

Medway Council
Meeting of Regeneration, Community and Culture
Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 13 December 2012

6.35pm to 10.20pm

Record of the meeting

Subject to approval as an accurate record at the next meeting of this committee

Present: Councillors: Bright (Chairman), Etheridge, Griffin, Griffiths, Harriott, Hicks, Hubbard, Juby, Mackinlay, Stamp and Turpin

Substitutes: Councillor Avey for Councillor Adrian Gulvin
Councillor Irvine for Councillor Maisey

In Attendance: Councillor Howard Doe, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services
Tina Barnard, Benefits Manager
Elizabeth Benjamin, Senior Lawyer - Litigation
Robin Cooper, Director of Regeneration, Community and Culture
Stephen Gaimster, Assistant Director Housing, Development and Transport
Matthew Gough, Housing Strategy Manager
Rosie Gunstone, Democratic Services Officer
Mick Hayward, Chief Finance Officer
Richard Hicks, Assistant Director, Customer First, Leisure, Culture, Democracy and Governance
Anna Marie Lawrence-Lovell, Performance Manager
Andy McGrath, Assistant Director, Front Line Services
Caroline Salisbury, Democratic Services Officer
Anthony Wallner, Capital Programme Manager

648 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting held on 25 September 2012 was agreed and signed as correct by the Chairman.

649 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Adrian Gulvin and Maisey.

650 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

651 Declarations of disclosable pecuniary interests

Councillor Etheridge advised the committee that a member of her family was in Band A social housing.

652 Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services in attendance

Discussion:

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services, Councillor Doe, addressed the committee outlining the main achievements within his portfolio which included:

Community Services

- Eastgate House: £1.3 million funding had been secured from the heritage Lottery Fund, together with further funding already secured and work would begin next summer
- Dickens Chalet: £50,000 of funding had been secured
- Rochester Castle: an environmental monitoring programme had been established in the Keep to determine the best approach for its preservation in the future. There were development proposals for two mural towers, educational interpretation units and catering use. Funding had also been secured for external lighting of the castle
- Upnor Castle: an EU funded interpretation programme had been completed with interactive use for young people. It had been discovered that the Barrack Block was the second oldest in the country and it was proposed to include this as part of the attraction
- Guildhall Museum: "Opening the Doors" project had been very successful and visitor numbers had increased by 4,000 in 2012
- Sports: Pre-Olympic training camps had been held at Medway Park. It had also hosted the British Transplant Games, which had been the most successful ever held. £20,000 sponsorship had been secured from a local company towards the Medway Sporting Academy which coaches young athletes
- Stirling Centre: agreement had been reached with the Kings School in Rochester to invest £500,000 in improvements and run the administration of the centre. The school would use the centre during the daytime and the public have use of it in the evening
- Deangate Golf Club: a new driving range had been installed, together with a new Par 3 Academy Course
- Greenspaces: seven play areas had been improved and a new play area built in Hoo. Satisfaction with play areas had risen by 5% to 90% in total
- Allotments: improvements had been made to sheds and security
- Volunteers: 23 Friends Groups had contributed a total of 11,000 voluntary hours towards a wide variety of community projects
- Events: two highly successful Dickens Festivals had been held in 2012 and the council had run a Christmas market where trade had been very good. A River festival had been held as part of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations, which had also been well attended and there was a lot of

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interest to hold another River Festival in 2013. 75,000 had attended the Olympic Torch Relay and 3,000 residents had taken part in the 'Medway Mile'

- Libraries: funding had been secured for Chatham and Gillingham libraries to evolve into community hubs and become the centre of activities for the local community with the ability to hold small events. 3,244 children had taken part in the Summer Reading Challenge
- Theatres and Arts: the FUSE Festival was now the largest contemporary festival sponsored by the Arts Council in the south east of England. The concerts at Rochester Castle had again been successful. 6,500 people had attended the Will Adams Festival and 100,000 people had visited the new Rochester Art Gallery
- Tourism: an outline strategy had been developed for Medway and the number of visitors had already increased. The council had worked on a pilot project with 'Visit Kent' and developed a draft Destination Management Plan. A "What's On" brochure had been published as part of the Medway Matters newsletter and in August 2012 more people had visited Medway than ever before.

Housing

- Strategic Housing: 108 affordable homes had been completed and the council was on track to meet the 204 target to be completed by the end of the financial year. However, homelessness had risen by over 30% but applications were generally still decided within 28 working days
- Empty homes: 1.3% of housing in Medway had been empty long-term, compared to a target of 1.6%. 63 empty properties had been brought back into use by the end of September 2012
- Temporary Accommodation: the numbers of people living in temporary accommodation had risen by 7% (compared with 200% increase elsewhere). This was as a result of the hard work of the Housing Solutions team working with housing providers to help minimise the expected increase
- Home Choice: 92% of people on the housing list bid using the council's on-line service
- Extra Care: the first scheme had been completed at Victory Pier in Gillingham and two more schemes were on-track for completion and one more due on site by the end of the year, which would improve the housing situation for 157 vulnerable elderly people
- Disabled Facility Grant: the budget was fully committed and applications were approved within the six month deadline
- Council housing: the number of void properties had reduced from 19 days last year to 14 days this year. Rent loss whilst properties remained empty stood at 0.48% and rent arrears were down, at a time when they were expected to increase
- Repairs: 99% of urgent repairs and 98% of routine repairs were dealt with on time
- Direct Debit Scheme: this scheme for paying rent via direct debit had been launched in 2012.

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A Member asked the Portfolio Holder what intentions he had for the new flexibility (headroom) within the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for the re-use of assets in order to close the gap between 204 completions of new housing and the 16,000 families waiting for accommodation. Councillor Doe responded that the number of people on the waiting list was mis-leading and the number of people within Band A and B was much lower. He also advised that the additional finance available (headroom) in the HRA was a one-off and his first priority for this funding would be to improve the council's current sheltered schemes to modern standards. With the remainder of the money, he wanted to produce more housing but for this to be linked to the regeneration of the Luton area of Chatham.

With regard to the Housing Strategy, the Portfolio Holder was asked why it did not recognise that the council's aim was for all residents to have the right to a decent home at a fair rent. Councillor Doe replied that ideally the strategy would state this. Anyone who could make their own housing arrangements should do so, with help from the council.

A Member asked about the future of the Strood library community hub. Councillor Doe advised that it had previously been agreed to relocate it as part of a Tesco development in Strood. Since then, Tesco had reviewed its national strategy and the council awaited the outcome of that review.

A Member asked if there were any plans to update the athletics ground at Deangate Golf Club. The Portfolio Holder advised that there was no funding available to achieve this at present. In the long-term, it was hoped that funding received from the Lodge Hill development could be used to develop the leisure facilities in that area.

The Portfolio Holder was asked about people who came onto the Home Choice system due to eviction for anti-social behaviour elsewhere and whether the council was notified of this before re-housing them. Councillor Doe advised that Housing Associations could inform the council of this but were not obliged to do so. The council would have to carefully decide where to place them and the Housing Manager would need to monitor the situation very closely.

A Member spoke about the housing crisis due to face Local Authorities due to the forthcoming reduction to housing and other benefits. He advised that people would be forced to downsize due to their lower income and asked if the council had plans for this, as properties had previously been disposed of and money had not been spent on re-furbishing the sheltered units. He also asked about the control of rents in the private sector. Councillor Doe advised that he recognised the pressures that were to come for people in receipt of benefits and there were plans to refurbish up to three sheltered units. He could not guarantee the required funding would be available for additional smaller units but he assured the committee that he would keep trying to secure additional funding when possible.

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Decision:

The committee thanked Councillor Doe for attending the meeting and the information and answers he had provided.

653 Petitions and outcome of public meeting held in All Saints area of Chatham

Discussion:

The Spokesperson for the Labour Group advised that the Ward Members were pleased with the progress made in the Hartington Street area of Chatham which had been the subject of a previous petition referral, as it had been agreed that a lamp column would be installed to improve communication with the CCTV camera in the park. With reference to the petition detailed on page 14 of the agenda, requesting extra facilities at Hamilton Road park, he stated that he had previously understood there to be s106 legal contributions from the development at Victory Pier to be used for The Strand and asked why the request for the replacement and upgrading of equipment could not be financed from this funding. The Director of Regeneration, Community and Culture undertook to investigate this and advise the committee of his findings.

Decision:

The committee agreed to:

- a) note the petition responses and appropriate officer action in paragraph 3 of the report;
- b) note the outcome of the public meeting held in the All Saints area of Chatham.

654 Supported Accommodation Task Group

Discussion:

The Head of Strategic Housing gave a presentation detailing the key lines of enquiry of the task group, who and where evidence was taken from, the findings of the review and the outcomes derived from the findings.

The committee praised the report and the level of detail it contained on this complicated matter. Members discussed the bureaucratic loopholes in the legislation that had been exposed, which affected the providers of exempt accommodation with some providers exploiting this for their financial gain and to the financial detriment of the council.

Members also discussed the number of vulnerable people moving into Medway and needing support. There were a number of reasons for this including cheaper property costs than elsewhere in Kent. Therefore, households were able to find a place in Medway easier than elsewhere, rather than staying and

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looking for housing in another local authority area. Also, the ease of access to accommodation in Medway was being communicated by word of mouth to other users, thereby increasing the numbers further.

Following questions about the legal minimum standard for supported accommodation and the powers the council had to enforce them, officers responded that providers were required to supply a minimal level of support and the council had been rigorous in ensuring that was complied with.

Members were also advised of the distinction between Housing Related Support payments, which were commissioned by the Council (formerly known as Supporting People funding) and the payment of enhanced housing benefit, which could only relate to the costs of the housing provision.

While the council took a very rigorous approach to ensure that the status of exempt providers was properly met and limiting the level of rent charged by the providers of exempt accommodation in assessing their eligibility, the ability to prevent the proliferation of providers setting up and attracting people to Medway was very limited. Housing Benefit regulations applied and did not give Local Authorities discretion relating to eligibility. The task group had recommended that Medway's Members of Parliament were asked to lobby government to change the legislation, so that local authorities (LA) could ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable were met whilst also ensuring that the LA did not suffer significantly in terms of reduced subsidy payable for Housing Benefit paid.

The Chief Finance Officer advised that it would be clearer if rent for supported accommodation was at a set rate, as it was for other providers and that this was separated from the support element of the provision with the council having discretion to commission the extra support separately.

Decision:

The committee agreed that the Supported Accommodation Task Group review document was referred to Cabinet for consideration with recommendations 1 – 5 as set out in the report (with an amendment to the typographical error in paragraph 4 to read “To recommend the Cabinet to (a) support the direction of travel, suggested by the Task Group, as set out in paragraph 6.2.13 in the report”)

655 Council Plan performance monitoring 2012/2013 - quarter 2

Discussion:

The Performance Manager introduced the report advising that the report allowed Members to monitor progress in achieving the outcomes set out in the Council Plan.

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Members were advised that performance measures NI117, NI148 and LX5 were not relevant to this committee but had been provided to give context and clarity of how the priorities as a whole had been performing.

The Committee was advised that the key highlights in quarter 2 were:

- Percentage of people who thought the Council helped people travel easily around Medway had risen by 6%
- Bus Lane enforcement in Chatham Bus Station and Canal Road in Strood was now fully operational
- The number of Job Seeker Allowance claimants had fallen by almost 7%
- Community Officers had attended all 36 Police and Communities Together (PACT) meetings
- waste recycling levels had exceeded their target, as was usual at this time of year due to the seasonal patterns of recycling
- the number of households living in temporary accommodation was 101 compared to a target of 110 and followed a 16% increase in the number of homeless applications this quarter.

A Member asked how the statistics for SF15 (percentage of people who feel Medway is safe) were compiled. Officers advised that the figures were taken from the Kent Crime Victimization Survey.

Following discussion on W5 (Satisfaction with how the Council deals with graffiti) a Member stated that public perception might be lower than expected due to graffiti viewed by commuters on trains of railway land. Officers confirmed that they had met representatives of Network Rail in order to try and find a way forward on this issue but had not seen any improvements since that meeting. The Assistant Director for Front Line Services undertook to contact Network Rail and Network South East. He advised that graffiti affected how people felt and behaved and was a very important issue to address.

The committee discussed the indicators under the heading “Everybody travelling easily around Medway” and advised officers that the statistics for this should include the whole of Medway and not just the town centres, as traffic flows were designed to allow people to avoid town centres and the traffic flow on those roads, such as the A289 (Pier Road, circumventing Gillingham town centre) and the Medway Tunnel should also be considered. A Member also raised the issue of traffic trying to move from minor side roads onto the major roads, especially the A2 and suggested that it was not sufficient for traffic to be flowing well on the major roads if there was congestion elsewhere on the smaller roads.

The Assistant Director for Front Line Services advised that in the future he would investigate where the measure of traffic flows was taken, as the six routes currently measured had been used for historical purposes and the council now had updated technology to allow scientific measurement of traffic flows on alternative routes. He also informed the committee that the purpose of the council’s Traffic Management Control Room was to allow intervention when

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congestion occurred. The system gathered data to target areas where issues were known and also allowed the council to collect evidence to determine where the traffic management budget would be spent to the greatest effect.

A Member raised the issue of flyposting (indicator NI 195d) and, although its status for quarter two monitoring was green, she raised a particular problem with large stationary vehicles parked on the highway with advertisements on the side. The Assistant Director for Front Line Services advised that if an advertisement was attached to highway furniture, the council could take action. However, the stationary vehicles were a national problem. If they had road tax and were parked legally, they were not caught by highway or planning legislation.

A Member asked whether there were any proposed actions to improve the outcome of NI 1 (percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality) and raise the target, as it was very low and also not making any progress. He asked for this information to be broken down by ward and stated that, as this was an indicator important enough to be part of the Council Plan, it should have meaningful data and the council should form a strategy to set things in place for improvement in the future. Officers responded that this information had been broken down by ward as part of Council Plan 2011/2012 End of Year report considered on 28 June 2012 and again, at Members request, for consideration of quarter 1 performance monitoring 2012/2013 on 16 August 2012. Presently there were no plans to change the target, as nationally it seemed to be difficult to engage residents on issues and projects within their locality.

A Member asked that the narrative for indicator GH8 (number of green flags) included the sites that had achieved a high score thereby giving them a free second year of green flag status and that other sites should aim to achieve the same high score in the future. This should also be reflected in the narrative of the report. He also asked if taxi's could be allowed to use the Bus Lane in Canal Road in Strood, especially now that CCTV enforcement cameras were in place, as this would reduce the number of cars using residential roads. The Director of Regeneration, Community and Culture responded that taxi's could not currently use the Bus Lane in Canal Road, as it was linked to a planning condition that restricted the number of vehicles using the Bus Lane. This was because a number of residents had objected to this during the planning consultation process. He advised that a local Taxi Association had written to the council asking for taxi's to use the Bus Lane in Canal Road and he had offered to review the situation in six months time. The Director advised that he would provide further information to the committee via a Briefing Note and would also hold a review on the use of the Bus Lane in Canal Road, Strood in early 2013.

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Decision:

The committee agreed to:

- (a) note the second quarter performance against the Key Measures of Success used to monitor progress against the Council Plan 2012/2013;
- (b) request further information on the restriction of vehicles using the Bus Lane in Canal Road, Strood via a Briefing Note and ask the Director of Regeneration, Community and Culture to review the use of the Bus Lane as soon as possible;
- (c) request that officers arrange a meeting with Network Rail and Network South East to discuss the problems of graffiti on railway land.

656 Housing Strategy annual review

Discussion:

The Head of Strategic Housing introduced the report, which detailed the progress made since October 2011 on delivering strategic housing priorities and set the direction for housing in Medway until 2014.

A Member stated that he thought the strategy should also set out the council's position on how it would meet the future housing need of everyone in Medway, including residents currently living in the private sector and paying rents they could not afford. The policy only recognised the current position in the housing market and, although it needed to be realistic, the policy could also set out a vision for the future should the housing economy change. He also advised that the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government had recently stated that pension funds could invest heavily in social housing provision and that this had not been included in the policy. The council had 16,000 families and individuals who aspired to live in council-owned property, probably due to its affordability, and it was wrong to ignore their wishes.

The committee discussed the increased cost of housing over a number of years and the effect this had on young people no longer being able to afford to buy, and rent, their own home. Members also discussed the mixed provision of good and bad landlords and the council's duty to provide decent accommodation for its residents.

Decision:

The committee noted the progress against the aims of the Housing Strategy and referred it to Cabinet for consideration.

657 Tenancy Strategy

Discussion:

The Head of Strategic Housing introduced the report advising that the Localism Act 2011 had set out a duty for council's to publish a Tenancy Strategy by 15 January 2013. The draft strategy reflected legislative requirements and set out the objectives to be taken into consideration by individual Registered Providers of social housing as they made decisions about their own tenancy policies.

The draft policy also set out a Tenancy Framework, which would establish a fixed term for all future tenancies and thereby allow the council to make the best use of its limited housing stock. This was proposed to be a minimum five-year fixed term for most households whereas previously, a tenant could remain in a property indefinitely, no matter how their circumstances changed. There would also be a review of the council's Housing Allocations Policy, which was currently being consulted upon.

Members commented that the report established that consultation had taken place and that feedback had been taken into account but there were limited details of who had been consulted, how many responses were received, what feedback had been given and how had this had influenced the draft strategy. Officers acknowledged that more detail on this could be provided and assured the committee that there had been full consultation with a variety of interested stakeholders on the limited areas it could consult on and had adopted a process similar to the rest of Kent. Further information would be provided for the committee about the consultation and its results via a Briefing Note.

A Member raised concern with paragraph 6.7 of the draft strategy and advised that he would strongly oppose any proposal to restrict eligibility for people to join the register. The committee discussed matters that fell under the review of the Allocations Policy, rather than the draft Tenancy Strategy and were advised that the review of the Allocations Policy would be reported for consideration to the next meeting of the committee.

Decision:

The committee agreed to note the draft Tenancy Strategy and refer it to Cabinet for consideration.

658 Housing Planned Maintenance Programme - progress report

Discussion:

The Capital Programme Manager introduced the report which summarised the progress of the fourth year of the on-going Housing Planned Maintenance Programme. He advised that the programme had originally been commissioned in order that the council met the Decent Homes Standard in 2010 and the council continued to be 100% compliant with that standard year on year. It was a varied programme which included works such as asbestos surveys, electrical

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testing, structural works and replacement kitchens and bathrooms. There was also very good tenant involvement with fortnightly progress meetings held. Tenant satisfaction surveys had shown that 99.75% of tenants were satisfied with the service.

Members queried the figures in Appendix 1, as they did not make clear whether the council was on track to maintain the budgeted average cost it had predicted for each of the type of works. Officers advised that there was a disparity in the figures provided due to the delay between completion of the work and the invoice being received. Members sought assurance that the average cost for each type of work remained on track and that the council received the best possible discount for equipment such as kitchens and bathrooms throughout the course of the annual £5 million programme. Officers undertook to provide further information on this matter.

Decision:

The committee agreed to request that further information is submitted to the next meeting of the committee on the current financial position of the Housing Planned Maintenance Programme 2012/2013 in particular with regard to the average cost for each of the works completed to date.

659 Draft capital and revenue budgets 2013/2014

Discussion:

The Chief Finance Officer introduced the report and advised that the government had made several announcements about future funding since the drafting of the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) that were incorporated in the report. The final budget for 2013/2014 would be very different from that presented in this report, as the forecast budget gap was now significantly greater than the MTFP had predicted and currently stood at £11,950 million. Table 4 in the report summarised the movement from the MTFP deficit of £5.917 million to the £11.950 million now shown and Members were advised of the various changes.

The Chief Finance Officer informed Members that the recent funding announcements were further complicated by a re-distribution of business rates. The outcome of the combination of formula funding grant changes, changes to school funding, the Council Tax freeze and business rates re-distribution would result in the council having, over its current three year programme, a deficit of £11.9 million in 2013/2014, £18 million in 2014/2015 and £23.5 million in 2015/2016, as set out in more detail in Table 5 of the report.

The committee was advised that within its own remit, there had been an additional £1 million proposed within the 2013/2014 budget on road maintenance, following detailed discussion by the committee on this matter but this would now be withdrawn. £250,000 had been set aside for insurance

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claims made against the council during the forthcoming year but this too would be removed as the council had successfully reviewed the vast majority of its claims.

The committee discussed the use of reserves to cover the forthcoming budget deficit and was advised that the council held £17 million in unallocated reserves, which was minimal compared to other similar sized Local Authorities. Members recognised the financial difficulties the council faced in the future and that £1 million additional funding requested by this committee for road maintenance would now be withdrawn. However, the annual cost of £750,000 for the maintenance of Medway Tunnel was viewed as unsustainable and further work should take place to address this.

Decision:

The committee agreed to:

- (a) note the draft capital and revenue budgets for 2013/2014, proposed by Cabinet on 27 November 2012, insofar as they affected this committee;
- (b) forward to Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 7 February 2013 the committee's comments and suggestions with regard to the preparation of the Council's capital and revenue budgets for 2013/2014.

660 Work Programme

Discussion:

The Democratic Services Officer introduced the report and highlighted the items on the Cabinet's Forward Plan within the remit of this committee, the formation of a task group to begin a review on 'street clutter' in the New Year and the proposed programme for prioritising the programme of future in-depth scrutiny reviews in 2013/2014.

The committee nominated some of the Members for the forthcoming task group on 'street clutter' to begin in January 2013.

Decision:

The committee agreed to:

- (a) note the current work programme;
- (b) nominate five Members of the committee to form the short-life task group on the basis of 3:1:1 on street clutter, to commence in January 2013;

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- (c) note the proposed timetable and process for determination of the next round of in depth reviews and to agree all members of the Committee should send ideas for topics within the remit of this Committee to the Chairman and Opposition Spokespersons (with a copy to the Head of Democratic Services) by no later than 28 February 2013 having regard to the criteria previously adopted for selection of topics as set out at Appendix 2;
- (d) note the request for further information to be submitted on the Housing Planned Maintenance Programme, as detailed in a previous agenda item.

Chairman

Date:

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