park would not have had an impact. Securing access to the park would be straight-forward on three sides, but where there was vehicular access at Faith Street significant engineering works would be required, costing over £54,000. In addition, closing the park at night would initially require trained security personnel.

It had been reported that the recent PCSO taskforce had reduced incidents in the park, however issues were then displaced to areas including Trinity Park and Whatman Park, where no CCTV was installed. Ambassadors working in the town centre were successful in reducing the escalation of incidents starting in the High Street, actively engaging with young people and were able to provide intelligence to other agencies.

Several Committee Members felt that action needed to be taken swiftly, and should go further than the recommendations proposed. The safety of residents needed to be prioritised and safeguarding responsibilities towards vulnerable groups was acknowledged.

The Head of Housing and Community Services acknowledged the desire to act quickly but cautioned that the allocation of additional budget for the works may take time to secure.

RESOLVED: That the Committee

1. Ask Officers to pursue with added vigour measures to close and secure Brenchley Gardens at night through locked gates and additional fencing, including doing whatever it takes to secure the necessary variation of budgets, overcome planning control issues et cetera;

2. Accept the recommendations for reinstating the bandstand frill and upgrading the CCTV coverage for the park;
3. Ask that plans and designs for the bandstand frill, the fencing and new gates are circulated to Committee Members as soon as they become available; and
4. Ask that the Council's Community Protection Team as a priority commence frequent visible foot patrols of the Brenchley Gardens and North Week Street Area, making active use of the Council's statutory powers for tackling anti-social behaviour, with Officers to seek sources of funding to increase the team's resourcing as necessary.

124. FUTURE USE OF COMMUNITY GRANTS

The Head of Housing and Community Services introduced the report and explained that a significant budget was retained by the council and had been utilised to fund community groups which provided services to local residents. A variety of services were provided as listed in the report, and the grant amount varied per provider.

In response to questions, the Head of Housing and Community Services explained that the grants were being utilised to procure a service and would therefore need to comply with the council's procurement guidelines. Under these guidelines the mediation and community links services would require three quotes to be obtained, while the advice service would require a formal tender process.

Members felt that it was important to recognise the value of the three organisations that currently delivered the services to Maidstone residents, and that it would be preferable to retain the services of Maidstone Mediation, Citizens Advice Bureau and Involve due to the high quality of services they provide.

RESOLVED: That

1. A three-year grant be provided without reducing the overall budget, thereby supplying the same level of funding for the supplier; and
2. The provision of voluntary sector services continue to be funded for mediation, advice and community links.

Note: Councillor Rose left the meeting between 8.19pm and 8.28pm during the debate and vote.

125. DEVELOPMENT OF THE MAIDSTONE TOWN CENTRE STRATEGY

The Interim Director for the Local Plan Review introduced the report and outlined the impact of changes in demand on the town centre and other town centres around the country. The development of the Town Centre Strategy was an opportunity to address these pressures and challenges

and also to make the town centre more environmentally attractive while ensuring the town centre space was used effectively.

The Committee provided feedback on the strategy and emphasised the importance of community events including local markets, concerts and increasing the capacity of the theatre. The river could play a larger role in the identity of the town centre, and community engagement was vital.

RESOLVED: That the feedback be used to inform a further report to the Policy and Resources Committee with a more specific proposal on the scope and timing of the Town Centre Strategy.

126. PARKS DELIVERY PLAN FOR BIODIVERSITY

The Parks and Open Spaces Manager introduced the report and gave an outline of the actions proposed to enhance biodiversity in the Council's parks and open spaces. This had been developed following the adoption of the Biodiversity and Climate Change Strategy in 2020, with which it would run in conjunction. The eight sections of the action plan were outlined and the Nature Pledge was read to the Committee.

In response to questions, the Head of Environment and Public Realm explained that community engagement work sat under the wider strategy, and the team were working with the Biodiversity and Climate Change Manager to develop a collective educational role spanning multiple environmental issues.

The Parks and Open Spaces Manager confirmed that issues with the 'No Mow May' scheme had been explored, and it was found that they did not relate to the Council's land.

RESOLVED: That the Parks and Open Spaces Delivery Plan for Biodiversity 2021-26, as attached at Appendix 1 to the report, be adopted.

127. CONTRACTING OUT OF HOMELESSNESS REVIEWS FUNCTION

The Head of Housing and Community Services introduced the report and explained that applicants had the right to request a review of certain homelessness decisions. Authority to contract out the function of carrying out reviews of homelessness decisions was permitted under the Local Authorities (Contracting Out of Allocation of Housing and Homelessness Functions) Order 1996, and the council had therefore contracted out this function under the delegated authority of the Head of Housing and Community Services. The benefits of this approach were outlined, including efficiency of specialist organisations, and the review being conducted independently of the council.

RESOLVED: That

1. The contracting out of the Council's homelessness review function under the delegated authority of the Head of Housing and Community Services be noted; and
2. Specific delegation to the Head of Housing and Community Services to contract out homelessness review functions under Section 202 of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended) be added to the Constitution.

128. DURATION OF MEETING

6.30pm to 9.21pm.

Note: The Committee adjourned between 7.55pm and 8.05pm.