

MINUTES of the meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 10 January 2012 at 7.00pm.

Present: Councillors Wendy Curtis, Danny Nicklen, Yash Gupta, Simon Wootton.

Apologies: Councillors Robert Gledhill and Diane Revell.

In attendance: B. Newman – Director of Sustainable Communities
M. Hone – Director of Finance & Corporate Governance
R. Waterhouse – Corporate Director, Change and Improvement
S. Clark – Head of Finance
R. Harris – Head of Commissioning
L. Sinclair – Interim Head of Housing
A. Hogg – Service Manager (Business & Resources)
J. Burton - Quality and Standards Manager (Library Management Team)
N. Warren – Community Development Manager
S. Welton - Performance Officer
V. Freeman – Senior Democratic Services Officer

1. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 8 November 2011 were approved as a correct record.

2. ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

The Chair advised the Committee that she had not agreed to any such items.

The Chair afforded Councillor Halden the opportunity to intervene at this stage of the meeting, whereupon Councillor Halden requested that it be minuted that at the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny meeting held on the 28 June 2011, he had been appointed as a temporary substitute on the authority of the Proper Officer, and at this meeting he had been allowed to vote as a Member on the Committee. However it had since been clarified that in accordance with the Constitution, a Member could not be temporarily appointed as a substitute by the Proper Officer. Although Councillor Halden was unable to substitute for a Member at this particular meeting the Chair had used her discretion, in accordance with the Constitution, and allowed Councillor Halden to comment on the reports contained within the agenda.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

a) Interests

No interests were declared.

b) Whipping

No interests were declared.

The Chair informed Members that as there was a member of the public in attendance at the meeting, she wished to change the order of the items on the agenda, to allow Item 7 to be taken prior to Item 5.

4. VETERANS CHARTER

Councillor Nicklen introduced a report which brought the recommendations of the Veterans' Charter Task and Finish Group to the Committee for discussion and agreement.

During the presentation of the report, Councillor Nicklen commended the Task and Finish Group and those officers involved for their invaluable input into the work undertaken on the Veterans' Charter.

A document was tabled at the meeting which amended recommendation 1.2 so as to read:

'1.2 That Overview and Scrutiny recommend that Council develops an information pack to inform and support Veterans access to services and support in the wider community, and that the Council assigns a contact officer and number should veterans require additional information and support.'

The tabled document also amended Appendix 2, the Draft Thurrock Veterans' Charter, so as to read:

'As service providers and charities we will aim to:

- Provide comprehensive and joined up signposting and information about available services through each provider's web site.
- Contribute to a Veterans' Information Pack – Thurrock KIT bag – and for Thurrock Council to assign a contact officer and contact number for Veterans who require additional information and support.
- Ensure that members of staff are briefed on the issues and where specialist charitable assistance may be available and of benefit to Veterans.

- Strongly encourage public services to consider the take up of services by Veterans, and to give consideration to the needs of all Veterans, war widows and widowers, families and dependents of Veterans and carers of Veterans.
- To promote the achievements of serving personnel and Veterans, and to work in partnership to strive towards a Community Covenant with the Armed Forces in order to foster a better understanding between communities in Thurrock, the Armed Forces and public services.'

Councillor Nicklen informed Members that the Housing Service were currently reviewing their policy so as to reflect the needs of veterans, and that the new policy would assist those personnel upon their return and aid in their understanding of the process.

Members heard that the Task and Finish Group had been encouraged to consider a Community Covenant – as well as a Veterans' Charter – to include the needs of serving personnel. The Group recommended that Council develops a Community Covenant. This would enable the Council to apply to a specific fund established by the Ministry of Defence to help improve understanding and relationships between the Armed Forces, public services and wider communities.

RESOLVED:

- i) **That Council be recommended to adopt a Veterans' Charter.**
- ii) **That Council be recommended to develop an information pack to inform and support Veterans access services and support in the wider community, and that the Council assigns a contact officer and number should veterans require additional information and support.**
- iii) **That Council be recommended to work towards a Community Covenant between public services, the Armed Services and communities.**
- iv) **That Thurrock hosts an annual community event to mark Armed Forces Day.**

5. CORPORATE SCORECARD PERFORMANCE REPORT – MONTH 6/QUARTER 2 (up to end September 2011)

The Director of Transformation introduced this report which advised Members of key performance issues arising from the delivery of the Corporate Scorecard 2011-12. Other Senior Managers then, in turn, presented their focus areas, following which Members asked questions.

The Head of Commissioning presented section 4.2.1 which detailed the percentage of adults, older people and carers who received self-directed support; either through direct payments or a personal budget. Members were taken through the key actions for improving performance against the indicator and for ensuring the embedding of a personalised and self-directed approach to the service.

At this point in the meeting, Councillor Gupta declared a personal interest, as a member of his immediate family was in receipt of Direct Payments and Councillor W. Curtis also declared an interest, in that her daughter works for Adult Social Care.

The Director of Sustainable Communities presented section 4.2.2 of the report which detailed the percentage of Section 106 money committed for spending on investment in infrastructure projects up to the end of September 2011 (Quarter 2). Although at the end of September the commitment was low, since this report the figure has risen significantly and is now well above the target. Members were advised that a report would be presented to the February meeting of Cabinet requesting that they approve a Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Preliminary Draft Charging Schedule for public consultation. A brief explanation of the differences between s106 and CIL was also outlined.

The Interim Head of Housing presented section 4.2.3 of the report, 'Housing Repairs', whereupon Members were advised that the performance indicators had show a slight improvement in the service. Members were further advised of the following:

- That the move of Morrison to Alexander House had been completed and that the ICT system had been installed and was due to go live shortly.
- The repairs line had moved in October 2011 and the arrangement was working quite well although there had been issues regarding the phone access.
- A new depot had opened at Blackshots for technical staff.

The Director of Transformation presented section 4.2.4 of the report, 'Sickness Absence', whereupon Members were updated with the latest data which showed a year to date figure for April – November as 6.98 days which although still higher than target is significantly better than this time last year. This suggests the array of initiatives that have been put in place over the last 12 months (including the new contract with Diagnostic Health Solutions (DHS) for the provision of a new service whereby employees report sickness absence directly to the nurse advisor contact centre) is now starting to having an impact.

Members were advised that sickness figures were produced for each management team and that specialist training had been arranged for management and that the Council encouraged a supportive culture. Recent new initiatives include a stress action plan and analysis of Staff Health and Well Being from the staff survey undertaken in November.

The Head of Finance presented section 4.2.5 of the report, the 'Capital Programme', whereupon Members were advised that the capital spend for the whole Council was 15% of the approved budget, however Procurement would not accept the budget set until the new financial year as the necessary approvals were not yet in place.

The Service Manager (Business & Resources) and the Quality and Standards Manager, presented section 4.2.6 of the report, 'PLS6 No of library visitors per 1,000 population', whereupon Members were advised that the original target for this indicator had been set prior to the closure of Chafford Hundred Library (the fourth busiest library in Thurrock) and therefore this needed to be taken into account. Libraries are now being used "virtually" more frequently although this is not included in this particular indicator and therefore the data provided only gives a partial picture of service usage.

The Community Development Manager presented section 5.1 of the report, 'CUL400a Volunteer opportunities within the Council', whereupon Members were advised that it was hoped that the Thurrock Council Volunteer Opportunities website would go live the following week.

During general discussion of the item, the following was noted:

Key Performance Indicators

Members were concerned that only certain key performance indicators were provided at the meetings and recommended for specific focus. They were advised that a full set of corporate performance indicators was included in the appendix to the report, and Members could ask questions regarding these. However the Performance Board put forward indicators which they believe required highlighting for further attention to go 'in focus' prior to the meeting.

Councillor Gupta requested information regarding the costs associated with the production of this report. The Director of Transformation confirmed that further information would be circulated to him following the meeting.

It was also confirmed that a special Overview and Scrutiny Committee Task and Finish Group is already arranged for mid February to consider appropriate use of performance data for engaging and informing residents about the performance of the Council and its services.

Target Setting

The Director of Transformation advised Members that the targets were set annually taking into account the previous years targets, future budget pressures and benchmarking figures. This is undertaken by Performance Board - a cross-council group of performance experts – who will be meeting to consider the 2012/13 targets in mid February.

Councillor Halden requested further details around the rationale for target setting. The Director of Transformation confirmed a briefing would be circulated following the meeting.

Asset Management Strategy

Members were advised that the revised Asset Management Strategy would be presented to Cabinet in February and that the Leader and the Leader of the Opposition had been fully briefed on this issue.

Direction of Travel

Councillor Wootton asked a question on Councillor Gledhill's behalf regarding the average direction of other local authorities and was advised that this is difficult to assess as every local authority now uses a different basket of indicators and many of our indicators are new and/or exclusive to Thurrock. This makes meaningful comparison and trend analysis problematic. It might, however, be possible to look at a comparison of overall direction of travel with other unitary authorities from the beginning of the financial year. The Director of Transformation confirmed further clarification would be sought and circulated to Councillor Gledhill following the meeting.

RESOLVED:

- i) **That services where there is good delivery against priorities be acknowledged and commended.**
- ii) **That the performance in areas of concern be noted.**
- iii) **The position in relation to the areas IN FOCUS and the actions in progress be noted.**

6. DRAFT GENERAL FUND 2012/13 BUDGET AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY AND 2012/13 PROPOSED FEES AND CHARGES

The Director of Finance & Corporate Governance informed the Committee that errors had been identified in the 2012/13 proposed fees and charges section of the report and that the Leader and Councillor W. Curtis had agreed that this part of the report be withdrawn from the meeting and resubmitted to the meeting on the 19 January 2012.

Members attention was drawn to paragraphs 3.3 – 3.6 of Appendix 1 to the report (General Fund Draft 2012/13 Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy - pages 84 and 85), and in particular the implications of freezing the Council Tax at the same level as for 2011/12 was explained to Members. Members were advised that by accepting the Council Tax freeze grant of £1.4m for 2012/13, the Council would have to find this sum, in addition to any other net savings required to balance the budget, in 2013/14.

There was concern that the total proposed budget for salaries had increased over 2011/12 despite a number of redundancies within the Council and it was explained that the figures for both 2011/12 and 2012/13 related to staff directly employed by the Council, and excluded Vertex staff, where reductions were more significant.

Members were also briefed on the proposed reforms to the National Domestic Rate (NDR) scheme that in future years would allow the Council to retain a proportion of NDR generated by new businesses setting up in the borough. This could be of significant assistance in achieving a balanced budget over the medium-term. It was pointed out, however, that the draft guidance still allowed the Secretary of State to clawback sums deemed to be excessive.

RESOLVED:

- i) That the Committee considered the assumptions, including those on prudential borrowing, and that the minutes, recording the discussion, be included in the budget report to Cabinet in February 2012.**
- ii) That the Committee's comments on the capital resource assumptions and bids be forwarded to the Cabinet meeting in February 2012.**

7. WORK PROGRAMME

It was agreed at the meeting that the following items be added to the Committee's Work Programme:

- Third Quarter Performance Report – 22 March 2012.
- Performance Management Task and Finish Group - 22 March 2012.

RESOLVED:

That the following be added to the 2011-12 Work Programme:

- **Third Quarter Performance Report – 22 March 2012.**
- **Performance Management Task and Finish Group - 22 March 2012.**

The meeting finished at 9.22pm.

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIRMAN

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
Victoria Freeman, telephone (01375) 652205,
or alternatively e-mail VEFreeman@thurrock.gov.uk**