

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 3 September 2019 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Oliver Gerrish (Chair), Jack Duffin (Vice-Chair) and Andrew Jefferies

Apologies: Councillors Colin Churchman, Garry Hague and Gerard Rice

In attendance: Sean Clark, Director of Finance & IT
Roger Harris, Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health/Interim Director of Children's Services
Jackie Hinchliffe, Director of HR, OD & Transformation
Andrew Millard, Interim Director of Place
Mykela Pratt, Strategic Lead - HR, Resourcing, and Improvement
Daren Spring, Assistant Director – Street Scene & Leisure
Gary Staples, Strategic Lead - Transformation
Vincent Waddams, Senior Project Manager
Natalie Warren, Strategic Lead - Community Development and Equalities
Sarah Welton, Strategy Manager
Lucy Tricker, 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.

6. Minutes

The minutes of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 11 June 2019 were approved as a correct record.

7. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

8. Declaration of Interests

There were no interests declared.

9. Apprenticeship Strategy Update Report

The Strategic Lead – HR, Resourcing & Improvement introduced the report and explained that it showed the progression of the apprenticeship strategy now it was entering its third year, and the impact it was having. She stated that the Key Performance Indicator (KPI) target had been exceeded in 2018/19 with 60 new apprenticeships, which had been an increase since

2017/18. She commented that the KPI target for 2019/20 was to have 59 new apprenticeships, and this figure had been based on 2.3% of the current workforce headcount. She commented that the good work of apprenticeships had been recognised at this year's Staff Awards. The Strategic Lead – HR, Resourcing and Improvement then detailed the introduction of the annual Apprenticeships Recruitment Day and described how in 2018, 15 new starters had been recruited through this, and in 2019, over 25 offers had been made. She also drew Members attention to Appendix 1 of the report, which was a breakdown of the 60 new starters in 2018/19, describing how 50% were up-skilling within the Council, and 50% were new apprentices. She felt that the apprenticeships being offered were diverse across subject and level. She summarised and stated that the council were committed to retention of apprenticeships, with 50% of the 2017/18 being retained, and 6 permanent roles offered for the 2018/19 cohort so far.

The Chair welcomed the report and felt it was positive. He asked if the retention rate for apprentices was aspirational enough, and if the council could create roles for apprentices when their apprenticeships ended. He also asked a question on the source of apprentices, as he felt it would be good to see more apprentices coming into the council from outside the current workforce. The Strategic Lead – HR, Resourcing and Improvement replied that 50% was a good retention rate, but those that did not stay at the council often took other roles within the borough. She added that the council wanted to see apprentices fulfil their career aspirations wherever they maybe, although the council offered a good support package and therefore had a good completion rate. She added that the council had embedded Directorate 'Apprentice Champions' to ensure apprenticeships were offered across the whole council, and described the success of the Apprentice Recruitment Day. She stated that the 50% of apprentices that were classed as up-skilling within the council also included those new-starters that had completed their first apprenticeships and were moving up a level.

The Chair drew the Committee's attention to page 16, point 3.7 and asked how the levy funding to small/medium enterprises (SMEs) would work. The Strategic Lead – HR, Resourcing and Improvement answered that this was a new priority, which was in the early phase of scoping. The Director HR, OD and Transformation added that this was a project that was being looked at regionally and nationally, although Thurrock Council was spending a good proportion of its levy, but would assist local SMEs if the opportunity arose. She stated that the council were identifying new apprenticeships to support the workforce challenges in the council, such as social workers.

Councillor Duffin felt that this report was very positive and included good detail on the direction apprenticeships were travelling. He felt that parents were currently more in favour of their children taking up apprenticeships than going to university. Councillor Jefferies added that he felt the report was also positive, but asked if the figure of 50% apprentices retained included people who had worked for the council before their apprenticeship started. The Strategic Lead – HR, Resourcing and Improvement replied that this was not the case, and the figure only included new starters that had been retained.

RESOLVED: That:

1. The Committee noted and commented upon the progress made in the areas detailed in this report.

2. The Committee noted and supported the priority areas identified as key to continued success in Year 3 as detailed in 3.17 of this report.

10. Grays South Regeneration: Civic Offices Project Position Statement

The Interim Director Place introduced the report and stated that it had been born out of a Full Council motion in July 2019, which had proposed the cancellation of the Civic Offices project, and a request from the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee for additional information. He stated that the report set out the current status of the project and the rationale behind it, as well as why the project was the best value option, both financially and for the wider regeneration benefits. The Interim Director Place felt that the Civic Offices project would encourage other investment in Grays and would improve the customer experience. He drew the Committee's attention to 2.1 and 2.2 in the report that detailed how the project would meet the wider regeneration ambitions and improvements for Grays. He commented that £200million was being invested into Grays regeneration, which included the proposed investment from New Rivers in the town centre. He also highlighted point 2.3 that summarised development in Table A, and the financial benefits of the project compared to refurbishment of CO1. He then highlighted 2.9 in the report that stated a Preconstruction Services Agreement contract had been signed in April 2019, and the Planning Committee had deferred the item until its September meeting. He added that land availability negotiations had taken place, so Thurrock Council had now acquired the freehold for properties in New Road and the High Street. He stated that early investigations had found that the CO1 site could yield 80 residential units, but with investment from New Rivers, this figure could be more ambitious. He also highlighted 2.13 and the proposals for Thameside, which had been de-coupled from the Civic Offices project, and stated that a separate report on this would come before the Committee at a later date. He summarised and added that recommendation 1 would have to be changed as Cabinet had moved from 4 September to 11 September.

The Chair began the debate and felt that this topic was of much interest to people across the borough. He asked what the £9.78million cost covered, and how this figure had been predicted. The Senior Project Manager replied that the figure of £9.78million included all build costs and professional costs for the development of the CO2 site. He stated that the CO1 site would be self-funded and would give a separate return. The Chair then asked how the figure of £2.8million for the return on CO1 was predicted. The Director Finance and IT replied that the figure of £2.8million was based on a Thurrock Regeneration Limited approach, which was a proven model as it had been used for the St Chads site. He stated that £2.8million included all of the ground preparation works, construction, rented income and finally capital receipts. The Chair

questioned the assumption he felt was made in the report that vacating CO1 would reduce costs, due to plant being at end-of-life. He asked what impact this would have on day-to-day running costs and savings. The Interim Director Place replied that using an old building, compared to running a BREEAM standard building would cost 30% more. The Director Finance and IT replied that any revenue savings that would be made from the project had not been banked. He added that any savings made from the project would help targets set in the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) of £900,000 saved this year, and £1million saved in coming years. He felt that the financial benefits were not the main driving force of the project though. He added that project was close to being cost-neutral in best financial estimates, but the project had been designed for its regeneration and housing benefits.

The Chair questioned how confident officers were that spending figures would not increase, as point 2.9 was not a final costing. He felt that the return on CO1 could decrease, whilst building costs could increase. He asked what contingency plans were in place, should this situation arise. The Interim Director Place responded that both return and spending could increase or decrease and point 2.3 to 2.8 in the report highlighted this. He felt that there was a strong housing market in Thurrock, and particularly Grays, which would ensure residential units in CO1 could yield significant returns. The Chair felt that the council should not expose itself to significant risk and asked how, if building costs increased, this would be managed. The Director Finance and IT replied that it would be the same as other capital projects, and that there would be a dedicated programme manager, as well as a dedicated team who could mitigate risk and control costings. He felt that the same questions could be asked about the refurbishment of CO1, as this would face the same risks. He added that managing capital projects was standard practice, and the dedicated team could put in place contingencies to manage risk. He summarised and clarified that if costs could not be contained, then savings would be sought elsewhere in the CO2 project.

Councillor Duffin asked if there had been any more decisions regarding the use of the new building as space in the evening, and what services would be offered. The Senior Project Manager replied that talks were currently underway with South Essex College regarding use of the space, and the café regarding extending their opening hours for the proposed new building. He felt that it was a circular scenario, as the more people who used the space; the more people would go there. He added that the proposed new Civic Offices would be community focussed, and not just for transactional council needs. Councillor Duffin asked how much work had been done on this, and felt that the council wanted residents to use more online services, rather than using the council offices. The Senior Project Manager replied that for transactional requests, Thurrock were encouraging a shift to online, but the most vulnerable residents would still use the Civic Offices.

The Chair agreed with Cllr Duffin and felt that the benefits were tailing the project, rather than leading. He felt that the benefits listed on page 34 of the report could also be achieved using the current Civic Offices space, for example making offices Wi-Fi enabled or renting out spaces for residents. He

asked officers what the project would achieve that could not already be done with the current buildings. The Interim Director Place replied that this was a cost-neutral proposal, and provision of the same services in the current space would not be of a high standard. He felt that the project added to the further regeneration of Grays town centre, for example the new underpass and potential investment of £100million from New Rivers, and provided wider benefits. The Chair asked to see an itemized list of plant that was at the end of its economic life, and how much it would cost to replace the plant. The Senior Project Manager replied that this would be sent to Members after the meeting. He added that the building would need to be gutted to allow replacement of all the plant and equipment for continued use as an office, however, taken as a whole, CO1 would be surplus to requirements and so excess space would need to be let out commercially. He commented that internal reconfiguration would be required to allow private tenants to have their own areas and entrances, and if used for housing, the existing building would need to be demolished, so no separate gutting would be required. The Director Finance and IT added that the money being used for this project could not be used elsewhere, and the council had never turned down and other project to allow this one to be completed.

Councillor Jefferies commented that he felt Grays needed the regeneration benefits that this project would provide, such as housing and investment. He added that the project would make Grays the capital of Thurrock, and would add to the recent central government funding given to Grays town centre. He felt it would connect Grays, as currently the railway line separated the two sides.

The Chair summarised and stated that the Committee had considered numerous new arguments during the course of debate and requested an additional recommendation reading as follows “The Committee call on Cabinet to cancel the Civic Offices Project, and convene an all-party Working Group to review ongoing options for the Civic Offices and capital spend”. Councillor Duffin commented that he felt creating a Working Group would not achieve a lot, as Cabinet could disregard recommendations made. Councillor Jefferies commented that he could not support an additional recommendation of that nature as he felt the project would increase investment and housing by making use of a redundant building.

The Chair called a vote in relation to recommendation 1.2:

In favour: Councillor Gerrish, Councillor Duffin
Against: Councillor Jefferies

The vote was carried in favour of introducing recommendation 1.2.

RESOLVED: That:

1. The Committee noted the contents of this report and made any comments to be considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 11 September 2019, these comments to be verbally provided.

2. The Committee called on Cabinet to cancel the Civic Offices Project subject to additional work to adequately demonstrate the benefits that would be delivered by the project.

11. Collaborative Communities - Thurrock's Approach to Community Engagement

The Strategic Lead – Community Development and Equalities introduced the report and stated that community engagement covered a broad spectrum, but the introduction of a new consultation portal increased residents inclusion, although it was only in early stages of development. She felt it was the right time to introduce a new community engagement approach, which could galvanise best practice and work across council departments. She added that all council departments should be working with communities to deliver joint outcomes and enable community action, without encountering too much bureaucracy. She summarised and stated the purpose of this report was to gauge Members views and increase community conversations.

The Chair welcomed the report and felt it was crucial to engage communities. He asked about the process of moving community engagement forward, for example by mapping community groups, and ensuring harder to reach communities were included. The Strategic Lead – Community Development and Equalities answered that the team were currently organising a conference with CVS that would display best practice and how the council were effectively managing services. She clarified that the new framework would not just consult residents, but would actively engage them. She mentioned that the council had a good understanding of voluntary, faith and community groups, and had an 'asset map' on a variety of groups. She stated that the new portal was digital and interactive to help harder to reach groups get involved and feel a part of their community.

The Chair asked if new digital engagement was being considered as part of this approach, such as community Facebook pages. The Strategic Lead Community Development and Equalities replied that the consideration of social media was included as part of the strategy, and the portal was becoming a way to increase traction on social media. She added that the portal was not just for surveys, but also for residents to make suggestions, comments and showed visual maps. She stated that it also had a participation budget tool, so a council department could show residents how much money they could spend on a project and residents could get involved by deciding on certain aspects within that budget. She commented that the purpose of this report was to get Member agreement and then every department would sign up to this proposal, so all services could think about the community and say yes to community action.

Councillor Duffin commented that he wanted to see consultation and petition successes pushed on social media, so residents could see the feedback from their participation. He felt that residents often felt disenfranchised as they were consulted on topics, but the outcomes did not change. He wanted to see

community engagement leading to definitive change. The Strategic Lead Community Development and Equalities agreed that residents often felt like decisions had already been made, so the new proposal would help to convince people their participation does matter. She added that new portal would give feedback to residents on consultation, and gave the example of the library consultation that highlighted to residents how they had been listened too. Councillor Duffin asked that consultations become easier to use, for example using yes or no polls on Facebook, or asking people to vote and share their opinion. The Strategic Lead Community Development and Equalities replied that the new portal could achieve this, as it was not wholly council led, so residents could become pro-active. She stated the team were now using quick polls to gauge resident's opinion, as well as making the system more user-friendly by introducing emojis.

Councillor Jefferies felt it was good to see increased resident engagement, and highlighted 2.4 in the report, stating that it was good to see Members could get involved and lead, as often they had access to resident's viewpoints. Councillor Duffin asked if there was scope around the petitions process, so communities could drive the narrative. The Strategic Lead Community Development and Equalities responded that petitions were now included on the portal, so it was easy for a resident to raise a petition. She added an article had been written by the company who ran the portal, which highlighted how well Thurrock were using the system.

RESOLVED: That:

1. The Committee considered the proposal to develop a new framework for community engagement building on the principle of collaboration with communities.

2. The Committee made comments to support the scope in this paper and the development of this approach.

12. Quarter 1 Corporate Performance Report 2019/20

The Strategy Manager introduced the report and stated it was the first Corporate Performance report in 2019/20, and followed a similar format to previous years. She mentioned that following comments made previously at the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee, a 'route to green' was now included for any Key Performance Indicator (KPI) that had missed target, and provided additional commentary.

The Chair felt it was good see the new 'route to green' as it was helpful to see concrete plans that were being undertaken for KPIs which had not reached target, for example the percentage of waste recycled or reused. He felt that some KPIs 'route to green' was not as detailed as he would like to see, but understood this was the first review using this system. He added it was good to see the KPI regarding bins collected on the correct day had met its target, and was now measured in a different way, so the Committee could see month-on-month targets, rather than an overall view.

Councillor Duffin added it was good to see the 'route to green' and felt it was a good change in formatting.

RESOLVED: That:

1. The Committee noted and commented upon the performance of the key corporate performance indicators in particular those areas which are off target

2. The Committee identified any areas which require additional consideration

13. Work Programme

No Members or officers had any items to add to the Work Programme.

The meeting finished at 8.13 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**