

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 14 March 2017 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors John Kent (Chair), Leslie Gamester (Vice-Chair), Jack Duffin, Steve Liddiard, Ben Maney and Aaron Watkins

In attendance: Sean Clark, Director of Finance & IT
Steve Cox, Corporate Director of Environment and Place
Jackie Hinchliffe, Director of HR, OD & Transformation
Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service
Murray James, Operational Service Lead - ICT
Chris Stephenson, Service Delivery Manager - Change and Implementation
Sarah Welton, Strategy & Performance Officer
Charlotte Raper, Senior Democratic Services Officer

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

1. Minutes

The minutes of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 18 January 2017 were approved as a correct record.

2. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

3. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interests.

4. Connected Thurrock - Thurrock's Digital & Information Technology Strategy 2017-20

The Operational Service Lead – ICT presented the report which outlined the digital strategy for the next three years. Members were asked to provide feedback to be put forward to the meeting of Cabinet on 5 April 2017.

Councillor Liddiard considered the report to be good and agreed that the strategy was very aspirational. He queried whether there were any examples of similar strategies proven to work within the Country. The Committee heard that there were many strategies though the proposed model was more

comprehensive as Thurrock had elected to bring everything together. There were many Local Councils currently on the journey to deliver similar outcomes though the proposed Strategy was towards the more ambitious end of the scale.

Councillor Liddiard agreed with the numbers but was unsure it could be delivered within 3 years. Members were advised the Strategy in reality covered 3 years and beyond. The aim was to drive agility and so there was a need to keep the strategic roadmap going beyond the strategy length.

Councillor Liddiard highlighted that within his work in the local community hub in his ward about 90% of the residents were unable to use the internet, even on their phones and required a high level of support from the hub volunteers. He expressed scepticism that these and similar residents could be converted and asked whether there was an opportunity to work with the community hub volunteers and staff in customer services in a different way and change the mechanisms in place to make life easier for all concerned. The breakdown of services people required assistance for, in his experience, was 70% for housing, 20% for benefits and 10% for council tax and other minor issues; he wondered whether it might be better to focus on those areas people needed most.

The Operational Service Lead – ICT agreed that officers were cautious not to bake exclusion into the strategy and it was necessary that residents could get in contact and engage in the best way for them. There would be digital buddies and people like the hub volunteers to help make the technology simpler. In order to ensure residents engaged the digital experience would need to be better than the traditional experience. As for focusing on key areas, the aim was to develop platforms that worked across a range of areas and to avoid individual point systems, though there would be prioritisation of service areas as the strategy unfolded.

Councillor Maney observed that he felt the report was somewhat light on delivery as to how the ideas would be implemented. He hoped that, when it was referred to Cabinet, Cabinet would look clearly at the delivery of the strategy otherwise it might come back to Overview and Scrutiny Committees in the future. The Committee heard that Councillor Maney's comments were reasonable but the intention had been an outcome focused strategy to offer a degree of flexibility compared to a full delivery plan. Immediate delivery plans would be put together to manage the strategy and there would be strict Governance in place.

Councillor Watkins expressed approval for an aspirational strategy and admitted that it would be very impressive. He asked if there were any risk that the technology might not deliver as hoped with residents who might not use it to its full potential, and asked for additional background information around the return on investment targets. Members were advised that the strategy required a cultural shift and the onus was on Thurrock; how user friendly and intuitive the technology would be. Residents could not be forced to use the technology offered so there was a need to offer an experience they would

want to use. The aim was to use data in such a way that there would be less need for residents to contact the council for issues. As for the return on investment targets, they were difficult to pin down. An expectation of 2:1 had been outlined and businesses cases would need to be very explicit as to the benefits.

Councillor Watkins agreed that the technology should be there to keep Thurrock ahead of the trend, but in order for it to be truly beneficial residents would have to use it. He asked how officers planned to promote the new technology to residents and whether there would be flexibility to navigate constantly changing technology availability. The world of technology changed quickly, hence an outcome focused strategy. How the strategy would be delivered might change but the desired outcomes would not.

Councillor Liddiard stresses the importance of strong business cases and ensuring value for money every step of the way and that he felt uncomfortable agreeing the £23million investment. He would be more comfortable with a case by case scenario. Members were assured that every capital spend would be supported by a business case.

Councillor Liddiard recalled previous Government Strategies to connect all systems which were either failures or extremely expensive and expressed concern regarding introducing one system to do everything for everyone. It was a big challenge but the intention was not one system, but a platform approach. It would not be realistic to join every service up; the key area of focus would be the outcomes that mattered most and the most important aspect would be data. The role of Local Authorities was likely to change and they would need to become data guardians/providers and so all data would need to be easily utilised and shared with other Authorities and partners.

Councillor Duffin referred to section 5.1 of the report, particularly the introduction of a public Wi-Fi across Thurrock, and asked whether it would be sponsored by outside businesses or a pay-to-use model. It was presumed there would be an element of paid service to fund the investment. It was important to saturate the borough with wireless for colleagues working offsite, NHS workers and other partners to change the shape of mobile working.

RESOLVED:

The Committee referred the Connected Thurrock Strategy to the meeting of Cabinet on 5 April 2017. The Committee's support was provisional dependent upon clearer objectives, a clearer strategy for delivery and performance monitoring.

5. Consultations in 2016

The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service presented the report which was in response to a request by the Committee. Appendix 1 provided a list of all the consultations from 2016.

Councillor Duffin asked how long it took to respond to the Residents' Survey. The entire survey took approximately 15 minutes.

Councillor Duffin asked how the £3000 for the consultation regarding the change of election process had been spent. Members heard that the cost was for communicating with residents via newspaper adverts, posters, an advert on the Council's facebook page and a leaflet which had been included with every Council Tax bill. It was queried how useful the facebook advert had proven compared to cost. It had only cost a few hundred pounds, but the 'reach' of the advert was not known and would be provided outside of the meeting.

Councillor Duffin enquired as to what made value for money as some of the consultations received less responses from residents than there were elected Councillors. Certain consultations were very targeted towards specific audiences, while some were much wider. The Communications Team promoted consultations wherever possible, via the media, community hubs, and even directly through Councillors but residents could not be forced to participate.

Councillor Duffin also asked whether the £7000 investment into the consultation portal had been value for money, as there were online survey generators that did the same for free. The Committee heard that the portal was more than merely a survey tool; it also facilitated petitions, generated reports and provided a database that officers could access in future.

Councillor Liddiard expressed his view that, given the number of responses compared to the size of the population; he would be uncomfortable relying upon 80% of the consultations to make decisions. Councillor Gamester interjected that one consultation had received only one response up until February and asked whether there was a better way to ensure the Council obtained statistically relevant data. For some decisions the consultations were not the only source of evidence, there were also workshops and other engagement activities. The Residents' Survey had been undertaken by an external market research company with a methodology to ensure the 1000 residents polled were representative of the make-up of Thurrock and there was confidence in the results. Officers would be mindful of how valid responses were.

Councillor Duffin asked if consultations generally cost around £3000 or whether the election consultation was an exception. Members heard that a case would be put forward for each consultation. The consultation regarding the elections process was borough-wide and open for 12 weeks to allow residents to have their say, which was a long time. For more targeted consultations, such as for housing tenants, letters would be sent directly which was a far less expensive process. Borough-wide consultations also varied in expense, with far more being spent on the consultation regarding the Local Plan.

Councillor Watkins asked whether BMG Research might be used to conduct all borough-wide consultations as they did with the Residents' Survey. He queried whether the numerous residents with whom officers interacted on a daily basis were ever asked why they weren't responding to consultations. BMG had also conducted the staff survey. The option could be considered but it would depend upon cost and the type of consultation. The possibility of asking residents was a good idea and would be taken on board.

Councillor Liddiard queried whether volunteers in the community hubs might assist with undertaking consultations. He also raised concern about skewed responses to surveys, he recalled a survey within Tilbury where residents highlighted that they wanted a swimming pool and improved bus services, with no reference to the homeless residents or the shortage of GPs in the area. The want versus need was not reflected. The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service agreed it was necessary to manage expectations. Volunteers in the hubs could be used to ask residents the questions; however BMG offered experience and independence which were positives.

Councillor Duffin sought clarity as to how many consultations were the result of requests from Committees and how many were Officer-led and how much they were used in the decision making process. The Committee was informed that there were some consultations which were a statutory duty. The Council had a responsibility to conduct consultations in cases of service changes, and some ongoing feedback mechanisms were used to make tweaks on a day to day basis. Other consultations were the result of Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommendations and steers from Portfolio Holders, dependent upon the issues.

The possibility that residents were reluctant to participate because they saw no real change as a result was suggested. Members heard that there were usually higher levels of response to issues with a direct impact. The way results and outcomes were fed back to residents could be improved. Councillor Duffin requested that, where possible, residents were emailed to inform them of the outcome of consultations in which they participated.

The Chair noted markedly different methods used in varying consultations. The consultation in light of the Local Plan was very good however the questions asked in the Residents' Survey were not so open. When asking which areas were most important Adult and Children's Social Care, Housing and Improvements to Education were not included. The Chair expressed his disappointment and asked how this was justified. The Committee was advised that the Residents' Survey focused on universal services rather than more specialist areas which many residents would not have accessed. Similarly the survey was not the only source of data for the Council.

Councillor Duffin queried who was responsible for the wording of questions, as to his mind one question regarding the Local Council Tax Scheme offered two very harsh options and he could understand residents being reluctant to participate on those terms. BMG had created the Residents' Survey using

their experience and guidance, input from other Local Authorities and the Local Government Association benchmark questions. For non-statutory consultations the services responsible framed the questions with assistance from the Community Development Team and the Communications Team. The survey in question had been developed alongside other councils.

RESOLVED:

The Committee noted and made comments on the consultations undertaken in 2016 in Appendix 1.

6. Quarter 3 Corporate Performance Report 2016/17

The Strategy & Performance Officer presented the report which provided the Committee with a progress update in relation to performance. The report highlighted 4 areas which were 'in focus'; one had achieved its target whilst three had not.

The Chair referenced section 3.3.4 of the report, focus 4, and noted that the target for street cleanliness had not been met, despite the investment into the 'Clean it, Cut it, Fill it' campaign. The Chair asked for an explanation as to why the target had not been met. The Corporate Director of Environment and Place informed members that despite being under the Council's own local target it was better than the benchmark average. The assessment methodology was also quite subjective; surveys were carried out on 10 different land types which provided a snapshot of the appearance of parts of the borough. The assessment methodology would change from April 2017, from which time the Council would be working with Keep Britain Tidy, providing national benchmarks for more consistent data.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee

- **Noted and commented upon the performance of the key corporate performance indicators in particular those areas which are IN FOCUS;**
- **Identified any areas which require additional consideration.**

7. Work Programme

Members were given the opportunity to suggest items to act as a steer for any incoming Chair and Members to the Committee next municipal year. Councillor Duffin proposed a report regarding the Communications Team and their decision making processes.

The meeting finished at 8.20 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**