
SITTINGBOURNE AREA COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Meeting held in The Auditorium, Avenue Theatre, Central House, Central Avenue, Sittingbourne ME10 4NU on Thursday, 26 June 2025 from 7.00 pm - 8.40 pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Shelley Cheesman, Tim Gibson, Kieran Mishchuk, Karen Watson, Tony Winckless and Ashley Wise (Chair).

OFFICERS PRESENT: Janet Dart and Charlotte Hudson.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor Richard Palmer.

Kent County Councillor Chris Palmer, Divisional Member for Sittingbourne North.

APOLOGIES: Councillors Derek Carnell, Simon Clark, Mark Last, Charlie Miller and Carrie Pollard.

97 **EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURE**

The Chair read out the emergency evacuation procedure.

98 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillors Tony Winckless and Kieren Mishchuk declared a non-pecuniary interest as Members of the Milton Regis High Street Society.

Councillor Tony Winckless declared a non-pecuniary interest as a Trustee of Milton Regis Country Park and Milton Court Hall.

99 **MINUTES**

The Minutes of the Meetings held on 27 February 2025 (Minute Nos 687 – 687) and 14 May 2025 (Minute Nos 30 – 31) were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chair as correct records.

100 **CUSTOMER ACCESS STRATEGY**

The Head of Housing & Community Services, Charlotte Hudson, gave a presentation on the customer Access Strategy.

She stated that Swale Borough Council's (SBC) current Customer Access Strategy was written in 2013, which ensured easy, clear and convenient access to Swale's services for all. While the overarching aim still existed, the way this was achieved needed to be revisited. In the last decade there had been a shift in local demographics, political control, technological developments and social norms post Covid-19, Brexit and soon to be Devolution.

The Head of Housing & Community Services went through the various channels available to customers currently and the trend in customer contact over the last few years. She also explained the stages of reviewing the Customer Access Strategy

before asking for feedback from everyone in attendance at the Sittingbourne Area Committee meeting.

The following comments were raised:

- People needed to feel confident they can call SBC easily if they didn't have online access;
- could the telephone system be streamlined? Some residents had reported it was difficult to navigate due to many options;
- some residents had reported problems navigating the SBC website;
- could a step-by-step video be created for people who didn't have skills to use self-service?; and
- could the Communications Team put something together to promote what methods could be used to contact SBC?

101 REVIEW OF AREA COMMITTEES

The Chair, Councillor Ashley Wise, said that earlier this year, Council agreed that a review of Area Committees should take place and he would like to hear everyone's thoughts on how effective the meetings were.

Councillor Wise gave a short presentation on the background and purpose of Area Committees.

A discussion took place and the following comments were raised:

- More public attendance was needed, councillors could help to promote the meetings;
- encourage external organisations to come and speak about their work/services;
- good work has come out of Area Committees;
- they needed to be accessible to everyone;
- include items on the agenda that residents would be interested in;
- people did not know what they could get from them;
- the name 'Area Committees' could put people off attending;
- consider moving away from only SBC councillors being able to vote;
- maybe change the structure of the meetings and the name to make them more friendly;
- they could be themed;
- networking could take place at the beginning of the meetings;
- consider what challenges there were for residents in their daily lives and make those issues the focus for meetings;
- suggest naming them the 'People's Forum', adopt an appropriate logo and publicise them more;
- invite Kent County Council (KCC) Cabinet Members to come along to talk about their areas of responsibility;
- publicise a 'You said, we did' after the meetings;
- it was important that they were non-political and respectful;
- use online polls for some decisions; and

- promote the online attendance.

The Chair thanked everyone for their input and said there would be a survey going out over the summer period on Area Committees and encouraged everyone to respond to it.

102 LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION UPDATE

Members noted the update report.

103 LOCAL BUS FORUM MINUTES FOR NOTING

Members noted the Swale Local Bus Forum Minutes.

Councillor Tony Winckless advised that he had joined an electric bus run trip to Iwade and back to experience electric buses. He said that they were accessible, quiet, smooth running and fully air-conditioned but were expensive and needed investment.

104 MATTERS ARISING FROM PREVIOUS MEETINGS

Members noted the progress on actions.

105 PUBLIC FORUM

Jenny Bowles, Milton Regis Society asked the following questions:

When were the toilets going to be re-opened? One shopkeeper is often being asked by the public for permission to use his toilet although they are not a customer. *Response provided - Public conveniences were being discussed by Members at the Environmental Services and Climate Change Committee on the evening of Thursday 10 July 2025. After the meeting it was hoped that the future of such facilities would be determined.*

The High Street was plagued with waste bins permanently left out. Having spoken to residents, they thought it was their right to do so. The bins spilled over onto the pavement and in the summer they smelled foul. This had only occurred in recent years. Would it be possible for them to be collected from the back of the property (where possible e.g. the Post Office) which was probably what happened in the past? The Milton Regis Society did understand that there was a difference between Council owned bins and contract bins. *Response provided - The question suggested that these bins are commercial contract bins that have been provided privately. A friendly word from a concerned party was often enough to resolve the issue. However, if the bins were left out all week and were causing issues such as blocking pavements/ odours/ litter etc then the council had powers to act. Environmental issues may be reported to the council online www.swale.gov.uk or via the call centre 01795 417850. SBC Councillors for the area agreed to do a ward walkabout to understand where the problems were and to identify possible solutions.*

In recent months, the Milton Regis Society had been outraged by the over-sized shop signs and the lurid colours that some shop keepers had used to paint their shop-fronts. Some blatantly flout the Conservation Area rules but some were unaware. Would it be possible to have a standardised set of rules, "dos and don'ts", to be given to all on a yearly basis? This would save a lot of work for the Council and a lot of anxiety in general. *Response provided – The Council had an adopted SPG (Supplementary Planning Guidance) on shopfronts, any new shopfronts within a conservation area should have relevant planning permissions in place.* <https://swale.gov.uk/your-council/publications/planning-and-planning-policy/the-design-of-shopfront-signs-and-advertisements> . Submit an online form for reporting a planning breach if concerned about non-compliance. Further details could be found here: <https://swale.gov.uk/planning-and-regeneration/planning-breaches-and-enforcement/report-a-breach-of-planning-consent>. It was agreed to explore providing a "dos and don'ts" list with the Heritage Officer.

Roger Harris asked if the following question could be raised in his absence:

Some time ago the twinning boards were removed from the Town Welcome Signs. Why were the signs removed and did the Council intend to replace them in the very near future. *Response provided - In 2011 Sittingbourne and Milton Twinning Association decided to call an end to the town's association with the Belgium city of Ypres after more than 45 years of ties between the two communities. However, there was still a relationship and a civic commitment as part of the Civic Journey of Remembrance. The signs were replaced under a previous administration's 'Delivering for You' scheme which aimed at basic tidying up of the infrastructure across the Borough – signs, benches, bins. At the time Cabinet discussed and agreed designs and opted to move away from 'civic' style signs for preference over more modern styles. It was at that point that the twinning signs were removed. The signs and posts had been designed in a way that subsequent panels could be added. If it was found that it was permissible to have a sign reflecting an informal relationship with Ypres and the resident was to suggest to Councillors that they want them replaced, Councillors from the committee could refer it to Policy and Resources to consider earmarking funds for the signs.*

Mr Jackie Davidson gave updates on the following issues:

- The re-establishment of a local public transport group;
- the recent increase in price of bus tickets were not being passed onto bus operators;
- the need for a bus depot in Swale; and
- the lack of a railway service between Sheerness and Dover.

The Chair said that the Sittingbourne Area Committee representatives on the Swale Local Bus Forum would take Mr Davidson's comments to the next meeting. He also confirmed that representatives from Chalkwell, Stagecoach and Southeastern Railway would be attending the September Sittingbourne Area Committee meeting.

Councillor Tony Winckless gave an update on the recent traveller situation in the Milton area and asked if the SBC strategy to deal with these matters more quickly. The Head of Housing & Community Services advised that the process was already quite slick and included taking cases to the Magistrate's Court and carrying out welfare checks. She said that a review was being carried out to see what lessons could be learned. Members asked if there could be a Member briefing on what SBC's powers and duties were relating to traveller encampments.

Councillor Karen Watson raised the issue of empty shops on Sittingbourne High Street. It was agreed that the Chair of the Economy and Property Committee be asked if an update could be provided on what action was being taken to encourage businesses to use the empty shops on Sittingbourne High Street.

Councillor Tim Gibson advised that he had written to KCC Highways to ask what could be done about the sequencing of traffic lights on the Bell Road, Crown Quay Lane junction. The build-up of traffic was causing people to undertake dangerous U-turns and vehicle idling.

Councillor Gibson spoke about the recent repeated fly-tipping on Bell Road. So far it had been difficult to get information about who was responsible for the purposes of prosecution.

Councillor Shelley Cheeseman said that drivers were frequently waiting in the yellow box junction on Bell Road, Sittingbourne, and this was contributing to the chaos at that junction. It was agreed to request an update from the Swale Joint Transportation Board on this matter.

In Councillor Mark Last's absence, the Chair advised that Lakeview Village Hall needed a new Board of Trustees and would welcome anyone who was interested to come forward.

Resolved:

- 1) That officers are asked if there could be a Member briefing on what SBC's powers and duties were relating to traveller encampments.**
- 2) That the Chair of the Economy and Property Committee be asked if an update could be provided on what action was being taken to encourage businesses to use the empty shops on Sittingbourne High Street.**
- 3) That the Chair of the Swale Joint Transportation Board be asked to provide an update on what was being done to address the issue of drivers frequently waiting in the yellow box junction on Bell Road, Sittingbourne.**

107 MATTERS REFERRED TO SERVICE COMMITTEE CHAIRS FOR CONSIDERATION

The following matters raised under other items at this meeting be referred to the relevant committee Chairs for consideration:

- That the Chair of the Economy and Property Committee be asked if an update could be provided on what action was being taken to encourage businesses to use the empty shops on Sittingbourne High Street.
- That the Chair of the Swale Joint Transportation Board be asked to provide an update on what was being done to address the issue of drivers frequently waiting in the yellow box junction on Bell Road, Sittingbourne.

Chair

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All Minutes are draft until agreed at the next meeting of the Committee/Panel