

Minutes of the Meeting of the General Services Committee held on 17 December 2020 at 6.00 pm

Present: Councillors Robert Gledhill (Chair), John Kent (Vice-Chair), Gary Byrne, Mark Coxshall, Shane Hebb, Fraser Massey and Bukky Okunade

In attendance: Anna Eastgate, Assistant Director of Lower Thames Crossing and Transport Infrastructure Projects
Ian Hunt, Assistant Director Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer
Andrew Millard, Director of Place
Jonathon Wilson, Assistant Director, Finance

67. Minutes

The minutes of the General Services Committees held on the 9 November 2020 and 16 November 2020 were approved as a correct record.

68. Items of Urgent Business

There were no urgent items of business.

69. Declarations of Interests

No interests were declared.

70. Thurrock Regeneration Limited

The Director of Place introduced the report stating that there was a need to appoint an interim director to Thurrock Regeneration Limited (TRL) due to previous directors resigning from their posts. Cllr Coxshall continued that the report was a technical one and recommended that the committee reconvene in early 2021 to set the longer term position for TRL.

Cllr Kent asked a number of questions including why there was a need to form a subsidiary company but also the reasons why the previous directors had resigned. It was explained that most housing companies of this kind would establish a subsidiary company as a property management company. In other words the subsidiary company manages the lettings and maintenance of the properties that the Council retains in its ownership. With regards to the resignation of directors Cllr Coxshall stated that the Administration wanted a faster paced delivery of housing and to change the processes and structure to achieve this. This in turn created conflicts of interest with the directors who held posts within the council. Officers added that the previous directors were finding that holding positions both in TRL and the Council a challenge. Anna Eastgate clarified that she was the director identified in the report who left due

to a specific conflict of interest, namely that in September her job title changed to include Place Delivery, which included housing delivery. Cllr Kent questioned why, if that was the case, a current senior housing manager who sat as a director of TRL did not have a similar interest.

Cllr Kent further queried why this committee, as shareholders, had not been informed of the resignations when they occurred. Cllr Coxshall believed that his response to a Full Council question and his press statement was sufficient to alert all Members to the events. He received no queries from Members at the time or since and therefore had assumed the resignations were a widely known fact and that a specific report was not therefore required.

Cllr Byrne queried whether Roger Harris, the proposed new interim director and a current corporate director at the Council, did not have a similar conflict of interest to the previous directors. It was highlighted that 2.3 of the report explained why there was no conflict of interest and it was added that Mr Harris was leaving the Council in March and his experience in housing matters put him in a good position to steer the day to day matters of the company until a permanent alternative was put in place. It was included, in response to a further query, that should Mr Harris become ill or unable to undertake the director role the Council would follow a similar process to now in that an interim arrangements could be made within a timeframe.

Cllr Okunade explored the reasoning for the numbers to be appointed and Cllr Coxshall confirmed that the two positions being requested to be filled tonight were interim measures to fill the necessary positions as is. It was hoped that beyond the interim measures the Council could increase the board of directors to a number that was deemed appropriate for future work and with quality candidates.

Cllr Massey highlighted the responsibilities of directors continued even after they had left such a company and also queried what other options had been explored? Cllr Coxshall believed that Mr Harris was a good choice for the interim role and even after he had left council employment in March he had strong and familiar links with Thurrock, the Members and officers. Officers added that no other nominations were received so no other options were forthcoming at this present time.

Cllr Massey felt the Articles of Association could be tightened up. Councillors generally agreed that regular meetings of this committee, relating to TRL, were desirable.

Cllr Byrne felt that the size of the company with a potential £10 million turnover should not be in the hands of one director. Cllr Coxshall reminded Cllr Byrne that TRL had not completed one house in 2020 and the turnover was not as stated until housing started to be delivered. The paper tonight was a holding position.

Members discussed an additional recommendation which read:

“To bring a report back to this committee presenting options on the future operating model of the companies, including the Board of directors and a review of the articles of association before the end of March 2021”

Cllr Kent expressed his opposition to the recommendations based on poor notification of the issues at hand. He felt the report presented tonight was not adequate.

The Committee moved to a vote on the recommendations of which all, including the additional recommendation, were lost with 4 votes to 3.

The Committee discussed the options now the recommendations had not been agreed. Options presented were:

1. Continue the company with directors in place.
2. Close the company and liquidate its assets, settling any outstanding debts.
3. The Operating model for the company is revised and the Council goes to market to recruit appropriate board members.

It was added during this debate that there were no financial implications put upon members of the committee in deciding not to appoint tonight.

Cllr Kent felt the company should not be wound up as it was fundamentally a good idea. He felt the voting tonight was a reaction to lack of consultation with Members and felt a fuller report in the New Year would be appropriate. Cllr Coxshall explained that this was the intention of tonight’s meeting and the report before everyone was simply a holding position to allow the deeper discussion to continue in 2021. Officers added for clarity that a director would be needed in the interim not to necessarily provide strategic direction but to complete operational duties like signing off reports and the like.

The Chair stated he was disappointed TRL would be kept in this position and closed the meeting with a view that a meeting would be organised for the New Year to discuss further.

The meeting finished at 7.07 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**