

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 18 January 2017 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors John Kent (Chair), Leslie Gamester (Vice-Chair), Jack Duffin, Steve Liddiard, Ben Maney and Aaron Watkins

In attendance: Sean Clark, Director of Finance & IT
Roger Harris, Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health
Jackie Hinchliffe, Director of HR, OD & Transformation
Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service
Janet Cox, Strategic Lead HR & OD
Charlotte Raper, Senior Democratic Services Officer

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.

28. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 22 November 2016 were approved as a correct record, subject to an amendment proposed by Councillor Duffin. Councillor Duffin outlined that, regarding the Local Council Tax Scheme, he had agreed with Proposed Change 5 in principal but could not support it until there was clarity provided around issues such as triplets.

29. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

30. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

31. Communications Update

The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services presented the report which outlined the focus of the communications team over the past year. Members were asked to offer comments on the direction of travel for communications to help set out an overall Communications Strategy.

Councillor Duffin raised the issue of inconsistency between the information conveyed by the Council's Twitter account versus the Facebook page. He suggested filming parts of Council meetings and uploading them to offer better engagement with residents, as many people in the borough were unaware what happened at meetings. He raised the issue of disjointed communication and the concern of relying solely on social media to inform residents which risked alienating certain groups. Many residents were not on social media, and did not have internet access; as such it was essential that communication was wider to ensure all residents could stay informed regarding updates.

He expressed concern at the relative disparity between the energy the council expended on monitoring the activity of councillors on social media and responding to complaints from residents. He highlighted his view that there was a perceived bias from the communications team with Conservative Councillors being quoted, named and photographed, while Councillors from UKIP and Labour did not receive the same treatment. Finally, he raised the issue of false press statements and queried the Council's procedure as there had recently been a press release containing false information, which had been corroborated by officers. He queried why no further action had been taken to correct the release.

The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services agreed that the information featured on Twitter and Facebook would be assessed. Generally information appeared on both, but some immediate updates were posted on Twitter and not Facebook. With regards to filming meetings the Committee heard that it had become increasingly popular with a number of Local Authorities and the Communications team wanted to do more, as it was a different way of engaging local residents with the democratic process. It was to be explored further as part of the direction of travel and the Portfolio Holder had also requested increased use of video. Generally speaking the communications team aimed to use as many channels as possible to deliver information to residents as social media was most suitable for certain audiences. The Council also used posters, leaflets and the local press to communicate a number of issues.

In terms of some of Councillor Duffin's latter points, the Director was not in a position to comment as he had highlighted specific dates for which she did not have the information to hand, but she would look into the outside of the meeting.

The Chair interjected that there needed to be some further input regarding the role of the communications team, which realistically was two-fold. Understandably, with regards to planned events in which Council policy was being promoted it was right that the relevant Cabinet Member would be pictured and referenced. However, in terms of reactive events, such as the attempt to burn down the library in East Tilbury, it seemed bizarre that local Councillors present were not named and pictured in the same way. He asked for clarity on the Council's policy or protocol in these events.

Members heard that the communications team promoted the work of the Council, including Portfolio Holders, decisions made jointly such as the Lower Thames Crossing where there is a Council position, and outcomes from other Committees such as Overview and Scrutiny. The team responded to requests and assessed what the messaging should be. There had been no request from the ward councillors around the events in East Tilbury. Specific responses had been made to media enquiries and with reference the latest position regarding the library, quoting the Portfolio Holder. It was highlighted that the Ward Councillor had been present at the time that the Cabinet Member had been interviewed and photographed which caused some concern for Members of UKIP and Labour.

Councillor Watkins supported the proposal to film meetings to post on the Council's website and upload to social media, particularly if this was to be done by the Council's communications team rather than an outside organisation. He praised the seemingly 24hour service of the team and insisted their work around the "give a gift tree", which had been largely social media driven, deserved recognition. He sought clarification on section 3.7 of the report and asked what the process would be moving forward regarding publishing public notices in the local press.

It was confirmed that there was an error; the report should have read June 2017, not 2016. The contract, which was very small and only covered public notices with no other advertising, had been awarded for a two year period and the decision whether to go back out to tender would need to be made soon.

It was asked what Opposition Members might do regarding press releases and statements. The Committee heard that the communications team was responsible for promoting the view of the Council, including the Mayor and other Councillors represented in their specific roles, for example Overview and Scrutiny Chairs, not by their party affiliation. Any Members seeking advice or guidance should contact the communications team who would offer any assistance possible.

RESOLVED:

The Committee noted and commented upon the update and direction of travel for communications to inform the development of a Communication Strategy.

32. Investors in People 2016

The Director of HR, OD & Transformation introduced the report by offering some wider context. Members heard that the Council had also won two national awards and the Local Government Association considered Thurrock within the top 10% of Council employers. The report outlined how Thurrock had achieved the accreditation, the feedback given by the assessor and the action plan moving forward.

Councillor Liddiard congratulated the Director of HR, OD & Transformation and all staff insisting a “well done” was deserved all round.

Councillor Maney referred to section 3.4 of the report and asked how the staff interviewed had been selected. The Committee heard that the Council had been given a breakdown by the assessors. Whilst there had been some light touch screening around staff on long-term sick, annual leave etc. the selection generally was at random based around the requirements of the assessor.

The Chair echoed Councillor Liddiard’s comments and added that it was hard to achieve these accreditations and even more difficult to hold onto and as such it was a good achievement and well done to all involved.

RESOLVED:

Members noted and commented on:

- 1) The achievement of reaccreditation of Investors in People Gold.**
- 2) The analysis being undertaken to identify the benefits to the Council of moving forward with the Generation 6 Framework requiring a potential re-assessment in 2019 and a number of formal progress meetings throughout 2017/18.**
- 3) The incorporation of the Investors in People continuous improvement plan into the key actions within the new people strategy.**

33. Staff Survey 2016

The Director of HR, OD & Transformation presented the report which was a follow up to the report previously presented at the meeting held 20 September 2016. This report provided an update on the corporate actions taken in response to the staff survey findings and plans to assess impact with a ‘pulse survey’ in spring 2017.

Councillor Duffin referred to section 3.3.1 of the report and queried whether the reality was that the current IT systems were not good enough, rather than 68% of staff requiring additional training. The Committee heard that in reality it was a combination of the two; in areas with the weaker responses further investigation showed there were competence issues too. Moving forward there were plans to test and check at the recruitment and induction stages to ensure new starters were confident on Thurrock Council’s corporate systems.

The Director of Finance and IT explained that there had been a huge investment in the IT infrastructure in recent years however prior to that it had been very outdated and there was some element of “catching up” to be done. There was also an element of “the more you get the more you expect” and as more resources became available there was more that could go wrong. As

there were increasing expectations around flexible and mobile working tablets and phones would be trialled to find the most suitable for the needs of employees.

Councillor Duffin moved on to section 3.1.2 of the report and the reference to massages for Council staff; he asked how much this was costing the Council. Members were assured that the massages had been bite size taster sessions by companies who had been promoting their services and as such had not incurred any cost to the Council.

The Chair asked how the success of wellbeing weeks was assessed. All taster sessions were evaluated by participants and the Council also assessed demand. There were also smoking cessation and weight loss programmes for staff for which the sign up levels and the overall outcome success were assessed. It was highlighted that investments in wellbeing directly linked into absence management schemes.

The Chair accepted that Members understood that a happy and healthy workforce were generally better motivated and less likely to be absent however it would still be helpful for Committee Members to see a proper evaluation. The Director of HR, OD & Transformation agreed that some form of evaluation report could come before the Committee in future.

RESOLVED:

Members noted and commented on the corporate actions taken to respond to the 2016 Staff Survey findings.

34. Budget 2017/18 - Capital Programme Approach

The Director of Finance and IT outlined the desire to present a more strategic and aspirational Capital Programme than previous years had seen. The report offered an update on the progress and approach currently being taken.

The Chair welcomed the introduction of a 'feasibility pot' and expressed his own view regarding delegations that he was satisfied with the system currently in place. He was cautious that imposing a restriction on level of investments which could be delegated ran the risk of tying the Council down when there was a need for a rapid response to an opportunity or investment change.

Councillor Duffin expressed concern regarding section 2.4 of the report. Members had previously been advised that the Thameside Theatre would not close until a replacement theatre opened, but now there were reports the Thameside would be closing in 2019 with no information surrounding the opening date of the new theatre. Members heard that the Section 151 officer had not been involved in any conversation regarding the closure of the Thameside Theatre, and there was nothing related included within the Capital Programme.

There was some confusion regarding the decision process and it was clarified that, whilst both Overview and Scrutiny Committees and Cabinet could offer recommendations, the final decision would fall to full Council.

Councillor Watkins agreed with the £2million figure for the feasibility pot, but felt there should be a sensible threshold around delegations. When asked if he could propose a figure he advised he had no specific figure in mind, and it need not be anything too low but investments of above perhaps a figure of £5million should require the approval of full Council.

Councillor Duffin moved to the topic of Delegations and expressed concern regarding the Gloriana Scheme. He noted that he was limited in what he could discuss as there were ongoing matters, but requested information on how to call an emergency meeting of the Council to discuss the issue. It was necessary to ensure the current scheme was effective and appropriate before moving onto further schemes with Gloriana.

The Director of Finance and IT advised the Committee that whilst he could make proposals, the final decision lay with Councillors. If a de minimis were set at the level of £5million nothing linked to Gloriana would fall below that figure and so all decisions would come back to the Council. Otherwise Members could decide to impose no de minimis but remove Gloriana from the scheme of delegations so any Gloriana decision would fall to Members.

Councillor Duffin requested confirmation on the process from the Chair, he advised he did not know the exact figure but it would be a number of councillors signing a request to hold an emergency meeting but exact details would be outlined within the constitution and would be available by the end of the meeting.

RESOLVED:

- 1) The Committee noted the progress on bringing forward capital proposals**
- 2) The committee commented on an approach to delegations**

Members were directed to the Constitution, Council Procedure Rules, Extraordinary Meetings, Chapter 2, Part 2, Paragraph 4.

35. Fees & Charges Pricing Strategy 2017/18

The Director of Finance & IT presented the report which set out the charges in relation to services within the remit of Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee, which would take effect from 1 April 2017.

The Chair expressed his view that the approach seemed sensible and satisfactory.

RESOLVED:

- 1) Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the revised fees and charges proposals.**
- 2) Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee commented on the proposals currently being considered within the remit of this committee.**

36. Draft General Fund Budget 2017/18

The Director of Finance & IT presented the report which outlined the draft budget proposals for a balanced budget for 2017/18 and proposed recommendations regarding the Adult Social Care Precept and Support Grant.

Councillor Duffin offered his full support for the proposal of a 3% increase in the Adult Social Care Precept in both 2017/18 and 2018/19 with no increase in 2019/20. He highlighted the current crisis in health and adult social care and expressed the need to do as much as possible to ensure the most money was available.

The Chair expressed his view that it was difficult to support any of the proposals for the Adult Social Care Precept with no exact budget figures available, as the 3% increase could be funding a cut in the broader budget. He asked why there were no specific budget figures listed within the report and emphasised that it would be difficult to assess what the increase should be if there was no advice as to what it was proposed the Council would be spending. Members were advised that in previous years the final budget envelopes had always been presented to Members in February in both Cabinet and Council reports. Previously the savings had been directly allocated to services whereas this year they were more cross-cutting; such as managing staffing-levels and income generation.

The Chair sought clarification regarding section 3.1 of the report, in terms of the level of cut to the Revenue Support Grant for 2017/18. The Committee heard that there would be a drop in Government funding of £6million for the Council to bridge over the course of the year. The four-year settlement offered an indication of the Revenue Support Grant over the next four years and the reductions to be faced, but there were other substantial grants to be considered as part of the General Fund. The Educational Support Grant and Housing Benefit Grant were both seven figure sums and were not covered by the four-year settlement.

The Chair referred to Councillor Duffin's proposal to support the recommendation of 3%, 3%, 0% and expressed that he was minded to agree as it was likely that the Government may change its mind again in future and

allow Local Authorities to have more funding, so it was best not to minimise what could be available.

Councillor Watkins interjected that he was also a Member of the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and recently sat as a substitute on the Corporate Parenting Committee. His personal view was that the 3%, 2%, 1% option would be more sensible to allow additional funds in the final year. Although it might be slightly less funding over the coming two years, it ensured an income in each year.

Members were reminded that their input on years two and three was only for guidance in terms of budget planning and the reality would be an annual vote on the year ahead, not voting on all three years immediately.

The Chair asked the Director of Adults, Housing and Health for his view. It was highlighted that the funding uncertainty for future years was so great that stability was required sooner rather than later. There was still lobbying occurring at a national level as professional organisations did not feel this was the right way to fund adult social care as it was particularly unfair to Local Authorities such as Thurrock with a low Council Tax Base. The crisis in health and adult social care and the need for additional funding was starting to be more widely recognised. The reality was that the current funding structure for social care was unsustainable and would need to be changed. Services were facing an immediate crisis and it would be better to get the additional resources required sooner than later.

The Committee considered the appendix to the report, schedule of proposals. Officers were asked to provide confirmation around the derivability of certain proposals, particularly absence management, consultancy and agency staff costs and the facilities review. Officers gave their assurances that these savings were realisable. With regards to the facilities review, the item had been exempt and as such Officers could not provide much detail but if the saving could not be met it would need to be identified elsewhere within the budget.

There was concern regarding a proposed reduction in resources for face-to-face contact and Members sought clarity that there would be fall-back solutions for instances of technical difficulties and other such circumstances that might arise. Members were assured that there would always be face-to-face staff available.

The Chair sought clarification on an implied change to staff's terms and conditions, in terms of sick pay. Members heard that the proposed saving focused on the pay mechanism itself, and there was no proposal to amend terms and conditions at this point in time.

There was some debate regarding street lighting efficiencies. The Chair had understood that these savings had already been banked. The Committee heard that only part of the savings had been previously accounted for within the budget.

A Service Review of libraries could offer a saving of around 10%. When asked if this involved closures the Committee was assured that the figure was an estimated result of the service review, and that any closure would be subject to the normal consultation process.

Members were advised that the Service Review for Adult Social Care – Fieldwork Services did not include any staff reduction. The Private Rented Sector review followed a change in legislation which increased the number of registered HMOs from around 20 to nearly 400. There would be a need to increase staff but this change should generate net income and it was considered to be deliverable.

Councillor Duffin requested the Debt Collection Service Review consider the treatment of vulnerable people particularly. Officers agreed that the review should improve matters and that there would also be a review of the Fair Debt Policy.

The Chair expressed concern at the likely closure of the Thameside Complex and proposed an additional recommendation. The Committee voted in favour of an additional recommendation to Cabinet that the Council should stick to the agreed position that the current complex should not be closed until its replacement has been delivered.

RESOLVED:

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee commented on:

- 1) **The report**
- 2) **The Adult Social Care precept options as set out in section 4 of the report.**
- 3) **That a recommendation be made to Cabinet to maintain the agreed position regarding the Thameside Complex. The current building should not be closed until its replacement has been delivered.**

37. Work Programme

Councillor Duffin requested an item regarding submission of questions and motions to Full Council, and how their viability was assessed. The Chair agreed that other Members shared his sentiments, but the item would be more appropriate to be heard by the Standards and Audit Committee. Officers agreed to liaise with the relevant parties to have the item put forward.

RESOLVED:

Members noted the Work Programme.

The meeting finished at 8.30 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**