

## Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 11 July 2023 at 7.00 pm

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**Present:** Councillors Martin Kerin (Chair), Jack Duffin (Vice-Chair), Alex Anderson, Valerie Morris-Cook, Lynn Worrall and James Thandi (Substitute) (substitute for Georgette Polley)

**Apologies:** Councillor Georgette Polley

**In attendance:** Steven Mair, Chief Financial Officer  
Jonathan Wilson, Assistant Director - Finance  
Jenny Shade, Senior Democratic Services Officer

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Before the start of the Meeting, all present were advised that the meeting was being recorded, with the audio recording to be made available on the Council's website.

### **1. Minutes**

The Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee approved the minutes of the meetings held on the 2 February 2023 and the 7 March 2023.

### **2. Items of Urgent Business**

There were no urgent items of business.

### **3. Declaration of Interests**

No interests were declared.

### **4. Terms of Reference**

The Committee's terms of reference were noted.

### **5. Provisional 2022-23 Financial Outturn Report - to follow**

The purpose of the report set out the provisional outturn position for the financial year 2022/23, prior to the formal closure of accounts. Further details of this executive summary can be found on-line

[\(Public Pack\)Item 6 - Provisional Financial Outturn 2023-23 Report Agenda Supplement for Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 11/07/2023 19:00 \(thurrock.gov.uk\)](#)

Members were asked to note that recommendation 1.4 should read "note" not endorse.

The following points were highlighted:

- In terms of investment sales, clear timeline taken to be shared with the investment panel, two stages one to be completed this Friday to assess which bids were coming forward with the second phase starting in August through to November with the aim to sell the solar investments by November.
- In terms of wider investments, all significant investments were being prioritised by size with the aim to bring in the sale of those assets inside this financial year.
- Some investments had a defined process and timescales. Advisors going out to market on other renewable assets to identify the options available. Expecting positive returns from the broader investment portfolio (excluding the three investments with specific concerns) which was still considered robust and should attract market value. Due to the sensitivity of some of these investments, updates would be provided to members. (see action point 1)
- Members were provided with an update on PWLB debt, wherever that debt had come to maturity it was being replaced with a one-year loan. In parallel with that the treasury strategy had been reset. There was no commitment for long term PWLB debt, and it was expected to sell assets to fund that borrowing. The gap on investments would be further reduced by property sales, any positive outcomes from legal action and divestments of investments.
- Decisions would then need to be made on how to hold the remaining debt with an assessment already in progress
- Member commented that it would be helpful if excel table headers continued onto all pages.
- Members recognised the confidentiality around the outcomes of legal action being undertaken but hopefully would see some of that help the financial position given what the council had gone through.
- Noted from previous scrutiny committee report on Violence Against Women there was nearly half a million underspend and queried if this was available to be carried forward. (see action point 3)
- Questioned what action was being taken to get government money, £0.25m was promised for the Just Stop Oil demonstrations. (see action point 4)
- Noted the overspend in Planning due to the reduced number of applications and in the context of the cost of additional consultants to support the development management team.
- Good to see the good performance against waste disposable contracts but noted the levels of recycling were not where they should be. (see action point 5)
- Noted the costs of the intervention and commissioner costs and how unbalanced this would look through the eyes of a resident.
- Questioned the process of department budgets and how these were monitored.
- In regard to the investment portfolio, questioned whether there was a goal expectation by the end of the financial year to which members were referred to the timescales within the report. Was very optimistic that the

majority of the value in that portfolio would be resolved by the sale of the higher value priority assets.

- Member referred to the provisional outturn budget and questioned when the financial position of the last two years would be known. Further work on the financial accounting was underway with a technical expert working with auditors and the finance team to resolve the technical issues.
- Members needed a better handle on the understanding of the finances within reports.
- There was concern that due to the huge amount of work being undertaken on budgets and information within the reports that something could easily get missed.
- Member requested a “visual” report to identify what exactly was taking place to be brought to committee so that members can track what was being sold and when. (see action point 7)
- Noted that the Grays Underpass and Stanford Le Hope interchange had been temporarily removed from the programme pending decisions.
- Member suggested for in the future, a section in reports that stated even if those two big projects were still on the programme, what position the council would be in. This could change the outlook and provide openness and transparency.
- Members requested an update on the reserves strategy to be provided to the committee. (see action point 8)
- Question on the analysis of the risk register as no comments had been made in the report with regard to changes of such risks.
- Commented that Government needed to find a different funding approach for local councils that made more sense, as there was a need to deliver services that residents deserved. (see action point 9)
- Member noted and raised concern on the slippage had occurred on the HRA Fire Safety project. (see action point 10)
- Rights to Buy Receipts were discussed for properties that had already been built and occupied. (see action point 11)
- Referred to the Government Town Funds Boards for Grays and Tilbury and were advised the projects continue with funding still available. Care was being taken so that the council would not be liable for any overspends.

## **ACTIONS**

1. Jonathan Wilson to provide future updates on the sale of assets.
2. Officers noted that report headers should be used.
3. Jonathan Wilson to take the Violence Against Women funding point away and respond to councillors outside the meeting.
4. Jonathan Wilson to update members on the government funding for the Just Stop Oil demonstrations.
5. Jonathan Wilson would pass comments made back on planning, consultations, and waste onto colleagues.
6. Jonathan Wilson to look at change of report format for future budget reporting reports.

7. Jonathan Wilson to inform democratic services on a date to which this report can be presented.
8. A report on reserves strategy would be presented to this committee.
9. Jonathan Wilson to liaise with colleagues on Exit and Hold Costs.
10. Jonathan Wilson to report back to members on the slippage on the HRA Fire Safety project.
11. Jonathan Wilson to follow up on the right to buy receipts and the applications of this projects and the years.

## **RESOLVED**

**Approval was sought for the following in relation to the provisional 2022/23 outturn position:**

1. **That the Committee commented on the 2022/23 forecast funding gap of £434.595m and note this is balanced by the exceptional financial support from central government.**
2. **That the Committee noted that the position continues to be subject to change particularly due to the ongoing assessment of the investment portfolio and pending completion of the audit of the financial accounts from 2020/21 onwards, therefore remains provisional.**
3. **That the Committee noted that the 2023/24 budget remains under review to consider the impact of the 2022/23 outturn position and note the potential for further budget virements. This will form part of the budget monitoring in 2023/24.**
4. **That the Committee noted the use of reserves as set out in Appendix 3, subject to the finalisation of the audit process relating to financial years 2020/21 and 2021/22 and note balances are subject to change.**
5. **That the Committee noted the use of capital receipts in 2022/23 as set out in Table 5 to partly mitigate the request for exceptional financial support from government.**
6. **This recommendation was discussed in the exempt session.**
7. **That the Committee noted that further consultation with external audit will be required to finalise the technical accounting treatments relating to the investment valuations and the associated Minimum Revenue Provision transactions.**
8. **That the Committee note the position set out in respect of the capital programme and the reported reprofiling as set out in section 4 of the report.**

**9. That the Committee note the positions on the Dedicated Schools Grant and the Public Health Grant as set out in section 6.**

**6. Fees and Charges Review 2023/24**

The report identified as the Council faced unprecedented financial challenges it would be reviewing and revising all of its financial plans. One element of this was income from Fees and Charges. The report presented addressed that by:

1. Designing and proposing the adoption of a new Fees and Charges policy.
2. Undertaking stage 1 of a three-part review of Fees and Charges.
3. Arising from that recommending several increases in charges/new charges, effective from 1 October, to potentially generate £114k increase in income in a full year.
4. Noting that subsequent stages will take this work further.

The following points were highlighted:

- Review car parking charges every 2/3 years, making this more efficient. (see action point 12)
- Some residents want to pay for a car parking space but being advised by the service that consultations cannot be funded. Members were advised that where the income more than offset the cost of the survey this should be possible. (see action point 13)
- It was agreed this should be an option for residents to decide upon to either add or remove parking permits.
- It was confirmed that it would be £15 for the 1<sup>st</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> parking permit pending cabinet approval.
- Revenue charged for parking permits had been made on assumptions based on the current levels of activity being maintained. Therefore no negative impact from a price increase and no further enhancements, the reality of that would be seen in six months' time and used to inform future reviews.
- Questioned whether an impact assessment had been undertaken on charges in regard to Thameside, the chair requested an urgent note be prepared with an update on the position of the theatre and what actions need to be taken to allow the theatre to operate. (see action point 14)
- Questioned why Thameside were unable to make bookings further than three months ahead, this included the booking of the pantomime. (see action point 15)
- Member noted the increased costs to Thameside would deprive non-profit groups and schools from being able to afford to use the Thameside.
- Raised concerns on why Thameside was locked during the day and why the list was still not working.
- It had been noted that Grangewaters had received the second highest increase this year, although not costing anything to the council. It was requested that members be more informed of what the full cost of running those services would be to residents.

- Members were referred to Appendix 1 of the report, Fees and Charges Policy, that highlighted the framework for setting the fees and charges across Thurrock and were informed that this process could take two to three years to complete.
- Discussed took place around the CPI and noted when comparisons between the actual price increases that had been put forward for each area, were as an average for each area less than the CPI except one exception which was environment enforcement which was a specific charge for abandoned vehicles.
- It was noted that increases in enforcement would drive the right behaviour.
- Member stated this was the wrong time for service charge increases.
- Members noted there would be an impact on services and individuals but fundamentally had to make Thurrock financial sustainable to ensure those services could continue for residents in the future.

## **ACTIONS**

12. Steven Mair to clarify with colleagues in regard to review car parking charges every 2/3 to possibly making this more cost effective.
13. Steven Mair to clarify with colleagues in regard to the funding available for car parking space consultations.
14. Steven Mair to clarify with colleagues on the Thameside concerns raised above.
15. Steven Mair to provide a note to members on the current position of Thameside.

## **RESOLVED**

- 1. That Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee, noted for Cabinet, the proposed Fees and Charges policy, Appendix 1, in particular agreeing the commitment to full cost recovery and annual CPI inflation increases as the default.**
- 2. That Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the proposed Fees and Charges increases for the material areas, Appendix 2.**
- 3. That Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the proposed new Charges in section 8 of this report.**
- 4. That Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the requirement for a further detailed review & analysis of remaining Fees and Charges by Quarter 4 2023/24.**

## **7. Work Programme**

Members noted the work programme and made the following points:

Remove the Portfolio Holder Annual Report: Central Services from the 7 December 2023 committee.

Remove the Portfolio Holder Annual Report: Culture and Communities from the 1 February 2024 committee.

To add a report on the consultation undertaken on Thameside Theatre, date to be confirmed.

A new format of how reports would be prepared was noted.

The recording of the meeting can be found from the following link:

[Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Tuesday 11 July 2023, 7:00pm - Thurrock Council committee meeting webcasts \(public-i.tv\)](#)

*At 8.49pm, the meeting went into exempt session to discuss recommendation 1.6 of the Provisional Financial Outturn 2022/23 Report.*

**The meeting finished at 9.10 pm**

Approved as a true and correct record

**CHAIR**

**DATE**

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact  
Democratic Services at [Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk](mailto:Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk)**