

**MINUTES of the meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee
held on 14 November 2013 at 7.00pm**

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

In attendance: S. Clark– Head of Finance
B. Brownlee – Director of Housing
J. Hinchliffe – Head of HR OD & Customer Strategy
S. Welton – Corporate Performance Officer
M. Boulter – Principal Democratic Services Officer

16. MINUTES

The minutes of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 12 September 2013 were approved as a correct record.

17. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

a) Interests

No interests were declared.

b) Whipping

No interests were declared.

18. 16-24 YEAR OLDS WORKING FOR THURROCK COUNCIL

The Members welcomed the positive action taken to revise the workforce strategy, especially that it targeted 21-24 year olds. Officers explained that the strategy would be linked with various departmental plans and the corporate scorecard and a final draft would hopefully be signed off by directors' board in December.

Officers distinguished between the internship and graduate programme streams. Internships focussed on one area of practice in the council and was a short term placement, either paid or unpaid, for a person who may be a graduate. An example being legal services placements. However, a graduate scheme was a longer more resource intensive programme whereby the Council employed graduates and trained them across various departments in the council. The aim of the graduate scheme was to train young people to become senior level officers. At present the Council did not have such a scheme as it was a resource dependent programme that the Council currently

could not commit to. However, it was looking at ways to progress a programme, including sharing a scheme with other councils.

The Committee debated the wage of apprentices and interns and noted that the payment was very low but that it aligned with national rates. Members debated the issue and differing views were expressed as to whether a low payment was justified by the fact that apprentices were gaining valuable skills and experience to secure jobs at the end of their apprenticeship, either within the council or with another employer. The Committee understood that the Council was unable to guarantee to offer every apprentice a job because it had to offer such vacancies equally to other staff. It was also noted that if the Council were to pay apprentices the local living wage, they would be earning the same rate as other full time staff members already employed at the Council.

The Committee felt a number of key factors needed to be investigated to ascertain whether the apprenticeship and intern programmes were effective:

1. Outcomes of apprenticeships; achievements in terms of qualifications, skills and employment.
2. Phasing of pay increases as contribution increased.
3. Transition between apprenticeship and employment.

The Committee felt these issues needed to be considered but recognised this was unlikely before the next Pay Policy.

RESOLVED: That:

- i) **The information regarding profile, programmes and support for 16-24 year olds working within the council be noted.**

19. VARIATION OF SERCO/ EUROPA SERVICES PROVIDED UNDER THE SSP AGREEMENT

Members commented that it was important for the reasons why the decision had originally been taken urgently to be held in public session. Officers explained that the Highways function had been taken back into the Council because it was having higher demands placed on it by changing circumstances and therefore, it was better operationally for it to be under direct council management. Some Members welcomed this action and thought it would make the service more efficient.

Resolved that the report be noted.

20. DELIVERING VALUE TO OUR COMMUNITY – PROCUREMENT STRATEGY 2013-15

The Procurement Strategy had already been to Cabinet who had requested it be sent to the Business Board and the CVS whose comments should then be discussed at overview and scrutiny. It was noted that both these organisations had now endorsed the strategy.

The aim of the strategy was to obtain value for money for the £170 million spent on external suppliers, as well as to encourage voluntary sector and local involvement in bidding for contracts.

The Committee were interested in how the strategy would avoid appointing contractors who gave a poor service. Officers responded that the strategy would not necessarily enable this as it was a high level document. However, other operational processes further down the structure would. The council had many options which it could exercise in different procurements including:

- focussing scoring much more on quality over and above price
- involving residents in the process more than previously
- using reference sites in the area and allowing residents to visit and discuss with other residents how any contractor is performing
- Involving members in the initial specification more and spending more time on this element of the work.

Officers added that there was a stronger and more responsive monitoring element to all contracts so that if a supplier failed to deliver then action would be taken to remedy it.

Councillor Hipsey felt that Members needed to be involved much more in the procurement process and felt there should be a system whereby they could form a small task group for all major procurement exercises and to approach their Member colleagues in other councils to informally ask their opinion of bidding companies. Officers advised that although Member involvement was welcome and they were supportive of it there were strict rules and legislation surrounding the procurement process which meant that Members could not be involved in picking contractors, nor could they gain informal viewpoints from other councils to then use in the procurement process as this could be open to legal challenge.

Officers recognised that portfolio holders were politically responsible for their budgets but that it was the professional responsibility of senior officers to enact the procurement rules and to employ contractors and suppliers within those rules.

The Committee felt there were ways in which Members could become more involved in setting the terms of procurement and asked that officers work with the monitoring officer to look into ways this could be achieved.

RESOLVED that officers, in light of the new strategy and creation of the procurement team, look into maximising the opportunity for Member

involvement in third party spend, in accordance with advice from the monitoring officer.

21. 2014/15 BUDGET – COUNCIL TAX AND PENSIONS

Members were informed of the current opportunities and issues surrounding council tax setting in the next few years. There was a possibility the government would offer further council tax freeze grants. If the Council took these grants it would keep council tax levels the same (excluding fire and police precepts) but would face a budget gap, per year, of £512,000. In addition the Council was expected to find £33 million of savings over the next three years. It was unlikely the government would revise these saving levels.

Officers felt, on being asked, that the majority of councils across England would raise their council taxes next year. If Thurrock were to increase by 1.99% then a Band C council tax would be 22p per week extra.

The Members welcomed the information and the early discussion but felt the debate was too political to be had within the committee. The Committee did briefly discuss the possibility of holding a referendum but this was a complex system that required the Council to have a reserve budget should residents declined the offered council tax levels.

The Committee learnt that Thurrock Council's pension deficit was around £150 million. The Council paid this off in yearly instalments. However, if the Council paid off its deficit for the next three years in one payment this year, it would save around £750,000. The Council was therefore planning to undertake this option dependant on borrowing rates and the lending conditions available. The Council had also saved money by paying Serco its annual fee up front.

RESOLVED that:

- i) The debate above on council tax be noted.**
- ii) The actuarial valuation and its impact on Thurrock Council be noted.**

22. WORK PROGRAMME

Officers highlighted that two reports had been requested to be scheduled by Cabinet:

1. Residency criteria for council tax discount scheme.
2. Four yearly elections be reviewed.

RESOLVED That the above reports are scheduled into the work programme.

The meeting was finished at 9.03pm.

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**