

Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on 17 June 2020 at 7.00 pm

The deadline for call-in is Wednesday 1 July 2020 at 5.00pm

Present: Councillors Robert Gledhill (Chair), Shane Hebb (Deputy Chair), Mark Coxshall, James Halden, Deborah Huelin, Andrew Jefferies, Barry Johnson, Ben Maney, Allen Mayes and Aaron Watkins

In attendance: Lyn Carpenter, Chief Executive
Ian Hunt, Assistant Director Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer
Kenna-Victoria Healey, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Lucy Tricker, Democratic Services Officer

Before the start of the Meeting, all present were advised that the meeting may be filmed and was being recorded and live-streamed to YouTube.

1. Minutes

The minutes of the Cabinet meeting held on 11 March 2020 were approved as a correct record.

2. Declaration of Interests

There were no interests declared.

3. Statements by the Leader

The Leader began his statement by describing how the world had recently changed dramatically because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but felt proud that Thurrock Council had continued to maintain key services during this difficult time. He highlighted the great work of Thurrock Coronavirus Community Action (TCCA) which had been set up four days after the beginning of lockdown, and had worked hard to deliver food, medicine and provide support for those most vulnerable residents. He thanked the 500 TCCA volunteers who had given up over 6000 hours of their time to deliver 800 shopping parcels, and 500 medicine parcels, and had been recruited within less than a week of the beginning of lockdown. He added that 57,500 residents were being kept up to date with twice-weekly newsletters, and 1,300 social media updates, which had been viewed on screens over 3 million times. He stated that these were now being scaled back to once weekly, but government advice could always be found on the www.gov.uk website. He added that Members briefings were also being scaled back from daily to twice weekly. He also described the Business Buzz e-newsletter which was sent out to 2,000

local businesses and contained information such as how to access grant schemes.

The Leader moved on to explaining how the majority of Council office staff were now working from home, whilst still delivering services, but added that frontline staff had continued to work throughout the pandemic, such as waste collectors. He stated that since lockdown began 2million bins had been collected; 600 tonnes of waste had been cleared; 130 fly-tips had been cleared; and 70 parks had been maintained. He added that 1000 potholes had also been filled in, all within target time; 1050 fixed penalty notices issued; and 50 £400 fines issued for non-payment of fixed penalty notices. He also added that 6000 council homes had been maintained; 37 rough sleepers had been housed; and 750 posters displayed outlining social distancing measures. The Leader continued and stated that £20 million of central government funding had also been allocated to 6150 businesses within Thurrock; and work had continued on projects such as the Grays two-way traffic system and the Tops Club site.

The Leader summarised and outlined the government's advice of staying at home, working from home wherever possible, limiting social contact, maintaining a social distance of 2 metres, and washing hands regularly.

4. Briefings on Policy, Budget and Other Issues

Councillor Hebb began his briefing by thanking key-workers that had dedicated so much time during the pandemic to keeping people safe, and continued to do so as the country emerged from lockdown. He stated that central government had allocated £9 million in funding for Thurrock for COVID-19 relief, as well as £20 million to help small businesses, whilst continuing to pay 60% of the nation's salaries during furlough. He continued and described the economic impact the pandemic would have on the Council, and detailed how 10% of income had been lost from fees and charges; council tax arrears had increased by 5%; and residents claiming council tax relief had increased by 20%. He highlighted that these changes would create a funding gap for the 2021/22 financial year, which would be compounded by business rates payments also being delayed. He stated that Thurrock Council had managed to close a funding gap in 2016, and he felt confident that the 2021/22 funding gap could also be closed.

Councillor Hebb continued and stated that Thurrock continued to run economic assessments, which had been helped as the rainy day general fund had been increased 40% since 2016/17, and a £6million Financial Resilience Reserve had been created. He commented that a social services reserve of £1.5million had been created since the pandemic, which was designated for extraordinary use, and could not be used to deal with everyday social services pressures. He stated that due to the ongoing pandemic the Council would need to draw on reserves, and make some service reforms, but mentioned that reserves would not be depleted. He highlighted that any money taken from reserves would be put back in over the next five years.

Councillor Hebb then moved on to discussing the Council's investment approach, and stated that investments had continued to make returns during the pandemic, and had helped to increase the Financial Resilience Fund and financial reserves. He stated that the short-term borrowing and investment approach had received cross-party support during Full Council meetings since 2017, and had helped to deal with financial pressures brought on by COVID-19. He highlighted that Thurrock's investments were focussed in renewable energy, which had not seen a downturn during the lockdown, compared to other Councils who had invested in areas such as high street retail, and were now experiencing investment losses. He stated that the investment strategy was not permanent, but helped Thurrock ensure self-sufficiency, and gave the Council the ability to reform statutory and discretionary services, whilst reducing the amount of investments over time, and that the longer that market is there, the longer council has to find and considerably embed efficiencies. He said members should be factual and accurate with statements made and recognise the commercial nature of the subject to avoid unintended consequences. Nor should members neglect the benefits of the approach such as targeted improvements in our communities and reserves position.

Councillor Hebb outlined the Council's financial position since the rise of COVID-19, but stated that Cabinet wished to retain projects such as Clean It, Cut It, Fill It as much as possible. He stated that Thurrock would have to consider services post-lockdown and continue to make some services leaner. He added that the surplus which had been ring-fenced for tackling anti-social behaviour would continue to be ring-fenced, but the Council had to consider their Medium Term Financial position. Councillor Hebb continued and highlighted the Council's Spending Review, which would enter its second phase soon, and would be adjusted to a post-COVID19 world, and would be presented in the forthcoming review.

Councillor Hebb moved on to discuss the surplus which had been allocated in January 2020, and stated that some of this money would have to be re-profiled and reallocated based on COVID-19 pressures. He clarified that areas such as additional police funding and work against the LTC would continue to occur, and the Council would work to ensure all projects funded by this surplus would be honoured by January 2022. He added that the current capital programme would also need to be reviewed in light of COVID-19 pressures, to ensure affordability. He added that a report would be coming to Cabinet later in the year which would outline the process for developing high-quality housing across the borough, but there were currently no on-going Thurrock Regeneration Limited (TRL) projects. He also stated that in light of the changes brought about by COVID-19, the Fair Debt Summit would be refreshed, and meetings were taking place with the IRV on how to undertake this project and collect council tax and business rates fairly. He summarised and stated that any residents or businesses that were struggling to pay their council tax or business rates should contact the Council as soon as possible, to be able to tackle the situation together.

Councillor Halden began his briefing by thanking all the officers who had continued to work hard during the pandemic, particularly the re-ablement

team who had been able to ensure that hospital to care home transfers still occurred within target time. He stated that the economy could see a future downturn due to COVID-19, but highlighted that the Council's financial resilience, including the £1.5million Social Care Fund would help relieve pressures and maintain extra care beds, whilst reviewing options for the domiciliary care market. He stated that the Council had also set up the Economic Vulnerability Task Force, in partnership with key stakeholders such as Inspire Thurrock to ensure that residents were protected from exploitation during these difficult times, and were supported in finding work. He added that the care system had had to learn to evolve during the pandemic, and a report would be going to the Health and Wellbeing Board in July which outlined the new primary planning areas. Councillor Halden summarised and stated that some projects were continuing during the lockdown, such as improving technology facilities for vulnerable residents to ensure they could remain in their homes for as long as possible, and improved transition services for young adults leaving care.

Councillor Huelin stated that during the pandemic, Thurrock Council and CVS had reacted quickly to the crisis and had collaborated together effectively. She thanked the TCCA and CVS, and felt proud that over 500 volunteers had received DBS checks to be able to start volunteering, and had delivered up to 300 interactions a day, including follow-up calls. She thanked the community for all their hard work, and felt proud that although the pandemic had been a difficult time, Thurrock had shown positive community spirit. She stated that the VSDF funds had been allocated, but all groups had agreed to defer payment to allow the Council to redeploy funds to those affected by COVID-19. She added that the CEDF funding had also been put on hold.

Councillor Jefferies thanked those who had worked hard to ensure that schools could remain open throughout the pandemic for the children of keyworkers. He stated that prior to COVID-19 a group of local authorities across South East Essex had met to discuss local skills and training programmes, but this had been delayed due to the pandemic. He commented that this group was now meeting again, with Thurrock taking the lead on how to build apprenticeships back up after the pandemic, as up to 27% of apprenticeships could be lost because of COVID-19. He added that the Council were also looking at ways to help those who had lost their jobs because of COVID-19, and Thurrock would work help retrain and upskill those people.

5. Petitions submitted by Members of the Public

There had been no petitions submitted by members of the public.

6. Questions from Non-Executive Members

There had been no questions submitted by Non-Executive Members.

7. Matters Referred to the Cabinet for Consideration by an Overview and Scrutiny Committee

There had been no items referred to the Cabinet for consideration by an Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

8. Items of Urgent Business

The Leader stated that one item of urgent business had been received, relating to the procurement of the Local Full Fibre Network (LFFN). He commented that he was presenting this report as he was the Leader of the Council and Chair of the Association of South Essex Local Authorities (ASELA), which promoted collaboration between Councils across the South Essex area. He moved on to mention that the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport had recently undertaken a major digital programme called Digital UK, to increase broadband capacity across the country, including LFFNs, and had allocated a £740million grant for public sector LFFNs to boost the economy. He stated that in 2018 ASELA had developed a bid for this grant, and in January 2019 had been approved a grant of £4.4million to enable full fibre capacity across ASELA. He added that Thurrock was the lead Council for this project, which meant that out of a total of 129 LFFN sites across ASELA, 78 of these (or 70%) were based in Thurrock, which equated to 130km of new dark fibre cables. He stated that the LFFN sites would deliver savings and improved connectivity, and would be installed between March and May 2021. He stated that the procurement route would be through Suffolk Cloud Partnership, which would be agreed through contract approval. The Leader commented that this project highlighted the good collaboration work taking place across South Essex, as this was one of the many projects being undertaken by ASELA. He added that the improved LFFN connectivity to sites would increase business retention and growth, as it would allow these sites to invest in fibre and access gigabit connectivity. He stated that increased access to digital technology would increase job opportunities in the public sector, but would help with new housing projects and business growth as fibre panned out across the borough. The Leader added that Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee had considered and agreed the recommendations. He mentioned that the Committee had raised a question regarding why Southend-on-Sea Borough Council had not been included in the bid, and stated that this was because the borough already had full fibre connectivity. The Leader summarised and stated that fibre connectivity in Thurrock was currently only 8%, but the additional LFFN cabling across the borough would help to enable growth, and deal with Wi-Fi blackspots in some areas of the borough.

RESOLVED: That Cabinet:

1. Agreed delegated authority for award of contract for the delivery of a Local Full Fibre Network (LFFN) to MLL Networks Ltd, via the Suffolk Cloud Partnership agreement, to the Director of HR, OD and Transformation, in consultation with the Leader of the Council. The total cost of this project is £4.436mn for the rollout of Dark Fibre connectivity and an Irrevocable Right of Use (IRU) of that fibre for 15 years. There is no additional ongoing cost for use of the dark fibre for the 15-year

period.

*Reason for decision: as outlined in the report
This decision is subject to call-in.*

9. Grays South Regeneration Area: Appropriations (Decision: 110512)

Councillor Coxshall introduced the report and stated that Grays had recently received lots of investment for regeneration, with £150million from the private sector, and more from the public sector including the Grays High Street Fund and Town Board. He stated that the project outlined in the report would provide better services for residents and deliver great housing, and had received no public objections in consultation. He stated that this was the final stage in development, and although one person had responded to the consultation, this was only to ask a question.

Councillor Halden raised a point regarding the new working from home guidelines, and felt that the Council's policy of 'fewer buildings, better service' had been ahead of its time. He felt that the Civic Offices development provided quality housing for residents, and allowed for the demolition of the old Civic Offices building, which was rarely used. Councillor Hebb also added that the development of the site would create 80 homes for families, which were close to the train station. Councillor Coxshall added that these could be good starter homes for families in Grays and from across Thurrock. Councillor Maney asked a question regarding the trees and memorials which were currently in Mulberry Square, as these included memorials for Council officers who had died in service. He felt that the trees should be replanted and memorials moved to a different location. Councillor Coxshall confirmed that the trees would be replanted and memorials moved, and the Council were currently considering the land opposite Grays train station. He felt that this would be a good place for the memorials, as it received lots of footfall from those entering and exiting the train station. He added that the Council were also currently considering a permanent memorial to the 39 people who had lost their lives in West Thurrock earlier in the year.

RESOLVED: That Cabinet:

1. Approved the appropriation of the area of land referred to in this report and shown edged red on the plan at Appendix 2, for planning purposes to facilitate the redevelopment of land to extend the Civic Offices.

2. In respect of the area of land edged red on the plan at Appendix 2 to this report:

(i) noted that it is necessary to use Section 203 of the Housing and Planning Act 2016 to facilitate the development and improvement of the land as part of the planning permission in order for any and all private rights and restrictions that affect the land to be overridden.

(ii) Noted that no objections were received as a result of the public consultation exercise.

(iii) Authorised officers to take such necessary administrative and accounting steps to give effect to the appropriation (including settling claims for compensation arising out of the extinguishment of any rights in the appropriated land pursuant to Section 203 of the Housing and Planning Act 2016).

*Reason for decision: as outlined in the report
This decision is subject to call-in*

10. Appointments to Outside Bodies, Statutory and Other Panels

The Leader introduced the report and highlighted Appendix 1 which laid out any changes made to appointments. He mentioned that the recommendation stated that there would be no changes to appointments due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Councillor Coxshall thanked Councillor Rice for his hard work on the coastal and flood defence committee, as he felt Councillor Rice had done a good job in protecting Thurrock. The Leader agreed and also thanked Councillor Rice, and felt that coastal defences would not have been placed as far down the Thames without his hard work.

RESOLVED: That Cabinet:

1. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, it was agreed that all current appointments, as listed in Appendix1, remain for 2020/21, unless otherwise advised by Group Leaders and/or Cabinet.

The meeting finished at 8.00 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