

**MINUTES of the meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny
Committee held on 26 July 2010 at 7.00pm.**

Present: Councillors Danny Nicklen (Chair), Terry Hipsey (left at 8.59pm), Wendy Curtis, Bukky Okunade, Mike Revell and Phil Anderson (substituting for Barry Johnson).

Apologies: Councillor Barry Johnson from the committee and Pauline Tolson, Sue Gray, Stuart St. Clair-Haslam and Cathy Kent as general Overview and Scrutiny Members.

In attendance: Councillor Tony Fish – Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care
Councillor Yash Gupta – Portfolio Holder for Environment
Councillor Lynn Worrall – Portfolio Holder for Community, Culture and Leisure
Councillor Andrew Smith – Portfolio Holder for Housing and Regeneration
Councillor Gerard Rice – Portfolio Holder for Crime and Disorder
Councillor Oliver Gerrish – Portfolio Holder for Central Services
Councillor Val Morris-Cook – Portfolio Holder for Pride in Thurrock
Councillor John Kent – leader of the Council
Councillor Amanda Wilton – Member of Overview and Scrutiny (left at 8.18pm)
Councillor James Halden – Member of Overview and Scrutiny
Councillor Angie Gaywood – Chair of Children’s Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee
S. Black – Head of Communities, Libraries and Culture
L. Billingham – Interim Head of Transformation and Independence
R. Harris – Head of Strategic Commissioning and Resources
B. Newman – Corporate Director – Sustainable Communities
J. Olsson – Corporate Director – Children’s Services
T. Shawkat – Head of Legal Services
M. Hone- corporate Director – Finance and Corporate Governance
S. Clark – Head of Finance
M. Boulter- Principal Democratic Services Officer

The Chair suggested that the Committee focus on appendix 3 for this meeting and reserve comment on future savings proposals for another meeting. The Committee agreed.

6. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

a) Interests

Councillor Okunade declared a personal interest in relation to Item 4 by virtue that she is a member of a voluntary sector organisation.

b) Whipping

No interests were declared.

7. PRIORITIES AND BUDGETS 2010/11 AND BEYOND

The Leader introduced the report stating that it had been difficult to make the savings proposals and that the situation was compounded by a number of factors including the withdrawal of government funding, PCT (Primary Care Trust) funding for children's services, the recent savings requested by the new coalition government and a £4 million overspend. The Council had been required to move quickly to make these in year savings.

Finance and Corporate Governance

With regards to the five Finance and Corporate Governance savings the Committee was informed that all savings had already been achieved and would be instant savings if Members agreed to the report proposals. The total sum of these five savings was £150,000. With regards to the review of business rates officers explained that the saving to the Council exceeded the annual budget because the refund agreed was backdated and was in respect of several years' worth of payments.

Community Well-being

The portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care explained the reasoning behind the savings proposals and stated that his aim had been to avoid affecting front line services. He had also aimed to achieve savings by increasing income for the services provided. All proposals contained in the report represented the complete package of savings and there had been no pre-selection beforehand.

With regards to the HIV/AIDS grant (CWB1) officers were asked why the saving of £50,000 could not be higher as the full grant was over £80,000. It was explained that the saving represented the money that was still left in the grant. Some of the fund had already been spent.

There was some discussion over whether assistive technology projects would actually make savings in the long term (CWB2). It was replied that long term future savings were difficult to predict in this case. It was expected the technology would help people stay out of expensive residential care. It was added that the assistive technology programme was not being expanded as much as was hoped prior to the requirement to make in year savings. Officers informed the Committee that more extensive savings would need to be made next year and there was always a possibility that services could be expanded again next year if savings in other areas of the directorate allowed for them to be invested in.

Following a brief question by the Chair it was clarified that training across the council was being streamlined centrally and that all efforts were being made to ensure there was no clashes or duplication of training. (CWB12 and CI4).

With regards to aids and adaptations for housing tenants (CWB14) it was explained that the saving was a genuine saving that had not come out of the Housing Revenue Account at the time but was funded through the general fund (although the fund was being transferred back to the Housing Revenue Account for future use).

The Committee debated the role and status of the Diversity Team and the cohesion budget (CWB27 and 28). During the discussion officers stated that the saving made in the Diversity Team would be achieved by not filling an already vacant post and that the project savings for community cohesion would be made by reducing the scope and size of planned future projects. Councillor Anderson asked whether the reduction of the Diversity Team and their projects would make the role of the team within the Council redundant and whether the staff could be usefully employed in other areas of the council thus making further savings. In response it was highlighted that there were legal obligations for the Council to promote diversity and ensure it was compliant with legislation. The Leader stated that further savings within the team could not have been made in year and that the diversity function would be reviewed again when the Cabinet considered savings for 2011/12.

Upon request a number of portfolio holders outlined the decision made at Cabinet on 21st July to open Chafford Hundred Library (CWB31) for three sessions per week for adult use. It was hoped that the library could remain open for adults full time by utilising a volunteer service. The Chair asked whether a cut in library opening times across all libraries in the borough would lead to less impact for all users. Officers explained that such a decision would take a long time to resolve and would not be viable for instant in year savings. It was added that Chafford Hundred Library had one of the lowest adult footfall figures in the borough.

It was clarified that the savings made by opening the library for adults three times a week would be £7760 as compared to £10,000 if the library was completely shut to adults. It was noted that the library would remain in use for children and the Leader highlighted that the proposed saving was the only option whereby the council could make an instant saving without closing a building (the library was contained within a school) or making staff redundant (staff would be used to cover peak times at other libraries).

Councillor Halden observed that piecemeal closures of libraries had the risk of causing the gradual decline of library use. He felt that in other areas of the borough there was more than one library close to each other and that this may have been a better option than reducing a service in an area where there was less provision. Officers stated that footfall had actually increased in libraries where opening times had been reduced last year. Officers felt that residents changed their habits to fit around the service but obviously this might not be the case if services were radically altered or reduced.

There was a brief discussion on the funding of community forums (CWB29) and it was outlined that the Vertex Sociability Fund was a fund that was regularly affected by savings proposals and that the Cabinet hoped to have £100,000 for community work for next year, although this funding would not necessarily be invested through community forums. Officers had met with community chairs last week and there had been an acceptance of the savings the Council needed to make. Their funding requests for next year were modest and amounted to around £14,000.

Children, Education and Families

The portfolio holder explained that she had attended a meeting to discuss the savings proposals and it had been a hard decision to identify those savings that would have least impact on front line services. The savings were based around integrating services with schools, encouraging local delivery of services and providing targeted services not universal ones.

The Committee was concerned that the reduction in social workers (CEF1) would increase the risk of serious cases of child abuse going undetected. The Committee was assured that risk was not increased by the reduction of staff and that the reduction represented a re-evaluation of the workloads within the department. The Committee was reminded that there would always be a risk of such cases going undetected but the new way of working would ensure social workers worked on the most important cases. It was hoped that around 700 inactive cases could be removed from staff's workload. It was added that schools would be expected to do more work in this area as a result. The Committee agreed that a presentation relating to the re-

structuring of the department would be welcomed before full council this week.

The Chair asked whether volunteers could undertake certain repairs at places such as the Culver Centre (CEF6) regardless of the proposed saving and it was confirmed that they could still do very light duties but the maintenance covered in the saving equated to more specialised repairs.

With regards to restructuring budgets across performance and support services (CEF7 and 8) the text was clarified as meaning that vacant posts would not be recruited to.

The portfolio holder responded to a question on the Learning and Universal Outcomes Service (CEF9 and 10) by stating that connexions workers, youth workers and adult education staff would be the most affected and that the savings would be made through vacant posts, agency staff and targeting services.

Sustainable Communities

The Corporate Director informed the Committee that out of a budget of £24 million only £12 million was realistic for review in order to make in year savings. Some of the savings targeted large budget areas and the Portfolio Holder for Environment stated that he had endeavoured to avoid affecting front line services.

Councillor Revell requested the list of park and cemeteries that would no longer be locked (SC5) and this was agreed to be provided before Full Council. The Portfolio Holder explained that there were other points of entry to parks which made locking gates unnecessary. With regards to removing the ten highest maintenance play areas (SC12) the Leader clarified that this did not mean that these play areas would be removed but the equipment there would be allowed to reach its natural end of use.

Councillor Revell also asked for more detail on the savings surrounding autumn planting schemes (SC11). He felt that the planting was very inexpensive and wondered at how the savings would be made. It was explained that the planting created work later on in the year which had costs attached to them and it was these costs that would be saved.

Some Members of the Committee felt that the reduction of the deep street cleaning teams from three to two would impact on the cleanliness of Thurrock (SC7). The Leader replied that if this saving was not made, other savings would need to be identified in Children's Services or Adult Services. On behalf of Councillor Tolson, the Chair stated that the revision of street cleaning in light of the savings would need to target those areas in most need. The Portfolio Holder for Pride

in Thurrock added that the Council need to educate residents more on littering to reduce the need for the Council to keep cleaning it up.

A brief debate was had on the removal of speed cameras (SC4 and 6) whereby the Committee was informed that all revenue made by these cameras went directly to the government and not the Council. It was confirmed that central government would allow this but there was some uncertainty as to whether their removal would cause funding issues for police authorities.

The Chair raised the issue of the reduction in some Grays Beach activities (SC8) stating that he felt that the small saving of £5000 was not worth the cost of losing valuable activities that encouraged people to visit the beach. The Leader agreed to re-look at this issue to see if the money could be saved from the beach without stopping any of the activities.

Corporate Improvement

Portfolio holders explained that the omission of a place survey in 2010 (CI1) was in response to place surveys no longer being a statutory requirement. Residents' views would instead be collected through processes such as complaints.

RESOLVED: That the committee:

- a) Agree the proposed arrangements for reviewing priorities and performance objectives;**
- b) Note the implications of the recent government announcement relating to local government in 2010/11 and other changes affecting the Council resulting from the budget statement on 22nd June (Appendix 2);**
- c) Delegate responsibility for revising the approved transport development programme to the Transport portfolio holder, in conjunction with the Leader of the Council and the Director of Sustainable Communities, to bring the programme back in line with the reduced level of resources now available;**
- d) Note the additional steps which have been taken to reduce expenditure through the curtailment of recruitment, reviewing the use of agency/temporary staff and contract staff and other measures to reduce costs and that Cabinet agree to receive a comprehensive programme of efficiency savings for the medium term at their October meeting (Appendix 2A);**
- e) Agree the savings proposals set out in Appendix 3 in order to achieve savings of £4m in 2010/11 and for these to be recommended for endorsement to full Council on 28th July and**

that Cabinet instruct Directors to achieve any further savings necessary to maintain spending within the sums agreed by Council for 2010/11;

- f) Note the latest medium term forecast of the Council's financial position in 2011 to 2014 and the composition of the Council's budget (Appendix 4);**
- g) Agree in principle to the changes proposed in respect of 2011/12 which have a long lead in time, instruct officers to commence implementation as soon as possible and refer to Council for information (Appendix 6);**
- h) Note the proposed timetable for the 2011/12 budget and refer this to Council for information (Appendix 8);**
- i) Instruct Directors to come forward by mid September with broad service strategies, and robust HR and efficiency strategies , for achieving savings of £35m over the next three years and specific proposals for 2011/12 which will achieve savings of £15m together with realistic implementation strategies and proposed performance objectives for the period 2011-2014;**
- j) Instruct the Chief Executive and Directors to develop an asset strategy by October setting out clear proposals to incentivise the efficient use of council land and property together with proposals for realising capital receipts by the sale of surplus assets;**
- k) Instruct officers to open discussions with the Unions over existing terms and conditions and cabinet determine a future staffing strategy at the September meeting;**
- l) Recommend that the Council instructs the Director of Finance and Corporate Governance to review the external debt structure in order to reduce total financing costs in the medium term and to make any changes necessary to the prudential borrowing arrangements in consultation with the Finance portfolio holder and subsequently by Council; and**
- m) Note the consultation that will take place in respect of the Council's medium term intentions regarding service provision (Appendix 7).**

The meeting finished at 9.06pm.

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**