

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY 23 MARCH
2022**

Present: Councillors Mrs Blackmore, Brice, Burton (Chairman), Cooper, Cox, English, Harper, Kimmance, Munford, Naghi, Parfitt-Reid, Perry and Round

Also Present: Councillor T Sams

205. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Cooke, Khadka, and Mrs Ring.

206. NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Councillor Cooper was present as Substitute Member for Cllr Cooke.

Councillor Naghi was present as Substitute Member for Cllr Khadka.

207. URGENT ITEMS

There were no urgent items.

208. CHANGE TO THE ORDER OF BUSINESS

The Chairman intended to take Item 9 – Presentation of Petitions immediately prior to Item 13 – Public Sector-Led Garden Community Update due to the related subject matter.

209. NOTIFICATION OF VISITING MEMBERS

Councillor Tom Sams was in attendance for Item 13 – Public Sector-Led Garden Community Update.

210. DISCLOSURES BY MEMBERS AND OFFICERS

There were no disclosures by Members or Officers.

211. DISCLOSURES OF LOBBYING

Councillors Blackmore, Brice, Burton, Cox, English, Harper, Kimmance, Naghi, Perry and Round had been lobbied on Item 17 – Archbishop's Palace – Expressions of Interest and Item 19 – Exempt Appendices (Item 17 – Archbishops Palace – Expressions of Interest) – Balfour Hospitality Proposal and AB Team Proposal.

212. EXEMPT ITEMS

RESOLVED: That all items be taken in public as proposed, but if the Committee needed to discuss the detail in the exempt appendices for Items 16 and 17 then the Committee would resolve to go into private session due to the possible disclosure of exempt information.

213. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 9 FEBRUARY 2022

RESOLVED: That the Minutes (Part I and II) of the meeting held on 9 February 2022 be approved as a correct record and signed.

214. QUESTIONS AND ANSWER SESSION FOR MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

There were three questions from members of the public.

Question from Kate Hammond to the Chairman of the Policy and Resources Committee

'Following Lenham Parish Council's invitation to all councillors to a visit of the Heathlands site earlier this month, Alison Broom wrote to councillors advising them against attending on grounds of potential bias and "to avoid a situation where they do so with only representatives of 'one side of the argument' present". Could you explain who at the Heathlands public engagement event was offering councillors an alternative view to the one-sided opinion of Homes England and MBC officers on Heathlands?'

The Chairman responded to the question.

Ms Hammond asked the following supplementary question:

'Kent County Council Cabinet Member for Communications and Engagement remarked: 'I've never heard of anything more ridiculous'. Do you agree with him that this is ridiculous?'

The Chairman responded to the supplementary question.

Question from Ms Gail Duff to the Chairman of the Policy and Resources Committee

'Can you confirm how much has been spent by Maidstone Borough Council and Homes England on the services of PR firm "We are Fabrik" to promote the Heathlands project since July 2021?'

The Chairman responded to the question.

Ms Duff asked the following supplementary question:

'In view of the fiasco over the leafleting and the fact that nearly every resident who attended the community exhibition was highly dissatisfied at the lack of concrete information available, do you think you received value for money?'

The Chairman responded to the supplementary question.

Question from Mr Heeley to the Chairman of the Policy and Resources Committee

'Many residents from Lenham and surrounding villages were deeply angry and upset with the poorly organised and promoted public engagement events for Heathlands. They contacted the Chief Executive to let her know of their dissatisfaction. Mrs Broom responded to residents that contacted her with an identical 1,120-word response. The word "sorry" was not mentioned once. Do you think it would have been appropriate for Mrs Broom to have offered an apology on behalf of Maidstone Borough Council in her response to aggrieved residents?'

The Chairman responded to the question.

Mr Heeley asked the following supplementary question:

'I take your point about there being some identical responses but not all of them. There's quite a lot of residents were very angry that they actually spent quite a lot of time putting together a response to the Chief Executive and just got an identical response back; a standard carbon copy. Will the Chief Executive be offering a more public apology to the residents of Lenham and surrounding villages other than the one that's hidden in tonight's committee paper because as you know very few people read the committee papers?'

The Chairman responded to the supplementary question.

The full responses were recorded on the webcast and made available to view on the Maidstone Borough Council website. The question-and-answer session took place between 7:09 and 14:37 of the recording.

To access the webcast, please use the link below:

[Policy and Resources Committee Meeting - 23 March 2022 - YouTube](#)

215. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO THE CHAIRMAN

There was one question from a Member to the Chairman

Question from Councillor T Sams to the Chairman of the Policy and Resources Committee

'We are pleased you attended the Councils jointly organised event run by We are Fabrik and with representatives from Homes England and William Cornall on behalf of MBC last week. What did you learn from the event that you did not appreciate before?'

The Chairman responded to the question.

Councillor T Sams asked the following supplementary question:

'Given the issues uncovered in the report and in hindsight of residents complaints. Was this good public engagement?'

The Chairman responded to the supplementary question.

The full responses were recorded on the webcast and made available to view on the Maidstone Borough Council website.

The question-and-answer session took place between 14:38 and 17:25 of the recording.

To access the webcast, please use the link below:

[Policy and Resources Committee Meeting - 23 March 2022 - YouTube](#)

216. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

RESOLVED: That the Committee Work Programme be noted.

217. PRESENTATION OF PETITIONS

Mr Heeley addressed the Committee on behalf of the Save Our Heathlands Action Group to present the petition.

In presenting the petition Mr Heeley highlighted the strength of feeling of Lenham residents with regard to the existing Lenham railway station and that it needed to be retained. The petition of over 3100 signatures demonstrated this strength of feeling and it was felt that the only people saying the options were deliverable were the private consultancy that the Council hired without confirming its acceptability to anyone else, including network rail.

Two of the four options contained within the January 2022 report on the matter were felt to be unacceptable to local people. The Committee were requested to make it clear, through a motion, that if the Heathlands Garden Community Proposal proceeded it was not acceptable to sacrifice the existing station through its closure.

RESOLVED: That the petition be considered alongside the report on the agenda relating to the Public Sector-Led Garden Community Update.

218. PUBLIC SECTOR-LED GARDEN COMMUNITY UPDATE

Ms Kate Hammond addressed the Committee on behalf of Save Our Heathlands Action Group.

The Director of Regeneration and Place introduced the report outlining the level of engagement there had been through the recent public engagement events. It was noted that Homes England had contributed five staff to the events. There had been 350 attendees across the four events, with the significant majority attending the event in Lenham. Further events were planned in May as there were local residents who had

not been aware of them and an apology was included in the report for the failures in notifying residents. Lessons had been learned and it was recognised in the report that the Council needed to establish a link with the local parish and set objectives for future events.

It was highlighted that whilst Homes England had 40% of the 822 acres of land required for the development under option, it was expected to be close to 75% by the end of March 2022.

In addition, the Local Plan Review statement of common ground was being prepared to be in place between the Council and Homes England as the promoters, and the Local Planning Authority. This would set out the workstreams that were the focus until the examination in public. Amongst other areas this included nutrient neutrality, minerals, highways, AONB setting, employment and the railway station.

The Committee expressed disappointment in the issues with the delivery of leaflets to residents. In considering what action to take moving forward, it was accepted that the delivery of the leaflets had been sub-contracted out to a private delivery company and a full refund for that activity was to be received. It was noted that the Council were putting in place further events, had apologised in the report and lessons had been learned.

Reassurances relating to the land under option of 40%, rising to 75% were sought and it was confirmed that 75% was realistic as a number of agreements were waiting to be engrossed.

The committee also requested further information relating to the railway options and other workstreams. It was highlighted that the Council's local plan submission on 31 March 2022 would include a road map for future pieces of work, and that officers would ensure that there was transparency and information sharing through the new governance arrangements from May 2022.

In considering the petition and the issues raised, the Committee noted that the Councils preferred options were for the existing station to be retained but that the other options could not be ruled out at this stage with Network Rail who required all options to be assessed. The Committee wanted to place on record its support for a new station whilst retaining the existing Lenham Station.

RESOLVED: That

1. The Committee's support for a new station whilst retaining the existing Lenham station be recorded; and
2. The report be noted.

219. FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF THE LOCKMEADOW LEISURE COMPLEX

The Director of Finance and Business Improvement presented the report. The report outlined a request for further investment in developing

Lockmeadow, in accordance with the agreed approach when purchasing it in 2019. The food hall and play area had been the second phase of development, but the focus was now on two areas. These were the Market Hall and under-croft, and further developing the play area which had been very popular since it had opened.

The aims were to upgrade the Market Hall and under-croft to improve utilisation and to provide more equipment in the play area for older children in order to drive footfall. The conservative estimate was that the investment would pay back within 10 years.

In supporting the proposals the Committee requested that support for children with Special Education Needs was provided through investing in specialist play equipment. The committee also requested that consideration be given to diversifying the catering offer in the Market Hall.

RESOLVED: That

1. The proposals for improvement works be supported;
2. The requested capital spend be approved;
3. Authority be delegated to the Director of Finance and Business Improvement to undertake a procurement process and award such contracts for delivery of the works in line with financial procedure rules and applicable public contracts regulations and principles; and
4. The Head of Mid Kent Legal Services be authorised to complete the necessary contract documentation and agreements associated with the works.

220. MAIDSTONE TOWN CENTRE STRATEGY

The Interim Local Plan Director introduced the item. The Committee had considered workstreams for the Maidstone Town Centre Strategy in September and October 2021, and reports had been taken to relevant service committees. Appendices 1 and 2 to the report provided an overview of the revised scope.

The decision before the committee was to consider approval for the updated scope and agreement to an outline governance structure. The governance structure ensured a clear lead by the Executive and Member on the Executive with input from the relevant Policy Advisory Committee.

The scope demonstrated the early work that would be necessary to deliver the strategy and the proposed community engagement plan.

The Committee supported the proposal in the report, stressing the need for a bi-partisan approach to ensure a robust strategy to deliver for the next ten to twenty years. They highlighted that flexibility in the governance arrangements was key, noting that the decision-making responsibility would rest with the Executive with other 'anchor institutions'

having an input, including other public sector organisations like Golding Homes, County Council, Mid Kent College, and the police; who invest and provide services in the town centre.

An ambitious approach that actively promoted the Town Centre, and leveraged Maidstone's cultural capital, was endorsed and encouraged by the Committee.

RESOLVED: That

1. The updated scope and core workstreams of the Town Centre Strategy as set out in appendices 1 and 2 to the report, be agreed;
2. The proposed governance structure at paragraph 2.5. of the report, be agreed; and
3. The principles of the proposed engagement strategy described in paragraph 2.13 and within appendix 3 of the report, be agreed.

Note: Councillor Cooper left the meeting after this item.

221. ADJOURNMENT OF MEETING

The Committee adjourned for a short break between 8.06 p.m. to 8.16 p.m.

222. MAIDSTONE HOUSE - NEXT STEPS

The Director of Finance and Business Improvement introduced the report which set out the management approach for Maidstone House and requested approval for investment in the property consistent with the business case that supported the decision to purchase the building.

There were objectives that it was proposed the Council pursue in the medium to long term. The first was to build on Maidstone House as a public sector hub, to enable relationships to be built with other public sector organisations. The second objective was to build on success of the Business Terrace, which had already been successful in promoting businesses.

The report put forward recommendations to support these ambitions in the short term with funding requested for improvements to the reception, including better signage, and to refurbish the lifts. £500k was requested in total.

The Committee welcomed the investment, recognising the need for the works and to proceed with them now. They also requested that the Director of Finance and Business Improvement look at a means of involving Members more directly in the bigger picture elements of the building, perhaps through some form of Member sounding board.

RESOLVED: That

1. The management approach for Maidstone House as set out in the report be approved;
2. Authority be delegated to the Director of Finance and Business Improvement, in consultation with the Chair of Policy and Resources Committee, to release capital programme funding for the projects set out in paragraphs 2.19 and 2.23 of the report, up to an overall limit of £0.5 million;
3. Authority be delegated to the Director of Finance and Business Improvement to undertake a procurement process and award such contracts for delivery of the works in accordance with financial procedure rules and applicable public contracts regulations and principles; and
4. The Head of Mid Kent Legal Services be authorised to complete the necessary contract documentation and agreements associated with the works.

223. ARCHBISHOPS PALACE - EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST

The Director of Finance and Business Improvement introduced the report and outlined the previous consideration of the issue. This included a feasibility study based on the principles previously agreed by the Committee. The resulting options were then further considered and expanded upon by the Committee and subject to formal public consultation. Potential partners had been identified through formal routes, wide publicity and direct contact; however the responses received had been limited as the building did not fit into any recognised business model.

Two proposals had been received and were summarised in the report, with the Committee to consider and decide which proposal should be subject to an exclusivity agreement (EA) across a six-month period. The EA would allow for further work to be undertaken by the bidder on their proposal.

The bid received from Balfour Hospitality proposed a boutique hotel with 25 rooms but would require three new buildings within the palace's grounds. The bid received by an internal team of the Council envisaged significantly less change, with the site's primary use to be as a wedding venue.

The Committee felt that both proposals had positive elements they could support but felt that the Balfour proposal should be taken forward. In doing so the need to factor in climate change considerations was stressed, alongside the very difficult challenges and high planning hurdles that the Balfour proposal would need to meet. In response to questions the Committee were informed that the Gatehouse was no longer leased out and was vacant, and that the only information currently available in the

proposals, including as to how the public would continue to access the buildings, was contained in the proposals.

It was noted that the Balfour option relied on the three new buildings and proposed little change to the Archbishops Palace building itself. The Palace would only have very limited changes and would be used as a dining, training, wedding and conference venue. By entering into an exclusivity agreement further work would be completed by the bidder to demonstrate how the challenges of the site would be met and provide more detail.

The Committee recognised the importance and heritage of the Archbishop's Palace and the high planning requirements that created but felt that the Balfour proposal showed some real ambition for Maidstone. The potential alignment between the proposal, the Council's Economic Development Strategy and overall enhancement of the town's heritage was highlighted.

The Committee questioned whether 6 months was long enough for detailed proposals to come forward and thought it was important that a longer period could be granted if requested, but it was accepted that six months was an appropriate starting point.

RESOLVED: That the Council grant Balfour Hospitality the exclusivity period of 6 months, to be able to do some detailed work and come back with a convincing proposal.

224. EXEMPT APPENDIX A (ITEM 16 - MAIDSTONE HOUSE - NEXT STEPS) - TENANCY SCHEDULE

RESOLVED: That the Item be considered alongside Item 16 – Maidstone House – Next Steps.

225. EXEMPT APPENDICES (ITEM 17 - ARCHBISHOPS PALACE - EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST) - BALFOUR HOSPITALITY PROPOSAL AND AB TEAM PROPOSAL

RESOLVED: That the Item be considered alongside Item 17 – Archbishops Palace – Expressions of Interest.

226. MINUTES (PART II) OF THE MEETING HELD ON 9 FEBRUARY 2022

RESOLVED: That the Item be considered alongside Item 8 – Minutes of the Meeting held on 9 February 2022.

227. DURATION OF MEETING

6.30 p.m. to 9.10 p.m.