

## **Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 17 September 2024 at 7.00 pm**

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**Present:** Councillors Ben Maney (Chair), John Fox (Vice-Chair), John Cecil (as substitute), Michael Fletcher, Aaron Green, James Halden, Cici Manwa (as substitute), Roy Jones, Tom Kelly (as substitute), Martin Kerin and Ryan Polston

**Apologies:** Councillors Qaisar Abbas, Clifford Holloway and Cathy Kent

**In attendance:** Councillor Sara Muldowney  
Dawn Calvert, Chief Financial Officer S151  
Marta Poczowska, Chief Digital Officer  
Tracie Heiser, Head of Customer Services  
Daniel Fenwick, Executive Director Corporate Services/Monitoring Officer  
Helen Nicol, Assistant Director Legal and Governance  
Sima Khuroya, Assistant Director of Finance and Procurement  
Lucy Tricker, Scrutiny Officer  
Claire Dixon, Scrutiny Officer  
Emma Trencher, Senior Democratic Services Officer

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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.

### **9. Minutes**

The Minutes of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 30 July 2024 were approved as a correct record.

### **10. Items of Urgent Business**

There were no urgent items of business.

### **11. Declaration of Interests**

There were no declarations of interest.

### **12. Q1 Forecast Reveue and Capital Outturn Report**

The Chief Financial Officer presented the Quarter 1 Forecast Revenue and Capital Outturn 2024-25 Report.

The report highlighted the forecast performance against the Council's Revenue account showing the current position of forecasting, a net pressure

of £3m which was 2% of the Council's revenue budget and to highlight the focus for the remainder of the year to reduce that to zero pressure.

The following key points were noted and highlighted by Members:

- £1.2m of the overspend was a result of an over estimation in respect of the covid grant. Members questioned what due diligence had been carried out when estimating the figures as it was noted that this was a significant sum. The Chief Finance Officer explained the scheme allowed local authorities to claim for their loss of fees and charges income during the covid period and highlighted as it was new to everyone, it had been a difficult task in terms of estimating. Lessons had been learnt and if it were to happen again, the Council would make sure as they went through the process of claims, it would be closely reconciled against the revenue.
- Members questioned if the Chief Finance Officer thought the overspend would have been worse if the Council did not have recourse to the reserves, did this mask the unhealthy financial position and what was being done to ensure a healthy balance of reserves. The Chief Finance Officer explained that reserves were there for a specific purpose with the reserve monies being used for one off expenditure that will not continue into future years. Therefore, the Chief Finance Officer did not agree they were masking the position as some of the reserves were grant monies received that had to be spent on specific areas, the grant monies had been placed on reserves as they had not been spent in the year in which it related. Therefore, when the Council spend that money, it is drawn from the reserve to match the expenditure. Assurance was given that the reserves that were being used were one off expenditure and not for any overspend at the end of the year as this would then carry forward into the next financial year.
- Members noted there was a budget forecast assumed of a total transfer from reserves of £10.6m. Members questioned what this was for and what would be done to replenish the reserves. The Chief Finance Officer explained some of the reserves would not be replenished as it was specific grant money.
- Members questioned, based on the overspend in Quarter 1, did the Chief Finance Officer think there would be added pressures on Quarters 2, 3 and 4 and what was the forecast for the overspend. The Chief Finance Officer explained the forecast was based on where the Council's finances would be at the end of the financial year and a huge amount of work was being done to ensure accurate forecasting.
- Members questioned how much interest had been made on monies in the Council's accounts. Members were referred to the table on page 16 of the agenda.

- Members questioned the £.0194 forecast overspend relating to delays incurred in the roll out of MFD printers and was this figure recoverable against the contract with the MFD supplier. The Chief Finance Officer explained this cost was due to dual running of two contracts.
- Members questioned what lessons had been learnt from Quarter 1 and how are those learnings going to be used going into Quarter 2. The Chief Finance Officer advised a huge amount of work was carried out at the beginning of the financial year to ensure the forecast was as robust as possible. At present everything was being reviewed to ensure confidence in reporting and forecasting was as accurate as possible. It was further advised ongoing work with Directorates was taking place to mitigate the overspend with support and challenge by the finance directorate to improve the budget setting process.

*Councillor Halden arrived at 7.25pm*

- Members questioned if there was confidence that the Council was in a reasonable financial position bearing in mind the financial pressures the Council was currently under. The Chief Finance Officer advised the situation is not ideal but considering the level of savings that was built into the budget, the pressure was challenging but manageable. It was acknowledged the pressures driving the overspend needed to be tackled, however some were national problems, for example temporary accommodation, and therefore outside of the Council's control.
- Members questioned the current position of the Thameside Theatre's budget and expenditure as it was noted this was a considerable pressure in the last budget. Action Point the Chief Finance Officer was uncertain of the current position and agreed to take this away and would report back to the Committee regarding the point raised.
- Members noted a report to the next Financial Recovery Board had been requested by Commissioners and could this report be shared with the Committee. Action Point the Chief Finance Officer agreed she would check if this could be released to the Committee.

**Resolved:**

**The Members noted the contents of the Report and thanked Officers for their hard work.**

### **13. Digital and Customer Progress Update (PowerPoint Presentation)**

The Chief Digital Officer provided a PowerPoint presentation to the Committee as set out in Item 6 of the agenda. It was noted the Contact and Digital Transformation Programme was a key element of the Improvement and Recovery Plan.

Members noted and questioned the following key points:

- Members noted design principle 5 was to embed a design led approach with a focus on proactive and predictive use of data. Members questioned what was being done to grow our internal capacity to manage that as it was further noted in some industries AI applications were not producing predictive results due to the lack of expert data knowledge capabilities. The Chief Digital Officer confirmed steps were being taken towards improving systems and it was acknowledged capability had been identified and recruitment of data analysts, data architects and data engineers were needed.
- Members noted the customer was at the centre of the technology and questioned how this was being achieved. The Chief Digital Officer advised user research and service design was being carried out to identify how customers were interacting with the Council's services at the present time and how they want to interact with the Council going forward.
- Members questioned if there was money in the budget for recruitment to ensure internally there was capability to deliver the digital transformation successfully. The Chief Digital Officer confirmed upskilling and restructuring current capabilities were being addressed to introduce new, digital skills and capabilities within the IT function.
- Members asked if there would be digital assistance within the libraries. The Chief Digital Officer confirmed there was already support within the libraries but the current service provision was under review.
- Members asked what the locations of the three internet clubs referred to in the presentation were. Action Point the Chief Digital Officers to liaise with officers on the exact locations and would report back to Committee.
- Members questioned what was being done to reach residents who currently do not or are unable to use the technology already in place. The Chief Digital officer provided insights on digital division across the Borough illustrating that Thurrock's residents had access to digital means of interacting with Council services and use them on daily basis. Importance of further analysis was highlighted to understand the reasons for limited uptake of digital channels before support plans could be developed.
- Members questioned the limited access to libraries and community hubs, and what was being done to address barriers families and residents have with accessing technology. The Chief Digital Officer advised a plan was being drawn up with the main focus of ascertaining what was preventing people accessing the technology and interacting digitally.

- Members questioned when the Committee would start to see a clearer picture and timescales of what the digital transformation would look like and how it was going to work. Action Point a report would be shared with the Committee showing timelines, what work was currently being done and what was planned and being considered.
- Members questioned if the Authority was looking at what other Local Authorities were doing digitally and ascertaining best practice. The Chief Digital Officer confirmed that discussions were already taking place with other Authorities to ensure best practice and the digital transformation is cost effective. Digital sessions have been put in place for all staff led by other Authorities to gain a clear insight.

#### 14. Q & A Session: Members Enquiries Process

The Head of Customer Services presented the briefing note to the Committee as set out in Item 7 of the agenda.

The key points that the Committee were advised of were:

- The current process of reporting members enquiries;
- Acknowledgment was made that the system needed to be refreshed and automated as it was long winded and out of date;
- Immediate action had already been taken with a new system having been purchased to replace the current Respond system;
- The current analysis of members enquiries showed:
  - 106 emails were received per week;
  - For 2023/24 there was a total of 4048 member enquiries;
  - 94% were answered within the timeframe of 10 working days;
  - Average response time for replying was 5 days;
- Benching marking had begun with other Local Authorities and Croydon had adopted the digital system Thurrock had purchased, which included a Members App at no extra cost;
- The digital information system is low cost and there would be no overlapping costs when implementing the new system and running two systems;
- The preferred way forward was to obtain feedback from a working group of members.
- A focus was to ensure improvement in the quality of responses.

Action Point the Committee agreed that a working group should be put in place and the Head of Customer Services would liaise with Scrutiny Officers to set up a group to review the current process and shape the future of the members enquiries process.

Members noted and questioned the following key points:

- There was differing views whereby some members noted the current system did not work efficiently, however other members thought it was a good system and worked well.
- Members noted the complaints process needed to be refreshed whereby officers do not just document the process of what had happened, but addressed why it had happened, what could be done and how it could be improved going forward.
- Members asked for clarification on what should be classed as a complaint, what was a members enquiry and what was a service request. The Head of Customer Service clarified and but agreed this needed to be clearly defined and could be discussed in the working group to agree a uniform approach.
- Members asked what could be done when a resident was not satisfied with the answer provided. The Head of Customer Services advised a function of the new system allowed an enquiry to be switched to a complaint easily.

## **15. Work Programme**

The Committee discussed the work programme and Action Log.

Members requested that the quarterly performance budget be added to the work programme.

Members noted in the Action Log the Culture and Workforce Task and Finish was shown as closed. However, it was discussed that it had been agreed to postpone until the results of the staff survey had been circulated. It was agreed that this remains open and that it be brought back to Committee following the completion of the staff survey.

A full recording of this meeting can be found from the following link: Corporate Overview and Scrutiny – Tuesday 17 September 2024, 7:00pm - [https://thurrock.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast\\_interactive/904688](https://thurrock.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast_interactive/904688)

**The meeting finished at 8.51 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](mailto:Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk)**

