

**MINUTES of the meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee
held on 12 September 2013 at 7.00pm**

Present: Councillors Richard Speight (Chair), Barry Johnson, Wendy Curtis, Yash Gupta and Terry Hipsey

Apologies: Councillor Charlie Key

In attendance: S. Clark– Head of Finance
R. Parkin – Head of Housing
R. Harris – Director of Adults, Health and Commissioning
J. Hinchliffe – Head of HR OD & Customer Strategy
K. Adedeji- Head of Housing, Investment and Development
G. Gladwin – Business Services Manager
S. Welton – Strategy and Performance Officer
K. Wheeler – Head of Strategy
M. Essex – Head of Regeneration
S. Cox – Assistant Chief Executive
M. Boulter – Principal Democratic Services Officer
S. Young – Senior Democratic Services Officer

8. MINUTES

The minutes of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 25 June 2013 were approved as a correct record.

9. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

a) Interests

No interests were declared.

b) Whipping

No interests were declared.

The Committee agreed to defer the report '16-24 year olds employed by Thurrock Council' as Councillor Key was absent.

10. CORPORATE SCORECARD PERFORMANCE REPORT

A Member of the Committee asked what the primary purpose of these regular reports was and it was responded that the reports allowed Members to satisfy themselves that the Council was performing well and to make recommendations or comment if they felt particular performance could be

improved. Officer added that the views of residents were taken into account through various surveys to inform the performance of services such as housing and adult social care. In Adult Social Care over fifty percent of indicators were informed by surveys with carers and users.

The Committee acknowledged that details on the capital programme were not ready in time for the report but could be provided outside the meeting.

Members raised concern over the state of public parks. Officers clarified that no funding had changed in relation to parks and that it may be a case that rounds or resources could be revised to ensure coverage of certain areas and specific times of the week.

Housing confirmed that the backlog in housing repairs had been removed.

RESOLVED: That:

- i) The committee acknowledge and commend services where there is good delivery against priorities.**
- ii) The Committee notes the performance in areas of concern.**
- iii) The Committee recommend the areas In Focus to be circulated to other relevant overview and scrutiny committee chairs.**

11. ANNUAL ACHIEVEMENTS AND PERFORMANCE REPORT 2012-13

The Committee noted the accessible and engaging format of the report for public use and also that the report was not a legal requirement but the Council felt it was best practice to produce.

Resolved: That

- i) The committee notes the level of performance achieved in respect of both priority and non-priority performance indicators for 2012-13.**
- ii) The Committee acknowledges and commends service staff where the performance outturn has met or exceeded target.**

12. NATIONAL NON-DOMESTIC RATES – POOLING OPPORTUNITIES

The Committee was reminded of their discussion on this topic at the June meeting. Two developments had occurred, namely that the results of a pan-Essex pooling proposal had been completed and also that guidance on pooling arrangements had been published. In relation to the latter, this stated a clear expectation that there should be a strong rationale for any pool's membership based upon promoting growth or strategic linkages and noted that government would reject submissions where this rationale did not exist.

Therefore, it was considered likely that the Council's original preferred proposal to pool with the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham would not be acceptable on the basis that it would struggle to make the strategic case.

The Council's revised preference was to pool with Barking and Dagenham as well as Basildon and Havering which was one of the options identified in the June 2013 report. It was planned that this proposal would be submitted to central government by the deadline of 31st October.

Officers took Members through the governance requirements for a pool which included the need for a lead authority (which Thurrock was happy to be), the need for contingency funds to safeguard against reductions in business rates, the need for a dedicated pot of funds to support cross boundary projects and a fundamental principle that all authorities should secure the same benefits anticipated without the pool being in place; i.e. any benefit generated through pooling should be over and above that which would have been generated anyway.

The Committee discussed the issue where it was clarified that the decision making powers over the cross boundary projects would be delegated to different organisations within each locality. Officers also confirmed that central government had not raised any concerns about the variety of different types of council (district, unitary and London borough) involved in the proposed pool. Officers stressed that the pool would only benefit the councils involved and without the pool the councils involved would not receive any of the funds.

The pool would last for a year minimum but there were no limits on how long they could exist but arrangements could be revised on an annual basis.

It was learnt that the management of the pool by the lead authority would not require much extra resource if at all and predicted business growth would only increase the benefit to each council. Without the growth the councils in the pool would still be receiving extra funding that they would not previously have got.

Officers added that central government had the final agreement on any pools and success was dependent on a number of factors including the number of other pool proposals applying and whether central government could afford all schemes.

The Committee discussed the governance arrangements surrounding the decision and whether this would be affected by the current purdah period. The Committee commended the well written report.

RESOLVED: That:

- i) The committee acknowledge the work undertaken since the last meeting and ask the above comments to be considered when moving the proposals forward.**

- ii) **The Monitoring Officer be consulted on the governance arrangements in making and implementing the decision during the purdah period.**

13. STRESS RELATED ABSENCE MANAGEMENT

The Committee recognised the complexity of the issues involved in stress related absence. This included the fact that it related to a small number of employees, which caused the flux in indicators but also the complexity of factors involved in people's well-being.

The Council currently deployed all recommended activities and mechanisms to improve the well-being of staff. This had caused a reduction in stress absence although it had begun to rise again in recent months.

Some Members felt levels of absence were critical and needed to be tackled with new schemes as a matter of urgency. Conversely, some Members felt that stress absence would always be an issue and the Council needed to find its acceptable levels and work to ensure that never increased. Officers stated that they were introducing rolling training of middle managers to recognise and manage stress better and policies were being reviewed on a regular basis.

The Committee noted that the figures did not include employees of the contractors and partners of the council, including Serco. Officers added that it was very hard to find comparable data amongst other councils relating to stress as every situation and organisation was unique.

Officers clarified some statistics and Members learnt that larger departments with particular roles, such as adult social care, would naturally have higher levels of absence.

RESOLVED that:

- i) **The report be noted.**
- ii) **The committee agree to onward monitoring of the situation via the stress performance indicator within the corporate scorecard being an IN FOCUS item for the remainder of this year.**

14. FAIRNESS IN THURROCK

The Committee recognised that there were inequalities in Thurrock and that the Council worked with a number of agencies and partners to identify and tackle this. The Chair felt that a task and finish group could help identify whether Thurrock needed an equality commission to better lead and manage this work.

The broad aim of the task and finish group would be:

“To look at ways other local authorities deploy equality commissions within budgetary constraints and progress equality issues within their localities. The Group would make recommendations on the relevance of a commission for Thurrock, other alternatives, as well as any costs involved”.

Some Members felt this should not progress as the group would not actually help in reducing inequalities. The Chair felt the task and finish group would be the first step in tackling these issues however. One Member supported the creation of the group on condition that it helped residents help themselves and not encourage ‘handouts’. One Member stressed the importance of tackling inequalities amongst children as this was where the problem originated.

RESOLVED That:

- i) A task and finish group be established along the broad aims stated above to explore a corporate approach to establishing a fairness commission, including examples of best practice.**
- ii) The group consist of four Members appointed in accordance with political proportionality.**

15. WORK PROGRAMME

RESOLVED: That:

- i) The Transfer of Europa/Serco services be deferred to November.**
- ii) The report on 16-24 year olds working in Thurrock be deferred to November.**
- iii) The consideration of the Public Services Social Value Act 2012 be included within the task and finish group.**

The meeting was finished at 8.55pm.

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIRMAN

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
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or alternatively e-mail mboulter@thurrock.gov.uk**