

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL - 2014/2015

ANNUAL REPORT

I was elected in May last year and almost immediately found myself appointed to the Cabinet with responsibility for Community and Leisure Services. So not only was I a new boy but I also had major portfolio responsibilities. Luckily I had one of the best teams of Officers to support me.

I think it is best to describe this year as challenging for Maidstone Borough Council (MBC). The grant from Central Government is reducing year on year and we have to find innovative ways to make up the shortfall in order to maintain our front line services. As a result we have been investing capital funds that have accrued over time into both cost saving measures and revenue generation schemes. For example, two properties have been purchased, Magnolia House and Aylesbury House and converted into lodgings to provide temporary accommodation at a much lower cost than using private landlords for the increasing number of homeless people seeking accommodation in Maidstone. Likewise the installation of solar panels at our depot in Park Wood is generating surplus power which is then being sold back to the National Grid.

MBC has also embarked on a Commercialisation Strategy to boost income. The shared Waste Collection Service has been expanded to include commercial waste as well and we already have over 200 customers for this service. New investments in commercial premises now bring in much more rental income than can be obtained from having funds on deposit with the banks. We also intend to make better use of our assets and will be developing new amenities and leisure facilities at Mote Park which will generate income to go towards the upkeep of this fine public space. In my view Mote Park is one of MBC's jewels' in the crown. It has green flag status and with over 40% of its visitors coming from outside the Borough it has been voted one of the most popular parks in the country. To ensure this park retains this high standard we must take care that funds generated from activities in the park are hypothecated to its upkeep and development.

This year has seen a new Strategic Plan put in place for 2015 to 2020. This sets out the priorities for the Council which in summary are to

“Keep Maidstone Borough an Attractive Place for All” and to “Secure a Successful Economy for Maidstone Borough”. This in turn means: (a) Providing a Clean and Safe Borough, (b) Encouraging Good Health and Wellbeing, (c) Respecting the Character of the Borough, (d) Ensuring there are good Leisure and Cultural Attractions, (e) Enhancing the appeal of the Town Centre, (f) Improving the Transport Infrastructure, (g) Promoting employment opportunities and skills and (h) Planning for sufficient homes. This is a challenging list of objectives and results from an extensive consultation carried out by the Cabinet and Officers through a series of road shows. These activities have been prioritised in the Council’s budget allocation for next year.

As I have said above this has been a challenging year and two issues in particular stand out. These are the emerging Local Plan and the Parish Charter. Taking the Local Plan first we have had extensive discussions and debates culminating in around 35 hours of formal discussions at the Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet. We started off with a proposed 905 dwellings for Staplehurst to which a further 220 dwellings had been added from the additional call for sites, making a total of 1125. I argued very strongly that given the current problems with infrastructure Staplehurst could not take such a high volume and after a lot of debate this was reduced to 650 by the Cabinet.

The housing need for the period has been independently assessed to be 18,600 homes. This has generated a lot of debate and criticism. And after taking into account the enormous public response and much deliberation by Councillors of all the objections raised, the estimate now stands and just under 16,000. It is worth noting that of this figure over 4000 homes have already been built or have planning permission. Some 3400 homes are in locations that are not expected to be addressed until towards the end of the Plan and the figure includes nearly 900 unidentified “windfall” sites that are anticipated will arise in the last 10 years of the Plan. As yet undeveloped sites are therefore expected to yield some 7700 homes between now and 2031; that is a much lower figure to be realised than many expected.

There are still questions being asked regarding the calculation of the Objectively Assessed Need (OAN) and these are being reviewed. However, it is essential that we now move on with the Local Plan in order to prevent developers from taking advantage of MBC’s situation.

Turning to the Parish Charter. The current Parish Charter was in urgent need of a refresh. I think people will understand that for a variety of reasons relations between MBC and the Parishes in the Borough was at a low ebb. And one of my tasks as the Cabinet Member for Community and Leisure Services was to try to rectify this situation; the Parish Charter was the ideal vehicle to achieve this. The new document is more detailed and sets out a clear framework for the relationship between the parishes and MBC. It aims to be collaborative rather than adversarial. One area that is covered in considerable detail is planning and the role and treatment of Parishes' Neighbourhood Plans. This is an area that has caused a lot of consternation and one of the aims of the new charter will be to change mind-sets.

The proposed new Parish Charter was presented back in March to the Parish Conference organised by KALC and MBC. I have also attended a number of Parish Council's to discuss the Charter and answer questions. I do believe that considerable progress has made and as a Parish Councillor I am aware of the issues and concerns raised. I remain committed to this collaborative approach.

Other major issues include reviewing the Flood Response Plan in conjunction with the Kent Resilience Forum. MBC has been managing the flood mitigation scheme introduced by the Government. This has been widely taken up by those residents whose homes have been so distressingly affected by the flooding last year. Finally, plans are in place to establish an Enterprise Hub in the Gateway premises for use by start-up businesses to bring together expertise and services that will greatly increase their chance of success. It is expected that this approach will make a considerable contribution to increasing employment and developing our local economy.

The above provides a snapshot of some of the key activities that have been undertaken. I do believe MBC has made a lot of progress during what has been a very challenging year, especially in moving towards being a more commercially aware and responsive organisation.

MBC will shortly be moving from a cabinet based system to one based on committees. I think it is fair to say that it is too early to say how this will work out in practice. Members felt that there would be

greater opportunities for all members to be involved and it is arguably more transparent and consensual. However, the cabinet system has had a long record of success in central government and there is a danger that decision-making could be slower; as I actually said at a meeting of the Full Council: a camel is a horse designed by a committee. Nonetheless a lot of effort has gone into drafting a new constitution and we must now put all our efforts into making it work whatever our reservations. I of course will be without a job!! But one never knows.

Councillor John Perry

Ward Member for Staplehurst

Currently Cabinet Member for Community and Leisure Services

Member of Staplehurst Parish Council