

Minutes of the Meeting of the Extraordinary Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 14 February 2024 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Martin Kerin (Chair), Deborah Arnold, Paul Arnold, Adam Carter, George Coxshall, Tony Fish, Aaron Green, Vikki Hartstean, Mark Hooper, Mark Hurrell, Andrew Jefferies, Barry Johnson, Cathy Kent, John Kent, Steve Liddiard, Ben Maney, Jacqui Maney, Cici Manwa, Valerie Morris-Cook, Sara Muldowney, Srikanth Panjala, Georgette Polley (*arrived 7.16pm*), Kairen Raper, Joycelyn Redsell, Elizabeth Rigby, Sue Shinnick, Graham Snell, Luke Spillman, James Thandi and Lee Watson

Apologies: Councillors Jack Duffin, Robert Gledhill, Fraser Massey, Terry Piccolo and Lynn Worrall

In attendance: Dr Dave Smith, Chief Executive and Managing Director
Commissioner
Asmat Hussain, Director of Legal and Governance and Monitoring Officer
Mark Bradbury, Interim Director of Place
Matthew Boulter, Head of Democratic, Scrutiny and Member Services
Michael Dineen, Assistant Director Counter Fraud, Enforcement and Community Safety
Alix MacFarlane, Communications Advisor - Intervention and Improvement, Interim Director
Steven Mair, Interim Chief Financial Officer/Section 151 Officer
Patrick McDermott, Chief of Staff to the Thurrock Commissioners
Sheila Murphy, Executive Director of Children's Services
Alex Powell, Assistant Chief Executive
Ian Wake, Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health
Nicole Wood, ECC Best Value Commissioner
Jenny Shade, Principal Democratic Services Officer
Claire Dixon, Scrutiny Officer
Lucy Tricker, Scrutiny Officer

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

20. Items of Urgent Business

There were no urgent items of business.

21. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

22. Revenue Budget Savings Proposals 2024/25

Slides from the meeting can be viewed from the following link:

[\(Public Pack\)Scrutiny Slides Budget Saving Agenda Supplement for Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 14/02/2024 19:00 \(thurrock.gov.uk\)](#)

The report outlined the second tranche of the revenue budget savings proposals, totalling £6.9 million that followed the £11.3 million of saving proposals discussed at the overview and scrutiny meeting of the 28 November 2023 and then at the Cabinet meeting of the 10 January 2024. The proposals were summarised at Appendix 1 and this report excluded those totalling £11.3 million as previously scrutinised and approved by Cabinet which were noted under Appendix 4.

The following points were raised:

- Requested that a narrative be added to the fees and charges changes so Members could understand the reasons for the changes.
- Questioned the current value of the Transformation Budget.
- Questioned whether the savings figures were a full year equivalent or were savings to be achieved.
- Referred to the business rate retention and asked for some clarification on the original and proposed savings.
- Sought clarification on whether the original £11.3 million had been approved by cabinet as the report presented was to note.
- Concern that with only two weeks to Budget Council and to ensure the most vulnerable residents in the borough were protected was the Portfolio Holder confident that savings could be made in time.
- Questioned whether these last-minute decisions were a good example of financial management.
- Questioned whether any changes had been made to the Hardship Fund.

Action

1. A narrative be added to the fees and charges changes so Members could understand the reasons for the changes ahead of full council meeting.

In turn, Portfolio Holders provided members with a summary of their portfolio 2024/25 savings proposals. These can be viewed from slides 8 to 14 from the above link.

Children's Services – Councillor Johnson

The following points were raised:

- Referred to Health Contributions and questioned how that would work to ensure savings were made.
- Clarification was provided that additional health funding would be received from health colleagues through the ICB budgets and would be external to council funding.
- Acknowledged the recouping of costs through the health contributions was a good idea and questioned why the council had not been undertaking this previously.
- Informed the initial consultation costs were in the region of £30,000 with council staff now being trained to undertake those healthcare assessments.
- Referred to the review of social care and questioned whether cost savings had already been made and how confident was the Portfolio Holder in those savings being delivered.
- Questioned whether those savings would impact the improvement of the service and cause any problems for the next Ofsted inspection.
- Questioned what the specific barriers were from accessing funds in the past and what would be put in place going forward to enable those funds to be accessed.
- Informed of the figure available in grants following on from staff training and were reassured that money had been coming in following the training.

Education – Councillor Carter

The following points were raised:

- Questioned in regard to the changes to the charging policy whether this would still be means assessed.
- Questioned why this particular area had been looked at and no other areas.
- Referred to the review of policy and routes and questioned what was specifically being reviewed in terms of routes.
- Questioned whether review included the move to the dynamic purchasing system.
- Asked the Portfolio Holder now confident he was that savings would be made by moving over to the dynamic purchasing system.
- Noted there was no data to support the cost savings.
- Questioned how the work being undertaken with academies had progressed and asked for details of those academies where work was already in train to consider alternative methods of transport.
- Noted that savings would start from the next academic year, September 2024.
- Questioned what additional savings had been found to increase the original savings of £250,000 to be increased to £395,000 as mitigation to the £18 million target.

- Questioned the cost per pupil and how many pupils this service was provided to.
- Questioned whether consideration had been given for the whole service to be wrapped up under one single company offering that service.
- Questioned how many Education Health Care Plans (EHCP) there were.
- Referred to the Transformation Budget and allocation of £20,000 for consultation for home to school and questioned whether that consultation had been completed.
- Referred to the Dedicated School Grant and questioned whether this would have an impact on children in the borough who attended schools that had been identified with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC).
- Questioned whether those academy schools starting their own transport would have a detrimental effect on their funding.
- Referred to the negative rating on the impact assessment of the Post 16 Travel charge, and questioned the Portfolio Holder whether he was happy and confident with the saving.
- Asked for reassurance that Post 16s would not be disadvantaged if they were not able to afford the service and questioned whether this would be means tested.
- Asked for some comparison with other boroughs on the Post 16 charging policy for Special Education Needs (SEN) transport.
- Confirmed that the budget was set for those children educated in Thurrock.
- Questioned what other services were looked into and what were the deciding factors to make this budget saving.
- Questioned who would be monitoring transport services such as taxi or escort services used by the most vulnerable residents and how would comments on services be feedback.
- Questioned whether public transport providers were accountable for the services they provided and whether the council had any role in this.

Action

2. Additional data requested for home to school transport as follows:
 - Details of academies where work was already in train to consider alternative methods of transport; cost per pupil; numbers of Education, Health, and Care Plans in Thurrock; means testing criteria, charging rates and the process of appeal; comparison with other boroughs Post 16 charging policy for Special Education Needs transport.

Environment, Economic Development Directional Leadership – Councillor Jefferies

The following points were raised:

- The council needed to be more innovative when future events are planned within the borough in regard to licensing appeals.
- More outdoor events need to be considered for the borough.

- Member referred to the grass cutting cycle and questioned the criteria used to identify which parks would be cut when.
- Requested that those ward members be informed of the results of the benchmarking exercise once this had been completed.
- Concessions for vulnerable residents would be looked at following the introduction of the new brown bin charge.
- The process for residents to undertake a public event in the borough needed to be reviewed.
- Questioned who would be responsible for any damage made following public events held on council land.
- Questioned whether the council would enforce organisers of public events to employ extra security to tackle any anti-social behaviour.
- Member stated there needed to be different models of delivery of the new brown bin charge for those vulnerable residents.
- Questioned whether the council's processes for public events was unattractive which was stopping people from applying.
- Member was reminded that brown bins were emptied once a fortnight.
- Members were informed that the assisted bin service would continue for vulnerable residents.
- Members were informed those vulnerable resident's bins were identified by a yellow diamond sticker.
- Residents who paid for the new brown bin charge would have a unremovable sticker on their bin which could not be reproduced. Also the bar-tech system will be used to identify which brown bins should be emptied.
- Questioned what consultations had taken place on the bio-diversity areas within the borough.
- Members agreed that each event should be looked at individually, either a non-profit, commercial or community events.
- Members were informed that for those assisted bins all three bins would be emptied.
- Questioned whether the salary of the employment of the event's organiser had been factored into the budget.

Action

3. A review of the application process for events in parks/open spaces to be undertaken.
4. Brown bin charge concession to be reviewed as part of savings proposal (Fees and Charges).

Finance, HR and Payroll – Councillor Snell

The following points were raised:

- Portfolio Holder confirmed the total HR savings of £1.136 million incorporated the £600,000 business case that was originally for the HR Transformation.

- Member referenced the note that further information on the additional proposed mitigation of council tax would be contained within the report to be informed this would form part of the cabinet papers.

Health, Adult Health, Community – Councillor Coxshall

The following points were raised:

- Questioned the Minimum Income Guarantee for Thurrock.
- Raised concern on the effect on residents who would not want to pay and questioned what risk assessments would be put in place.
- Questioned whether alternative methods had been explored which may have been more cost effective.
- Agreed this was an opportunity to review the service.
- Reassured that a robust review of the service had been undertaken for those most vulnerable residents.
- The average charge figure would be £5 a week.
- Questioned whether the £50,000 saving was really necessary and what other service savings had been considered.

Action

5. Adult Social Care charging policy to be added to the work programme for the Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Regeneration and Highways – Councillor B Maney

The following points were raised:

- Member asked for some context of savings where the council looked at which were now being disposed of.
- Asked for a guarantee that under the rent review, leases would be looked into and be based on what businesses were currently in those buildings. This should be on a need's basis based on what businesses could actually afford. For the review to also look at rent agreements for small commercial businesses.
- This was an opportunity to reevaluate rents to encourage residents to start-up businesses in the borough.
- Noted that it would be more beneficial to the council to have council owned units in use and occupied.

Transformational Change, Communications and Governance – Councillor Snell and Councillor D Arnold

The following points were raised:

- The total HR savings of £1.136 million incorporated the £600,000 business case that was originally for the HR Transformation.

- Referred to contact management and questioned whether the procurement of the voice automation equipment had commenced.
- Questioned how confident the Portfolio Holder was that the equipment could be procured and installed into the council to achieve the £520,000 savings.
- Noted that the costs of procurement currently being looked at could be reduced because of the economies of scale and the advances of technology.

Members were provided with a summary of the Scrutiny – additional saving proposals and the 2024/25 Proposed further savings.

The following points were raised:

- Referred to the £1.7 million and reiterated that going forward there would always be a £1.7 million gap.
- Questioned the Parks and Open Spaces savings of £53,000.
- In regard to the £1.7 million saving, questioned the figures for the five-year impact which would be approximately £85,000 for the first year, £400,000 over five years.
- Discussion took place on the Hardship Fund reduction and clarification was sought on the process.

Action

6. Clarification of the Hardship Fund process and the Community and Equality Impact assessment to be circulated when available.
7. The following revisions to recommendations were made:

Recommendation 1.3 - That the committee consider the Community and Equality Impact assessments and summaries of the public engagement activities that were available.

Recommendation 1.5 - That the committee consider the remainder of the Fees and Charges proposal will be distributed with a narrative as part of providing rationale for the changes.

RESOLVED

- 1. That the committee act as a critical friend in objectively assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the proposals.**
- 2. That the committee ask Members or Directors for any explanation or information needed to better understand the proposals.**
- 3. That the committee consider the Community and Equality Impact assessments and summaries of the public engagement activities that were available.**

4. That the committee make recommendations to Officers to improve the proposals.
5. That the committee consider the remainder of the Fees and Charges proposal will be distributed with a narrative as part of providing rationale for the changes.
6. That the committee provide commentary and recommendations (including any alternative options) to Cabinet to consider when making decisions.

At 9.15pm, the Chair extended standing orders to 10.30pm.

At 9.15pm, the meeting was adjourned.

At 9.27pm, the meeting reconvened

23. Revenue Budget 2024/25

The report set out the proposed Revenue Budget for 2024/25 that allow the Council to set a legally balanced budget for 2024/25.

The following points were raised:

- Commissioner's comments would be added to the reports being presented at next week's cabinet meeting.
- Concern that going into a budget setting council meeting in two weeks' time there was still over £1 million gap in the budget and savings still having not been identified.
- Concern that members may lose sight of the gravity of the situation that the council was in and would remain so for several years.

At 10.10pm, Councillor Spillman left the meeting.

RESOLVED

1. The second tranche of savings as set out in the Budget Savings Report, elsewhere on this agenda.
2. The 2024/25 Budget to enable the Council Tax requirement for 2024/25 to be set at £91.266 million (as per section 5), a 7.99% increase on 2023/24.
3. The Council Tax Resolution 2024/25 as set out in Appendix 2 which sets the following Council Tax precepts increases:
 - The Police and Crime Commissioner has increased Council Tax for Band D property to £246.42 per annum, a 6% increase on 2023/24,

- **The Fire Authority has increased Council Tax for a Band D property to £82.62 per annum, a 3% increase on 2023/24.**
- 4. The proposal for Members to work with officers to identify £1.7 million in additional savings by 22nd March 2024, potential actions are presented in Table 18.**
 - 5. The proposed 2024/25 Budget based on the estimated financial deficit to be funded by a capitalisation direction of £68.6 million.**
 - 6. The submission of business cases by services is required to secure approval to utilise budgets earmarked for contract Inflation, use of contingencies and budgets earmarked for pressures (Section 10, Table 21) for approval by the Chief Finance Officer and the Finance Commissioner in conjunction with the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Human Resources and Payroll to allow in-year budget adjustments. Members comments on those business cases seen and presented.**
 - 7. The submission of a spending plan by services is required before the newly announced additional grant funding for Social Care can be utilised (£1.4 million). This will require approval by the Chief Finance Officer and the Finance Commissioner in conjunction with the Portfolio Holder for Children & Housing to allow in-year budget adjustments.**
 - 8. Note the Council's estimated position on Reserves as set out in section 13.**
 - 9. Note the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) settlement for 2024/25 and the Thurrock allocation of £53.3 million as set out in Section 11.**
 - 10. Note the continued use of measures to control expenditure as set out in section 14.**

At 10.18pm, the Chair suspended standing orders until 11.30pm.

At 10.18pm, the meeting adjourned.

At 10.18pm, Councillors Rigby, C Kent, Shinnick and Liddiard left the meeting.

At 10.23pm, the meeting reconvened.

24. Medium Term Financial Strategy 2024/25

The Council's financial position was virtually unprecedentedly challenging and would remain so for several years. The position was forecast to improve considerably in the next five years, via the divestment of assets, the implementation of a challenging savings programme, working differently and service delivery changes. The report presented the council's financial position.

No comments were made.

Action

8. Medium Term Financial Strategy 2024/25 recommendations for Cabinet papers to be revised to include the committee received the report and considered it.

RESOLVED

The committee received the report on the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and in doing so considered:

- **the financial targets summarised in paragraph 1.3,**
- **the financial assumptions / deliverables as summarised at paragraph 1.4 to 1.7;**
- **that if any of the above targets or assumptions adversely vary, alternatives to the same timescale and value would need to be identified and implemented.**

At 10.33pm, Councillor Manwa left the meeting.

25. Capital Strategy/Programme 2024/25 to 2028/29

The report set out proposed changes to the Council's capital strategy from 2024/25 to 2028/29.

No comments were made.

RESOLVED

1. **That the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the matters set out in this report prior to it being presented to Cabinet on 22 February 2024 and Council on 28 February 2024.**
2. **That the Committee noted that Full Council will be asked to agree the following:**
 - (a) **approved the revised capital strategy and 5-year capital programme for 2024/25 to 2028/29 as set out in this report.**
 - (b) **approve that the capital projects:**
 - **currently "on hold" totalling £119.0 million (see Appendix 2) are not included in the Capital Programme and the associated borrowing of £62.9 million is not required,**
 - **the capital schemes that have not started totalling £3.3 million (see Appendix 4) are also formally confirmed as removed from the capital programme and the associated borrowing of £3.3 million is not required,**

➤ those schemes assessed and considered no longer necessary totalling £60.1 million (see Appendix 5) are confirmed as removed from the capital programme and the associated borrowing of £56.5 million is not required.

(c) approved the proposed financing of the capital programme as set out in Appendix 3.

(d) delegated to the Interim Director of Finance s151 all decisions surrounding the financing of individual items of expenditure within the revised capital programme, in line with the overall capital programme as set out in Appendix 3, in a manner which achieves the most effective use of Council's resources.

(e) approved that any future changes to the capital programme should be approved by Full Council, whilst ensuring that external funding is able to be used in a timely manner, with any new borrowing requirements subject to Commissioner approval.

(f) approved that the Capital Programme Board review and receive updates on the action plans put in place to address the further improvements identified in Appendix 7 and to note progress on continued delivery of these improvements.

26. Housing Revenue Account: 30-Year Business Plan

The report set out the proposed 30-Year Business Plan for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and considered both the Revenue and Capital position. The Revenue Business plan over a 5-year period projects gross income of £360.666 million and gross expenditure of £350.814 million. The HRA Capital Programme provided for a total capital investment of £175.069 million over the next five years, of which £83.77 million related to existing properties, and £91.291 million relating to new developments and property purchases. Over the 30-year business plan period, £646.214 million was to be spent on the HRA Capital Programme.

No comments were made.

RESOLVED

- 1. Noted the HRA revenue budget for 2024/25 (Table 1 & Appendix A).**
- 2. Noted the HRA 5-year revenue budgets for 2024-25 to 2028-29 (Table 1 & Appendix A).**
- 3. Noted the HRA 30-year revenue budget for 2024-25 to 2053-54 (Appendix B)**

4. Noted the HRA 5-year capital programme for a total of £175.069m (Table 3 & Appendix C).
5. Noted the 30-year capital programme for 2024-25 to 2053-54 (Appendix D).
6. Noted the draft HRA reserves and balances for the 5-year business plan (Appendix E).
7. Noted the submission of the two requests to the Secretary of State. The outcome of it will be reported to Cabinet / Council.

A full recording of this meeting can be viewed from the following link:

[Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Wednesday 14 February 2024, 7:00pm - Thurrock Council committee meeting webcasts \(public-i.tv\)](#)

The meeting finished at 10.42 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