

**Medway Council**  
**Meeting of Business Support Overview and Scrutiny**  
**Committee**

**Tuesday, 20 September 2011**

**6.33pm to 9.20pm**

**Record of the meeting**

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

**Present:** Councillors Avey, Bowler, Bright, Carr (Chairman), Pat Gulvin (Vice-Chairman), Irvine, Juby, Maple, Osborne, Royle, Tolhurst and Watson

**Substitutes:** Councillor Gilry for Councillor Harriott

**In Attendance:** Matthew Gough, Head of Strategic Housing Services  
Richard Hicks, Assistant Director, Customer First, Leisure, Culture, Democracy and Governance  
Julie Keith, Head of Democratic Services  
Councillor Tom Mason, Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services  
Caroline Salisbury, Democratic Services Officer  
Deborah Upton, Assistant Director, Housing and Corporate Services/Monitoring Officer  
Phil Watts, Finance Manager, Children & Adult Services  
Kevin Woolmer, Finance Manager, Business Support & Regeneration, Community & Culture

**331 Record of meeting**

The record of the meeting held on 4 August 2011 were agreed and signed as correct by the Chairman.

**332 Apologies for absence**

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Harriott.

**333 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances**

There were none.

**334 Declarations of interest**

There were none.

**335 Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services**

**Discussion:**

The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services addressed the committee outlining the main achievements within areas of his portfolio during the past few months:

- registration services – continued to provide a high level of service and had carried out the digitisation of bereavement and registration records. The chapel at the crematorium was going to be enlarged and better car parking to be provided. New cremators were to be installed. The service was well managed and proficiency savings had been made. The budget, at the end of the last financial year, had been under spent
- human resources (HR) – the HR teams had been re-organised and a recent benchmarking exercise had shown that the cost per employee was well below the national average. HR continued to develop its staff who were a motivated workforce in difficult times
- partnership boards – there had been a re-organisation of the Local Strategic Partnership Board and the new board would meet later in the year. However, the Children’s Trust, the Community Safety Partnership, the Health Partnership and the Prosperity & Enterprise Boards continued to meet
- ICT – a list of the many projects and work achieved was circulated to the committee. These included ICT have successfully delivered a number of projects including:
  - HR self-serve project
  - Replacement of Connections, the Council’s intranet site
  - New IT components for 17 schools
  - New e-audio and e-book service for library users
  - ‘Love Clean Streets’ application for Safer Communities

There were a number of projects in progress including:

- network requirements for the Urban Traffic Management Control system
  - technical project management for the Dynamic Bus station.
  - Replacement of the theatre booking system
  - Close working with the PCT and health agencies to deliver services to the Healthy Living Centres
- Big Society – the Portfolio Holder stated his intention to hold meetings with voluntary sector organisations and staff working in the community to discuss ideas to take forward. He also advised that he had several ideas that included holding a volunteer fair and recruiting mentors for young people who lacked support at home and struggled academically and were showing signs of socially disruptive behaviour.

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Members asked the Portfolio Holder a number of questions and made comments, including:

- what affect the number of schools transferring to Academy status would have on the council's HR section, as the Academies could now buy services from other providers that were previously provided by the authority. Members asked for assurance that the council would be marketing its services competitively.

The Portfolio Holder responded that he hoped that the council would employ, in a temporary capacity, a sales person to pro-actively market the services provided by the council

- the idea of a Volunteers Fair, as part of the work for the Big Society. Members were enthusiastic about this idea but requested that it was rolled out as a road-show into local, community areas as they believed this would have a greater effect and would reach further into the communities
- Members requested that the notice given with regard to the closure to some services at Bluebell Hill crematorium was advertised well in advance of the closures
- the provision of alternative options for cremation/burial and that new innovations (eg. willow caskets) and cheaper and more environmentally friendly options are offered as soon as practicable
- could more money be made available to ICT services in the 2012/2013 budget to update older computer programmes and facilities run by the council
- following a question at a Full Council meeting, Members had become aware that council staff had recently moved to using an electronic payslip facility and that staff had encountered problems with these when applying for a mortgage. The Portfolio Holder was asked if further investigation had taken place about this problem

Councillor Mason responded that he would look into this further and advise the committee when that work had been completed.

- training courses should remain available for staff during this economically difficult time and staff should not be concerned at being away from the office, as training was even more important when sections were being run at minimum staffing levels.

### **Decision:**

The Committee thanked Councillor Mason for attending the meeting and the information and answers he had provided.

**336 Topics for in-depth scrutiny reviews - priorities and timetable**

**Discussion:**

The Head of Democratic Services introduced the report advising that each Overview and Scrutiny Committee had put forward ideas of topics for in-depth review. The Overview and Scrutiny Chairmen and opposition spokespersons had met to discuss these further and notes of that meeting could be seen in paragraph 4 of the report. There had been a consensus on three topics to be reviewed over the next 18 months but this committee was now being asked to take a view on a fourth topic - being either town centre de-cluttering or European funding.

The Chairman of the Regeneration, Community and Culture Overview and Scrutiny Committee advised that he had spoken to the Director, who had indicated that he had no further advice or preference towards either of these topics. The Chairman advised that he would recommend that the review should be the de-cluttering of town centres and main roads in Medway.

Members agreed that the un-resolved topic should be within the remit of the Regeneration, Community and Culture Overview and Scrutiny Committee but that it should be referred back for final decision to that committee.

**Decision:**

- a) The committee agreed that the following reviews should be the in-depth work programme for the next 18 months in the following order:
  - i) Effective challenge to address underperformance in Medway Schools
  - ii) Supported Accommodation – with an extended scope to include other support for those in supported accommodation, and
  - iv) Mental Health.
- b) The third review for the Regeneration, Community and Culture Overview and Scrutiny Committee should be referred back to that committee for final decision for either: de-cluttering of town centres and main roads in Medway or European funding.
- c) The committee agreed that the comments and suggestions of Members at the informal meeting on 5 September 2011 should be actioned, as set out in paragraph 4.3 of the report.

**337 Medium Term Financial Plan 2012 - 2015**

**Discussion:**

The Finance Managers introduced the report advising that it provided the framework for the detailed preparation of the budget for 2012/2013. The committee was informed that table four of the report summarised the position for the following three years. It showed that there was anticipated to be a

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reduction of £3.5 million in resources available to the council. Also, the requirements of the council would increase by £6 million and therefore there was currently a funding gap of £9.5 million to be addressed in the 2012/2013 budget setting process.

The committee asked questions and made comments about the plan, including:

- why there was no consideration in the plan for the proposed change to the benefit system?

Officers responded that there remained too much uncertainty about the changes, so no meaningful assumptions could be made and included in the plan

- the reference to the time-limited ward improvement fund (fourth bullet point on page 40 of the agenda), did that refer to year end 2011/2012 or 2012/2013? Also, if this fund was to be withdrawn, that Members were notified as soon as possible

Officers advised that it referred to the end of the financial year 2011/2012

- the addition of 10% inflationary pressures to some contracts
- where did the figures for YPLA come from in Table 1, as schools would not be able to supply accurate figures at this point in the year? Also, how were the pupil premium figures determined?

Officers responded that the figures in Table 1 were factual and what the council actually received. £17.7 million was correct, at this point in time, and each term were reviewed and refined. Members were reminded that the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) would not impact on the General Fund

Officers agreed to circulate the detailed calculations of the pupil premium figures to the committee

- Members questioned the new homes bonus figures

Officers explained that this had a cumulative effect over a 6 year period which was why the figures doubled year on year

- with reference to paragraph 6.2 (page 42) of the report, Members asked why the separate Better for Less Category management project was anticipated to deliver £5 - £10 million of savings? What information sat behind this prediction?

The Assistant Director, Housing and Corporate Services, responded that this was anticipated through better procurement and commissioning of services, for example facilities management of the many properties owned

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by the council being run by one contractor rather than by many. There were a number of areas that could be investigated but it was not a “quick fix” option

The committee requested that a report was submitted for consideration with early views from officers on the details of the options to be looked into and further information about out-sourcing of services

- with reference to paragraph 3.4 (page 33) of the report, the committee asked where the assumption of a nil pay increase for council staff had come from? Members were aware of the discussions and consultation about a multi-year freeze on pay increments but believed that there should be a small budget for a negotiated outcome

The Assistant Director, Housing and Corporate Services, advised that there would be a nil pay rise offer to staff. Council staff were aware of the authority’s financial position and expected this position, so officers were not expecting problems with this

- paragraph 4.6 (page 35) of the report, with reference to the government not increasing Council Tax Freeze Grant over its four year time frame, despite more houses being built in Medway during that period. Members asked if representations had been made to government about the unfairness of this position, which would cause big problems in the future

Officers advised that they were unaware of any representations made to central government by the council on this matter

- Members asked why there was no reference to the Member’s Priority Fund within the plan?

Officers advised that the fund remained in the capital programme which was not covered by this plan

- paragraph 5.2 (page 38) of the report, third bullet point, budget pressures of £0.2 million could be offset by increased fees resulting from tariff increases. Members asked if officers could look at the level of recovery rates of PCN’s (Parking Charge Notices) and benchmark this against comparison authorities to see if it was possible to recover the monies by this route, rather than to increase tariffs.

### **Decision:**

The committee agreed to:

- (a) note the Medium Term Financial Plan 2012 – 2015;
- (b) request officers to provide a Briefing Note clarifying the details behind the pupil premium figures;

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- (c) request the Chief Finance Officer or Deputy Leader of the Council to write to the government about the four year Council Tax grant freeze and low Council Tax base.

### **338 Housing Strategy 2011 - 2014**

#### **Discussion:**

The Head of Strategic Housing Services gave a presentation to the committee on the Housing Strategy 2011-2014.

The committee asked officers to:

- include additional information to the final paragraph of the Tenants Strategy section (page 68 of the agenda) about the Government's Armed Forces Covenant to explain why the armed forces were so important in Medway
- drive the strategy forward with regard to nearly 20% of private sector housing in Medway failing the Decent Home Standard
- include a reference in the strategy to the committee's future in-depth review of supported accommodation (agenda item 6 on this agenda)
- include, for the public, a signpost to the portfolio of other documents that sit alongside this strategy, for ease of access
- consider the possibility of 'naming and shaming' landlords providing below standard accommodation
- re-visit the map and pie chart on page 60 of the agenda to ensure that they are easily readable for the public.

Members also commented on: current sheltered accommodation for older people being converted to provide bed-sit accommodation for young people; people placed in housing by the Home Office, eg. refugees and others being included in the statistics and provisions of the strategy in the future; the Mortgage Rescue Scheme; an article in Medway Matters giving debt advice and information for how and where to access services; the Rural Housing Survey used to inform schemes currently coming forward and also to support bids to the HCA for schemes delivered in those areas; the powers available to the council to bring empty properties back into use; consideration of the Allocations Policy once the Localism Bill legislation had been produced.

#### **Decision:**

The committee agreed to:

- (a) note and endorse the Housing Strategy 2011 – 2014;

- (b) request that officers include an article in the Medway Matters newsletter, set out as a story and giving guidance and information on debt advice.

### **339 Introduction of the Gold Service Tenants Incentive Scheme**

**Discussion:**

The committee welcomed the introduction of this incentive scheme and entirely supported it, as long as residents would be given every assistance from officers to set up direct debits and/or open a bank account and also to ensure that Post Office accounts allowed direct debit facilities.

Members discussed the options for qualification to the scheme and who should benefit from the provision of a handyman service.

**Decision:**

The committee agreed:

- (a) to endorse the benefits to be provided under this scheme;
- (b) to request that the criteria for the scheme should be as set out in paragraph 3.2 (page 99) of the report and that the handyman service should be available to all tenants and not just the elderly and vulnerable, as suggested by the Housing Services Scrutiny Panel.

### **340 Succession Policy**

**Discussion:**

The Assistant Director, Housing and Corporate Services, advised that the policy set out existing practice but formalised the approach currently taken by officers and made it clearer for tenants.

Members asked that when more than one person succeeded to a tenancy (page 122 of the agenda) and family members could not reach an agreement between themselves, that there was more information in the policy about how Housing Services would select a successor to the tenancy.

**Decision:**

The committee agreed to:

- (a) note the policy as at Appendix A and supported its wide publication to residents;
- (b) request that officers expand the detail in section "Can more than one person succeed to a tenancy?"



**341 Work Programme**

**Discussion:**

The Democratic Services Officer introduced the report, advising the committee of two items added to the Cabinet's Forward Plan within the remit of the committee. However, the Cabinet would consider these on 4 October 2011 and therefore the committee did not have time to consider these before that Cabinet meeting.

**Decision:**

The committee agreed to:

- (a) note its current work programme and the terms of reference at appendices 1 and 4;
- (b) note the work undertaken by all O&S committees;
- (c) request future reports on the following:
  - (i) powers available to the council to bring empty properties back into use
  - (ii) Better for Less project (as discussed in agenda item 7 Medium Term Financial Plan 2012 – 2015 earlier in the agenda) - why this project is anticipated to deliver £5 - £10 million of savings and what information sits behind this prediction? The report should also include early views from officers on the details of the options to be looked into and further information about out-sourcing of services.

**Chairman**

**Date:**

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