

**MINUTES of the meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny  
Committee held on 5 July 2010 at 7.00pm.**

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**Present:** Councillors Danny Nicklen (Chair), Barry Johnson, Terry Hipsey, Wendy Curtis, Bukky Okunade and Phil Anderson (substituting for Mike Revell).

**Apologies:** Councillor Mike Revell

**In attendance:** D. Lawson – Interim Deputy Head of Legal Services  
S. Black – Head of Communities, Libraries and Culture  
L. Payne – Corporate Director – Community Well-being  
L. Richards – Policy Officer  
N. Warren – Communities Officer  
M. Boulter- Principal Democratic Services Officer

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**1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

a) Interests

Councillor Okunade declared a personal interest in relation to Item 6 by virtue that she represents the council on the CVS and TRUST boards.

All Councillors declared a personal interest in relation to item 4 by virtue that they were either candidates or counting agents at the previous election.

b) Whipping

No interests were declared.

**2. REVIEW OF THE ELECTION PROCESS 2010**

The Committee was given a brief background to the election process this year and was informed that although the process had come under some criticism for the time taken to declare the Parliamentary result there was no evidence to suggest that the legal provisions relating to the conduct of the count were not followed. It was highlighted to the Committee that Thurrock had not been the last council to declare its Parliamentary results on the night, however, there was an assessment that the whole process was three to four hours longer than it should have been.

The process was longer than it should have been because the counting did not start until all the ballot boxes had arrived at the venue. This cost at least two hours and better practice would have been to start counting boxes as soon as they arrived. Secondly the count staff took an over-caution approach and did not follow instructions and there was a lack of firm management at the count of the relationship between staff and count agents. This cost additional hour or two. It was also felt that the counting venue was too small.

There were ten recommendations following an internal and an independent report. The key recommendations were to speed up the process of allocating ballot boxes, employ senior staff to the roles of count supervisors and appoint additional Deputy Returning Officer/s. These measures would significantly speed up the count process. Further recommendations were made regarding improving logistics, event management and communication between officers at the event.

In response to a question officers confirmed that the cost for employing the two deputy returning officers would be a small some of money amounting to a few hundred pounds. The Chair felt that residents were keen to volunteer for polling station duty and that this should be considered as it would save money and also allow officers to cut their working day and focus on the count later in the evening.

Councillor Curtis raised the issue of public attendance at the final count and observed that there was not enough space or seating for members of the public to watch the count. Officers agreed this had been an issue on the night and additional seating was organised during the night. The officers confirmed that this particular issue would be addressed through an improvement of event management.

A discussion was had on the role of the counting agents and many of the committee felt that the counting agents had acted in an appropriate manner at the count when asking for recounts or clarification of procedure. Members felt communication of the procedure on the evening could have been improved.

Some members of the committee were concerned that the employment of two deputy returning officers would not improve the procedure and that an improvement in supervisor support and knowledge would tackle the issue more effectively. These same members also felt that it was not essential to have senior officers acting solely as supervisors as many less senior officers would be able to perform the role just as well and might be less inclined to solve problems through innovation rather than sticking to the set procedures.

Councillor Hipsey felt that there were too many people at the count and that candidates needed to be careful about their interaction with officers on the evening because of Purdah issues.

**RESOLVED: That**

- i) **The report is noted.**
- ii) **A briefing note returns to the Committee at an appropriate time outlining the costs for employing deputy returning officers and any costs associated with changing procedures.**

**3. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

The Committee were asked to set up a task and finish group to develop an approach to community engagement. It was explained that community engagement was a priority for the council and it was hoped that Members would be empowered to become leaders for their communities.

It was suggested that the group could hear from expert witnesses in this field, listen to evidence from other councils where community engagement has been successful, and explore the relationship between residents and councillors to form a way forward. The group could also look at area based working and devolved budgets.

Councillor Johnson asked that the group be careful when looking at other councils to ensure that options were picked that best suited Thurrock's needs.

Councillor Hipsey asked whether devolved budgets would replace community forum funds and it was responded that it was not known. However, some community forums did not use their funding whereas others used it very well.

**RESOLVED: That**

- i) **A task and finish group be set up to look into this issue and will undertake the tasks stated in the report.**
- ii) **The Group be composed of four Members with one representative from each political group at the council.**

**4. VOLUNTARY SECTOR GRANTS REVIEW AND THRIVING THIRD SECTOR STRATEGY**

It was highlighted to the Committee that the task group established to undertake the review was vital and that Member representation was essential to its progress. Thurrock needed to improve in making the third sector feel that it was being supported by the council.

A debate was had on the role and input of faith groups and it was confirmed that they had been included into the Compact in 2006. There were few faith groups applying for funding but those that did had put the money into good projects. A key objective was to encourage more faith groups to participate, although it was stated that some groups did not want to seek funding.

In response to a question on a lack of understanding of the third sector, officers replied that this lack of understanding on officers' part was sometimes because there was a lack of information available on the third sector. It was planned for this to be improved through better communications.

Councillor Anderson thought the report was good but needed more intention and a framework for delivery to become a proper strategy. Officers agreed and stated that the task group would go some way in forming the strategy.

**RESOLVED: That:**

- i) The progress regarding the review of Voluntary Sector Grants and the intention to report to Cabinet in October 2010 rather than September 2010 be noted.**
- ii) An email be sent to all overview and scrutiny Members asking for two people to participate in the task group.**
- iii) The above comments be noted for consideration of the draft strategy.**

**5. WORK PROGRAMME**

Councillor Hipsey raised an issue on the viability of returning an empty building in Stanford Le Hope to public use.

**RESOLVED: that:**

- i) The CAA Update for April be removed.**
- ii) A report on the procurement process of the recent waste contract be added to the work programme following clarification on the actual topic for discussion.**

**The meeting finished at 8.46pm.**

Approved as a true and correct record

**CHAIRMAN**

**DATE**

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact  
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or alternatively e-mail [mboulter@thurrock.gov.uk](mailto:mboulter@thurrock.gov.uk)**