

MINUTES of the Meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 28 June 2011

Present: Cllr R Gledhill (Chair); Cllr A Kiely, Cllr Y Gupta, Cllr J Halden*

Apologies: Cllr W Curtis (substituted by Cllr A Keily); Cllr D Revell; Cllr T Hipsey; Cllr D Nicklen

**Cllr Halden was appointed as a temporary substitute on the authority of the Proper Officer. Cllr Kiely was appointed as an additional substitute to the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee at Council on 22 June 2011*

Attendance: R. Waterhouse – Director of Transformation
M. Hone – Director of Finance and Corporate Governance
S. Welton – Performance and Risk Officer
C. Stephenson – Corporate Performance & Improvement Manager
C. Stratford – Head of Housing
B. Foster – Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes
Sue Green – Strategic Lead Early Years
R. Harris – Head of Strategic Commissioning and Resources
S Clark – Head of Corporate Finance
T Shawkat – Head of Legal Services/Monitoring Officer
J Mayer – Senior Democratic Services Officer
N Warren – Community Development Officer
S Zachariah - Business & Strategic Development Manager

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

a) Interests

None declared.

b) Whipping

None declared.

2. MINUTES OF CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE OF 5 APRIL 2011 (Municipal Year 2010/11)

As Cllr W Curtis and Cllr B Okunde were the only two Councillors on the Committee, who had also served in the previous Municipal Year, the Chair received and noted the Minutes. Cllrs Curtis and Okunade were

not present at this meeting, so confirmation of the Minutes would be subject to verification by Cllrs Curtis and Okunade.

3. MATTERS OF URGENT BUSINESS

There were no matters of urgent business but the Chair agreed to papers being tabled in respect of Agenda Item 7 (Corporate Performance Report) as paragraphs 4.6 – 4.8 had been omitted due to a printing error.

4. REVIEW OF BOROUGH ELECTION AND UK PARLIAMENTARY REFERENDUM 2011

The Head of Legal Services (Monitoring Officer and Returning Officer) introduced this report, which outlined the progress made following the review of the Election held on 6 May 2010. The Borough Election and Parliamentary Referendum on 5 May enabled the service to demonstrate improvements. The report also suggested further refinements for the future. Members were pleased to receive the report and agreed that the process had vastly improved since the 2010 General Election.

There had been positive feedback from agents, MP's and members generally and the Chair asked if this could be formalised and circulated to Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Members.

Members of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee provided the following feedback:

1. Ramps were of a poor quality at some stations.
2. If any polling stations change, a sign should be displayed at the former station.
3. Belhus Station was poorly located and a long walk for most ward residents.
4. Explore the possible use of satellite counting locations.

The Monitoring Officer advised that the above issues would be picked up as part of the forthcoming Polling Station Review.

In responding to members questions, the Monitoring Officer advised that the count had taken place the next day because the Referendum count could not start until 4pm the next day (Friday 6 May). Holding both counts the following day was the most efficient use of counting staff.

In concluding, the Chair commended the vast improvements in the efficiency of this year's election and count and thanked Tasnim Shawkat, Elaine Sheridan, the Elections Team and officers who assisted.

RESOLVED

- 1. That the Review of the Borough Election and UK Parliamentary Referendum 2011 be noted, along with the comments made at 1-4 above.**
- 2. That any feedback on this year's election (from agents, MPs and other agencies) be formalised and circulated to members of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee.**

5. VETERANS' CHARTER

This report proposed that Corporate Overview and Scrutiny establish a Task and Finish Group in support of the Motion resolved at full Council on 30 March 2011; *'to investigate and consider working with partners to create a Thurrock Service Veterans Charter'*.

The Community Development Manager advised that the project would include working with veteran engagement groups and advertised in the local press. The officer advised that a few charters were in place across the country, with one in the North West being an example of best practice. The Chair suggested working with those veterans who had integrated well; learning from their positive experiences. The Portfolio Holder suggested that a lot of members would have met ex-servicemen and women during the recent election campaign. Therefore, once agreed, the Group's Terms of Reference should be circulated to all members.

RESOLVED

- 1. That a Task and Finish Group be established, in support of the Motion created by Full Council on 30 March 2011; to investigate and consider working with partners to create a Thurrock Service Veterans Charter.**
- 2. That the Group's Terms of Reference (once agreed) be circulated to all members of the Council .**

6. CORPORATE PERFORMANCE – MONTH 12 (to end of March 2011)

This report provided members with a summary of performance against key performance indicators, contained within the Corporate Scorecard 2010-11, up to the end of March 2011

Members were concerned about the poor performance of the NEET (Not in Employment or Training) indicator, but noted that this was particularly challenging and only 2 authorities in the country had achieved the target. Officers advised that the most vulnerable young people were targeted first.

There was some debate about the range of indicators used within the Corporate Scorecard and whether they were the best measures to use to monitor the things that were of interest to the community.. Members agreed that the issues which constituents' feel most strongly about are street cleaning, litter, graffiti and fly-tipping.

Members also considered indicator NI 158 for 'non-decent' homes. The Chair suggested that Health Overview and Scrutiny might wish to look at what Thurrock would class as 'decent' and 'non-decent'. The Head of Housing advised that this is currently a national definition but a local definition might be required in the future.

The Director for Transformation explained that there would be fewer nationally prescribed performance measures in the future and indicators would increasingly be developed by service managers to focus on the issues that were of local importance.

He added that the report presented to members at this meeting was the final report in respect of the old Corporate Scorecard. At the next meeting the Committee would receive the first quarter's monitoring report against the new Corporate Scorecard that was approved by Cabinet in March 2011.

Councillor Smith was invited to comment as Portfolio Holder and whilst reluctant to change the targets in the new scorecard, felt it would be prudent to ensure they were focussed appropriately.

In concluding, the Chair proposed that the Task and Finish group, set up by the Committee at its last meeting should involve members from across all the Overview and Scrutiny Committees, and look at outcome based qualitative and quantitative indicators. It was agreed that an outcome of this work should be used to enhance the effectiveness of performance reporting to residents.

RESOLVED

- 1. That the performance and monitoring in areas of concern and areas for further focus be noted.**
- 2. That the improvement activity either currently underway or being commissioned in respect of underperforming indicators be noted.**
- 3. That the Task and Finish Group commissioned at the last meeting of the Committee should include members from across all Overview and Scrutiny Committees, and look at outcome based qualitative and quantitative indicators.**

4. **That the Outcome of the Task and Finish Group be reported to all Overview and Scrutiny Committees and Cabinet.**

7. **CORPORATE FAIR DEBT POLICY**

Cabinet on 8 June agreed that the Policy document required further refinement before being presented as a complete and full working document. Cabinet therefore took the decision refer the document back to this meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee, before receiving it again on 6 July for final approval.

The Chair invited the Portfolio Holder to speak on the report and Councillor P Smith stressed that residents having financial difficulties were urged to contact the Council as early as possible. The revised document set out different strategies for the 'can't pays' and 'won't pays', whilst recognising the Council's duty to maximise its collection of Council Tax. The Director of Finance and Corporate Governance was confident that this approach would result in a fall in complaints about the Council's collection procedures. In addition to this, a system for recording telephone calls would soon be in place.

The Director also explained the challenges in assisting certain types of debtor in Thurrock. Generally, these were young professionals, with high outgoings and a lot of debt but not eligible for any assistance. Amongst this group, there was often a culture of paying off high interest debts first, such as loans or credit cards.

Members welcomed the revised document and its prevention strategies and were pleased that it had a more human and flexible approach to collection. In order to strengthen the prevention strategies, the Council were running debt and bailiff surgeries. Collection staff were working closely with the Citizens Advice Bureau and offering residents pre-payment for Council Services, such as nurseries.

There was some discussion about the definition of 'vulnerable residents'. Generally, members felt that not all residents who fall within certain categories; ie having a physical disability, would be vulnerable and unable to pay their Council Tax. Whilst the majority of members felt that the list should be reduced, Cllr Kiely felt that the Policy should define more categories of vulnerability (e.g. lone parents) and asked that his opinion be recorded in the Minutes.

The Chair asked for an addition to page 109 of the Policy. In addition to possible attachment of benefits, the Policy should also state: '*Attachment of Earnings mayight be considered to collect the debt*'. ~~CHECK CLLR GLEDHILL~~

In concluding, the Chair welcomed the revised Policy for its flexible, human approach and innovative debt prevention strategies, such as the Bailiff surgeries. However, the Council must maximise its collection of

Council Tax, in order to protect services for its residents. The Chair thanked the officers and Portfolio Holder for their hard work in revising the document.

RESOLVED:

1. That the revised Corporate Fair Debt Policy be approved, with an amendment to page 109, as stated above.
2. That the Policy show a shorter list of categories of vulnerable residents, whilst recognising that the list would not be exhaustive.
2. That the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee receive feedback on the new Policy at its Meeting in March 2012

8. WORKPLAN

Members reviewed the draft workplan and amended it to include the following:

- RIPA Surveillance – comparison with other authorities (resolution from the Standards Committee of 23 June 2011)
- Review of the Corporate Debt Policy – 22 March 2012

The Chair noted that there would be scope to convene an extra meeting between September 2011 and January 2012 in order to accommodate some of the items marked 'to be confirmed'.

The meeting finished at 9.27 pm.

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIRMAN

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
Julie Mayer, telephone (01375) 652403,
or alternatively e-mail jmayer@thurrock.gov.uk**

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