

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 24 March 2016 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Shane Hebb (Chair), Graham Snell (Vice-Chair), Steve Liddiard and Deborah Stewart

Apologies: Councillors Russell Cherry and Martin Kerin

In attendance:

Sean Clark, Director of Finance & IT
Karen Wheeler, Head of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service
Jackie Hinchliffe, Director of HR, OD & Transformation
Sarah Welton, Strategy & Performance Officer
Mykela Hill, Organisational Development Officer
Malcolm Taylor, Strategic Lead - Learner Support

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

39. Minutes

The minutes of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 2 February 2016 were approved as a correct record.

The Committee went through the Action List Update signing off a number of the outstanding actions as they had been progressed satisfactorily. Points of note included:

- A full time employee had now been employed to develop accreditations the Council could undertake to demonstrate performance against the priority of a 'well run organisation'. A cost benefit analysis would also be undertaken.
- The audit of training records by the internal audit team would be scheduled into the audit plan for the next municipal year.
- The benchmarking of investment into training would be left open until the budget had been finalised for next year.
- Officers were under the impression that OFSTED had been reminded to undertake further inspections of schools in the spring term but this would be double checked.
- Officers were investigating whether complaints were related to communication issues.
- The three bin collection policy be added to the Local Plan.

- The format of the fees and charges report for next year would include RAG status on the cost recovery viability of each fee/charge.

40. Items of Urgent Business

The Chair accepted an urgent report regarding the shaping of the Council and Budget proposals. Officers informed the Committee that following the Full Council meeting in February, no changes had been made to the budget proposals. In the current financial year the report set out the budget pressures in the Children's Services and Environment departments.

Unaccompanied asylum seekers continued to present a financial pressure and the Council was due £400,000 from central government which covered the majority but not all of the cost incurred in supporting these people. The government was currently taking a position that it would now not reimburse this cost. There was also the general pressure of rising placement costs for children and also an increase in the amount of children needing placements, which in turn required more staff to support the work. The gross overspend of the Children's Services department was £5.8 million.

Another budget pressure was regarding the surplus owed on Serco pensions which amounted to £2.5 million. The Council picked up this liability when it brought the Serco services back in house. However, officers were confident all pressures had been mitigated and the Council would come in close on budget.

For 2016/17 officers were working on which pressures from the previous years would come over plus allocating growth funding. The Public Health budget had also been reduced by government by £924,000. This presented a big challenge.

For the years from 2017/18 to 2019/20 the Council was looking at a total reduction of budget by £18.5 million with £7 million being in the year 2017/18. This assumed there would be a council tax increase of 3.99% each year. If the Council wished to spend more money it would need to find this funding from elsewhere.

Budget Review panels would be in place for the next municipal year and services could be protected either by:

- generating income,
- becoming more efficient (through managing contracts and other means)
- reducing the demand for certain services
- reducing or stopping services.

The Chair explored the use of staff resources and wondered whether the services that were seeing greater demand could be bolstered by recruitment and whether vacancies in other services could be used to offset increasing staff in other areas. Officers stated that workflows were monitored and staffing was altered as a response, although budgets were fixed within each

service and the vacancies in these services could not be easily removed to send the funding over to another service entirely. Social Care services were under great pressure and staff efficiency in these areas was at maximum. It was added that the majority of the social care budget was now focussed on commissioning and the staff were not necessarily internal Council employees. It was further added that the Council had invested in Local Area Coordinators who worked to reduce the demand on essential services.

Officers agreed that a strategic level the workflows of services could be looked at and the structure of the Council recalibrated to prioritise high demand services. Officers would undertake a metric based assessment of services rather than simply monetary indicators and this would show which services were most important to the Council.

It was highlighted that other services such as Central Services had the majority of its budget invested in staff and certain services, like Legal Services, was focussing on income generation to maintain its service. There was currently no recruitment freeze although the use of agency staff was a challenge. Compulsory redundancies had been avoided by running a successful voluntary redundancy scheme.

The Committee recognised that the budget review panel was an inclusive exercise that involved all political parties and was not a decision making body.

Resolved That:

- 1. The Committee note the financial pressures still being faced in Children's Services.**
- 2. The Committee note the need to identify £18.5 million through a combination of additional income and cost reduction over the period 2017/18 to 2019/20.**
- 3. The Committee note the assumptions set out in the Medium Term Financial Strategy forecasts as set out in paragraph 4.2**
- 4. The Committee recommend that at one of the first meetings next year, the committee receive and shape the terms of reference for the second phase of the Budget Review Panels process, which will include the list of services and costings for the service.**

41. Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

42. Member Support Services

Officers introduced the report highlighting the current review of Member Services and the resources available to Members in the day to day roles. Following questions officers explained the difference between Member and

Democratic Services stating that Democratic Services was not explicitly a Member support service but a governance service provided to the whole council. Democratic Services worked closely with the Member Services team and for a number of years they had been managed by the same officer.

The Committee discussed the budget of the team and acknowledged that a large section of the budget was dedicated to staffing costs. Members expressed some interest in the 'subscriptions other' code and wondered what corporate subscriptions the council paid.

In terms of resources Members felt the following could be useful:

- The Member handbook being digitised online and therefore being updated regularly throughout the year.
- An app be developed to allow access to the handbook via a mobile phone.
- Develop a digital service whereby Members can type in a service and relevant officer names are presented who are available to ring.

The committee explored whether Member and Democratic Services could be merged. It was explained that the services worked closely together but they provided different roles that were best served politically as separate, although it was added that the services had fallen under one manager for many years. Some Members felt that job pooling could occur and political assistants could be included. Councillor Snell felt a merge would not serve either team effectively and following a vote, the Committee agreed to form a recommendation in favour of exploring a merge.

In relation to correspondence some Members felt they could each be given a mini stationery budget to spend each year and correspondence to cease being sent to home addresses saving on postage. Councillor Snell disagreed with the idea of a personal budget saying that it would be used to criticise over spending by Members and the fact the Council was aiming to go fully digital a personal stationery budget would potentially be a retrograde step.

Resolved That:

- 1. Officers look to digitise the Members Handbook and have a schedule for updating it regularly over the year.**
- 2. Officers investigate the harmonising of Democratic and Member Services.**
- 3. Officers investigate the feasibility of a personal budget for each councillor to spend on consumables.**
- 4. Officers review the 'Subscriptions Other' code in the Member Services budget to ascertain if all expenditure is required.**

43. Month 9 / Quarter 3 Corporate Performance Report 2015/16

Officers took the Committee through each indicator that required comment. The first, 'The percentage of schools judged good by OFSTED', was discussed and it was outlined that two further schools were expected to receive ratings in the near future increasing the performance of this indicator from 80% to 87%. It was predicted the Council would exceed its target. Officers reassured the Committee they were taking supportive action on the schools that were borderline failing their inspections. It was confirmed this was a non-statutory indicator and schools yet to be assessed were currently being scheduled by OFSTED.

The Committee discussed the indicator relating to 'Looked After Children' and officers stated that the outcomes for those not in education, employment or training (NEET) would need to be reviewed to understand whether there were more meaningful educational outcomes for children with learning disabilities. Of the children making up the indicator eleven (27%) were asylum seekers and only one of these had missed education entirely. Nine had Special Educational Needs (SEN) and were undertaking entry level courses. Less than 50% of the cohort were working below GCSE level, while fifteen were studying for their GCSEs but not attaining five qualifications. The group was mainly working below C Grade.

The Committee discussed meaningful outcomes for children who were failing educational attainment and clarified that asylum seekers received the full range of support offered to all other looked after children when leaving care. Achieving five A to C grades was a statutory indicator. Members felt a non-statutory indicator could be added to measure other useful outcomes for these children.

'The rate of children subject to child protection plans' was usually affected by the increase in children entering the system who needed the plans. It was a demand led indicator. Although Thurrock did not have a large amount of children subject to these plans it was affected by the low rate of children leaving the plans once they were on them. There was a procedure in place for managers to sign children off of plans when ready to improve the performance.

'The percentage of older people still at home 91 days after discharge from hospital' had been a challenge in the final quarter of the year but Thurrock's service was high performing and would be in the top quartile performance for England. It was confirmed that older people meant those over 65 and only a small percentage of these were not put through reablement, mainly those suffering advanced dementia or end of life care. The NHS provided a full reablement package lasting six weeks.

'The percentage of household waste sent for reuse, recycling or anaerobic digestion' was discussed briefly and a communications plan to inform residents how to dispose properly of waste was being developed. Members wondered whether the communications strategy could be funded by the fines

collected from fly tipping. The Committee felt waste and recycling was a major issue that needed urgent and focussed attention.

Abandoned vehicles were highlighted and Members wondered why all costs were not recovered as the cars could be traced back to the owners through the DVLA. Officers stated that not all vehicles abandoned were reported and this could cause a discrepancy in the number of reports compared to the numbers of vehicles collected.

The Committee discussed the format of the report and felt that the direction arrows could also appear in the header of each page and the amber indicator was not required.

Resolved That:

- 1. The committee notes the performance at this stage in the year and asks all comments above to be noted and progressed by officers.**
- 2. The areas In Focus be circulated as appropriate to relevant overview and scrutiny committee chairs.**
- 3. A non-statutory indicator be added to the suite of indicators to show domicile and non-domicile educational progress.**
- 4. The Portfolio Holder and Director of Environment provide a report to Full Council to bring the issues and challenges of waste and recycling into focus.**
- 5. The Performance Board remove the Amber indication on the reports and include direction of travel arrows on the header of each indicator.**

44. Digital Council Programme - Progress Update

The digital programme was about driving efficiency and making resources for frontline services. The programme consisted of a channel migration to encourage people to access services digitally and also, to deliver savings from investments in technology. The Committee noted that computer modelling was used to inform how council practices could be changed and asked that these models be checked for consistency as they sometimes did not always take into account the reality.

With regards to the Electronic Records Management System (EDRMS) officers confirmed it had Google level search functions and that the system was for internal use only. Officers also confirmed that around sixteen Members had set up a My Account profile but the number could be greater as officers could not search all private email addresses registered. Officers added that more communications would be delivered to help residents use My Account and other online services.

The Committee learnt that online activity was increasing with regards to Council services, for example, Twitter was a major source of interaction between the council and residents. Officers were relooking at how to make the Twitter account more proactive and practicalities needed to be investigated such as how to respond to Twitter enquiries out of hours.

Resolved That:

- 1. The Committee encourages all Members to sign up to My Account and become ambassadors for it.**
- 2. Provision is available for residents who do not use computers to access services.**

45. Workforce Analysis and Performance

Officers explained that staff were a £62 million asset to the Council. The Committee were taken through the agency staff lists and were drawn to the fact that there was a current overspend in Children's Services, which would be tackled in the future. Following questioning it was clarified that staff's personal Performance Reviews were not linked wholesale to the performance of the departments they worked for. Therefore, if a department failed to reach its corporate targets it did not mean the staff in the department had not been performing well.

Resolved That:

- 1. the Committee note the report.**

46. Work Programme

The Committee felt that the Action List served as a good steer for any incoming Chair and Members to the committee next municipal year.

The meeting finished at 9.34 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**