

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 10 November 2020 at 7.00 pm

- Present:** Councillors Oliver Gerrish (Chair), Jack Duffin (Vice-Chair), Garry Hague, Shane Ralph and Gerard Rice
- In attendance:** Graham Brace, ASELA LFFN Programme Manager
Sean Clark, Corporate Director of Finance, Governance and Property
Wendy Le, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Natalie Smith, Strategic Lead - Community Development and Equalities
Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service
Lucy Tricker, Senior Democratic Services Officer
- Kim Towlson, Chair – Thurrock Association of Forums
Peter Saunders, Vice-Chair – Thurrock Association of Forums
Janet McCheyne – Secretary – Thurrock Association of Forums
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Before the start of the Meeting, all present were advised that the meeting was being recorded, and live-streamed to the Council's website.

14. Minutes

The minutes of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 8 September 2020 were approved as a true and correct record.

15. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

16. Declaration of Interests

There were no items of urgent business.

17. Community Forums

The Strategic Lead Community Development and Equalities set out the background to the report and described how community forums had evolved over the past twenty years. She introduced the three guests to the meeting, from the Thurrock Association of Forums (TAF).

The Chair of TAF introduced himself and states that he was the Chair of both Horndon Community Forum and TAF and felt that community forums provided a go-between for residents and the Council. He stated that community forums constantly examined themselves and how communication could be improved

with both residents and the council, particularly during the difficult times of the pandemic. He stated that forums were currently not working as closely with the council due to COVID-19, but instead were working very closely with residents. He explained that TAF were currently trying to reactivate 2-3 deactivated forums, to get back to the original number of 20 forums across Thurrock. He added that there were also two non-active forums in Grays, both Grays Central and Grays Riverside, and two fragile forums which TAF were working to try to maintain during the pandemic.

The Vice-Chair of TAF introduced himself and stated that the role of forums had evolved since the early 2000s and were now quasi-parish councils, but with no legal status, as they helped collect resident's views on issues and convey these to the council via Ward Councillors. He felt community forums had a good working relationship with their ward councillors, particularly his forum of Chadwell St Mary which worked closely with their three elected members. He thanked the Strategic Lead Community Development and Equalities and her team for their hard work and he felt they were very active and helpful, but added that he felt there was some reluctance amongst other council directorates to engage fully with forums. He stated that TAF and other community forums worked closely with other organisations such as CVS, and through their good work had provided the impetus for projects such as the Chadwell St Mary community hub, which had been very successful up until the advent of COVID. He added that as the role of forums had changed over the years, and TAF had been formed, they were now in a better position to make representations to the council and they could negotiate on issues that affected all forums, such as the LTC and Community Infrastructure Levy.

The Secretary of TAF stated that although community forums were experiencing difficult times due to COVID-19, they were still helping CVS support vulnerable people across the borough, and were using email and social media to stay in touch with their local communities. She thanked the hard work of the community development and equalities team, particularly the Strategic Lead and Lynn Gittins. She added that community forums had good working relationships with elected members and other organisations such as CVS, and also had access to good insurance through the Council. She summarised and stated that she felt that some directorates did not realise how to utilise community forums to their full extent.

The Chair thanked the members of TAF for attending the meeting and providing their views and asked how the Council could help and support community forums. The Chair of TAF responded and stated that the Council currently paid for community forums insurance as well as administration money, but this had been cut over the years, and felt that forums could always do with additional funding. He thanked the Community Development and Equalities team for their hard work and felt that any barriers could be overcome. The Vice-Chair of TAF agreed with the statements made by the Chair of TAF.

Councillor Rice added that the Chadwell St Mary forum had worked very hard in the fight against the LTC and informing residents what was happening, and

the Council should continue to ensure all administration money continued to be paid. Councillor Ralph questioned the average turnout for forums and asked how Councillors could help in generating more interest. The Chair of TAF responded that the attendance of forums varied from 2-3 people to 40/50/60 people if an important topic was being discussed. He stated that it was difficult to interest people to standard meetings and persuade all Thurrock residents to join forums. He added that the community supported forums in many different ways, not just through physical attendance at meetings. Councillor Ralph asked how forums and the Council could spark interest in younger generations, and asked if there was a possibility of holding specialised events post-COVID, such as Christmas and summer fetes. The Chair of TAF responded that there was interest in community forums amongst younger people, particularly young parents, but they found it difficult to attend meetings due to work and childcare constraints. Councillor Ralph questioned whether meetings could be livestreamed to include younger people. The Chair of TAF responded that this was something TAF and other community forums were currently looking into. The Secretary of TAF added that although younger people did not attend meetings, they were active in forums in other ways, such as on social media. She added that in some smaller communities it was easier to establish forums, and that different areas had different issues which affected attendance.

Councillor Duffin thanked forums for their hard work, and thanked those residents who engaged with community forums and the Council. He suggested that the Committee recommend an annual meeting between TAF, Members and senior officers to improve feedback, as he felt this would be beneficial to both parties. The Chair of TAF stated that they met roughly 4-5 times per year and certain council officers were invited to these meetings, but other senior officers and members were always welcome to attend.

The Chair summarised and stated that this report would be the start of an ongoing conversation and process into the relationship between community forums and the Council, which would focus on funding, communications with council departments, and community outreach to residents. The Strategic Lead Community Development and Equalities added that the Collaborative Communities Framework would be a good way to incorporate these ideas and conversations, and the detail of this would be discussed at the next TAF meeting. The Chair thanked all community forums and the meeting attendees for their hard work and help within the community.

RESOLVED: That:

The Committee:

1. The report is provided as background information to Community Forums.

18. Collaborative Communities Framework: 2021-2025

The Strategic Lead Community Development and Equalities introduced the report and stated that an earlier version had been shared with the Committee last year, and had been developed with the Council's partners and the voluntary sector, and the work with the Thurrock Coronavirus Community Action had helped push the framework forward. She stated that residents were at the heart of this framework, which was divided into three sections: equality to ensure fair access and cohesion; empowerment to ensure the council were working with community forums to make sure they succeed; and engagement to ensure conversations with partners and residents are started early. She added that the framework was ambitious and a development plan was being drawn up to ensure a culture change within the council. She stated that she was keen on comments from the Committee in how to provide the necessary change, including on a 'pact' or 'bond' with partners and residents, but stated that as this framework covered four years, it would be long-term change programme.

The Chair thanked the Strategic Lead and stated that this was an important piece of work that would set services up well to be able to help residents. He asked what the proposed 'pact' would look like and what the outcome of this would be. The Strategic Lead Community Development and Equalities stated that some other Councils had established a manifesto with local organisations, and this framework was the beginning stages of organising this. She felt that the Council had worked well with partner and voluntary organisations during COVID and wanted this to be extended after the pandemic. She added that the 'pact' would be a reciprocal arrangement with potential rewards for volunteers, which would ensure a win-win situation for both the Council and partner or voluntary organisations.

The Chair queried what routes were available to contact the significant proportion of residents who did not get involved with community forums, and asked how these people could be engaged and those processes embedded within the council. The Strategic Lead Community Development and Equalities replied that there were numerous channels to engage with residents such as via email or social media, and the Community Development team worked closely with the Communications team on this. She felt there needed to be a formal process to enable this dialogue and link local networks together to be able to connect with each other. She explained that the Council worked closely with CVS on the 'Stronger Together' initiative that brought working between the Council and voluntary sector closer to be able to facilitate and develop ideas, as well as nurture policy discussions. She added that working closely with the voluntary sector was good as it invited comments and ideas, as well as allowed the Council to help businesses and individuals secure grant funding. She added that these ideas would be embedded through engagement with directorates and officers.

Councillor Ralph echoed the Chair's comments and felt it was a vital report. He stated that the Council needed to engage with communities, and that Stronger Together has worked very well during the pandemic. He felt that the Council needed to work closely with the community, for example the recycling team could attend community events to spread the recycling message and provide information. The Strategic Lead Community Development and

Equalities replied and stated that she hoped community events would begin post-COVID and that past Council teams who had attended such events received good levels of feedback and new ideas. She described that officers who attended community events also felt empowered on their return to change their services and implement ideas.

The Chair summarised and stated that the Committee felt it was a positive report, and how communities engaged with the Council was very important. He asked if updates on the project could come back to the Committee in future.

RESOLVED: That:

The Committee:

1. Commented were invited to support the scope of the Framework – specifically the idea of a ‘pact’ or ‘bond’ with communities, as well as broader comment of the proposed actions and their priority.

19. Connectivity and Wi-Fi Improvements

The Chair explained that the agenda had changed slightly, and the Connectivity and Wi-Fi Improvement had been moved forward. The ASELA LFFN Programme Manager introduced the report and explained that it was in response to questions raised at the Committee meeting in June 2020 regarding digital infrastructure. He explained that Thurrock currently only had 8% fibre coverage across the borough, and the Council were committed to raising this to 100% before the government’s target of 2025. He stated that Thurrock’s LFFN (Local Full Fibre Network) was part of a wider entity organised by ASELA (Association South Essex Local Authorities), who had received a grant of £4.4million from the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. He explained that part of this grant had been given to Thurrock, which would provide 60km of fibre and 78 full fibre sites. He described that the project was currently being delivered and 31 sites across the borough would be completed by the end of November, with the rest being installed by the end of January 2021. He stated that ASELA had also received an additional £2.5million of funding to extend the programme, and the team were currently arranging which sites would receive this funding and the necessary fibre infrastructure.

The ASELA LFFN Programme Manager added that the team were working with the Superfast Essex Programme to ensure that the project received best value from public monies, and additional support was being sourced by ASELA from the Outside In Programme from central government, which aimed to get fibre connectivity to harder to reach places. He explained that although Thurrock did not have many hard to reach areas, there were some areas in ASELA which would benefit greatly from the scheme. He then explained that by working so closely with central government during this project, Thurrock and ASELA had gained visibility and were able to provide

input into government decisions. He added that the LFFN team were also working with community forums regarding poor broadband speeds in some areas and were providing guidance and help in this area. The ASELA LFFN Programme Manager felt that it was good to see investment from central government and market engagement, but the programme also required investment from the private sector to encourage the inter-connectivity of LFFN. He stated that Openreach had recently announced investment in Grays and Purfleet which would begin in six months' time and help approximately 26,000 residents' access fibre networks. He explained that the business model surrounding public Wi-Fi was changing, as there was now a decreased need for this service, as the majority of people had smartphones with 4G access. He stated that there was an increased demand for high quality inside Wi-Fi as there was greater usage and greater demand. He explained that indoor Wi-Fi was provided by the organisations running the sites, and although the Council did have some public Wi-Fi sites, it was now increasingly important to have full fibre and 4G/5G coverage.

Councillor Ralph began questions and asked whether the reduced demand for public Wi-Fi was a corporate or public view, and whether this had been consulted on. He felt that some people still required public Wi-Fi, particularly in areas with poor signal. The ASELA LFFN Programme Manager responded that this was the general market and sector view, but no detailed analysis had been carried out. He stated that although some areas did have poor coverage, he felt it was not best use of public monies to invest in public Wi-Fi, as the Council needed to invest in full fibre. Councillor Ralph felt concerned that some people could not afford to rely on expensive phone data packages and relied on free Wi-Fi. The ASELA LFFN Programme Manager explained that the business model for Wi-Fi charging was now gone as there was no justification for this, as people expected free Wi-Fi everywhere, for example in pubs and hotels.

RESOLVED: That:

The Committee:

1. Commented on and noted the report.

20. Overview and Scrutiny at Thurrock: A Review

The Senior Democratic Services Officer introduced the report and explained that it had been borne out of cross-party backbench wishes to review and examine the scrutiny function, which had culminated in a Full Council motion. She described how the team had begun the report by undertaking detailed quantitative and qualitative data, which had been presented before the Committee and highlighted some of the areas of improvement within scrutiny. She explained how the Committee had then agreed for three separate project streams, which were a Scrutiny Symposium, an Executive-Scrutiny Workshop, and detailed analysis and research. The Senior Democratic Services Officer described in detail the research that had been undertaken, as well as the outcomes from the project and how these had helped to inform the

recommendations. She outlined the recommendations and stated that any comments from the Committee would be sent to Cabinet along with the report in December, before implementation in the New Year.

Councillor Ralph thanked the team for their hard work, and asked about the process if 'to note' reports were emailed to the committee. The Senior Democratic Services Officer replied that report authors, Democratic Services and the Chair would work together to decide if a 'to note' report was suitable for email only, and this would be emailed to the committee. If the committee wished to make detailed comment, then they could choose for the report to be added to the agenda. Councillor Hague felt the report would be a good way to improve the scrutiny function, as he felt it was an important part of the political process. He felt that it was important to have a robust scrutiny function and therefore fully supported the recommendations.

RESOLVED: That:

The Committee:

1. Approved the recommendations as set out at Appendix 1, and agreed to send the report to Cabinet for appropriate approval.

2. Approved the draft Executive-Scrutiny Protocol at attached at Appendix 1 of the review.

21. Financial Update

The Corporate Director of Finance, Governance and Property introduced the report and stated that this was the third financial update that had been brought to the Committee in this municipal year and included the impact of COVID-19 on the Council. He outlined that section 3.2 and 3.3 of the report outlined additional government support being given to Thurrock Council, which included £3.48million for general funds and brought the total level of government support to £14.42million. He stated that the Council were currently going through the claim process in regards to lost income for fees and charges, but mentioned that approximately 71% of these losses would be covered. The Corporate Director of Finance, Governance and Property then outlined other government funding which included £100,000 towards COVID enforcement and compliance; £1.2million for residential care homes; additional support for schools transport; and £190,000 for the Thameside Theatre. He added that Thurrock were still waiting for their allocation from central government of cold weather funding. He stated that Thurrock had also received £523,000 for the COVID winter grant scheme, which would run between December and March, and would support those most in need with food, energy and water bills, and free school meals.

The Corporate Director of Finance, Governance and Property then outlined support for businesses which included four new business support schemes from the government, two of which were applicable to Thurrock. He

commented that the first scheme covered those businesses which had been forced to close during this lockdown period, who would receive a grant of £1334, £2000 or £3000 depending on their business. He added that the second scheme was a discretionary scheme allocated at £20 per head of the population which would be used to support businesses who had been impacted by the second lockdown, but had not been forced to close. He mentioned that officers were still working through the details of these schemes as the government were still producing guidelines, but these schemes would go live to businesses next week.

The Corporate Director of Finance, Governance and Property then moved onto describing the financial situation for this financial year, and stated that before the start of the secondary lockdown, the Council had predicted an overspend of £2million for this financial year. He stated that this prediction used all £4million of the Council's surplus, plus the first three tranches of the government grant. He added that the latest government announcement would cover the deficit, as he expected the current financial situation to deteriorate further. He stated that to help mitigate some of these problems there had been a review of the capital programme, and all non-essential vacant posts had been frozen. He commented that whilst there had been an increase in residents receiving Local Council Tax Scheme (LCTS) support, he felt that the full impact of COVID was not yet known, and would not be known until government support such as furlough was ended. He stated that a significant number of Thurrock businesses were being supported through business rate relief, but commented that the wider longer-term impact of COVID on these businesses was also not yet known. He stated that due to these impacts, the Council's tax base would not be as high as in previous years. The Corporate Director of Finance, Governance and Property then outlined the impact that COVID would have on capital projects and commented that all ongoing projects were working to ensure they were COVID compliant. He stated that the impact on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) had largely been limited to an increased debt risk due to a reduction in rent collection, but felt that the impact would not be known until employment protection schemes were phased out.

The Corporate Director of Finance, Governance and Property then moved on to outlining the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and the impact COVID had had on this, and stated that the Council were now predicting a £34million budget gap over the next three years, £19million of which would be during the next financial year. He stated that this is due to a loss in council tax and business rates; increased spending on social care to ensure market resiliency; a reduction in fees and charges; and a pause in the capital strategy including Thurrock Regeneration Limited (TRL) and capital investments. He stated that the financial challenge in 2021/22 was too big to be met with sustainable savings in the time-scale that the Council has, and commented that the Council were currently examining a number of immediate short-term relief measures. He mentioned that these included the use of reserves and a freeze on recruitment for non-essential current vacancies, which would save approximately £4million. He stated that central government were considering a referendum limit on the maximum increase of council tax, but this would not

be known until mid-late December.

The Corporate Director of Finance, Governance and Property stated that a draft budget would be presented to Corporate Overview and Scrutiny and Cabinet in January. He stated that central government had announced that this would only need to be a one-year settlement, so the Council would not have any certainty regarding the 2022/23 until December 2021. He added that the Council were currently undertaking a full asset review, a targeted transformation programme, and were reviewing Council staffing budgets. The Corporate Director of Finance, Governance and Property then moved onto discussing investments and stated that they were working well, and although there had been pressures on returns, all investments were still safe. He stated that investments were being reported to a Shadow Investment Committee, and that the Council's investment strategy now focussed around longer-term Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) investment, rather than shorter term borrowing from other Councils. He stated that due to the current financial situation other Councils were not lending as much, and had removed Thurrock from their lending list due to negative press surrounding Thurrock's investment strategy. He added that although both lender and borrower had been benefitting from these short-term lending strategies, other Councils had not wanted to risk any bad press. He stated that this shorter-term debt had now been swapped and re-financed for PWLB debt, and this would be reported to the Standards and Audit Committee.

The Chair thanked the Corporate Director of Finance, Governance and Property for his report and questioned whether the refinancing for PWLB debt had had an additional cost to the Council. The Corporate Director of Finance, Governance and Property replied that it had had an additional cost, but all investments were still profitable, although this profit had been diluted due to an increased borrowing cost. The Chair then asked about the end of year financial outlook for 2020/21 and queried how the Council had moved from a £4million surplus to a £2million deficit, and asked if this could decrease further before the end of the financial year. The Corporate Director of Finance, Governance and Property replied that before the last announcement from central government, Thurrock had only received £3million in support, and stated that any previous surplus would now be put towards the future deficit. He stated that the £2million funding gap had been before the announcement of the second lockdown, and did not include any winter social care pressures that the Council would experience. He stated that the Council currently had £11million in general fund reserves, which would only be used as a last resort, as well as £1.5million social care reserve and £3.5million general reserve.

The Chair then queried the 2021/22 budget and asked if TRL had been paused due to COVID-19 or if other factors had been involved. The Corporate Director of Finance, Governance and Property replied that due to COVID-19 the capital strategy and investment activity had been paused. He stated that there was currently a TRL target of £1.8million each year, which now had to be funded through reserves. He added that TRL was currently undergoing a governance review, which included going to the General Services Committee, Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as well as Cabinet, and stated

that if the Council went forward with TRL then those targets would be put back in place. The Chair then asked if the Council had a back-up plan if investments stopped delivering. The Corporate Director of Finance, Governance and Property responded that the Council were looking into additional funding streams, but other incomes such as fees and charges were only small compared to the investment income. He added that plan B of a council spending review was currently running alongside plan A, but had been accelerated due to the pandemic.

The Chair then queried how the funding gap would be met, and asked what the level of potential staffing redundancies would be. The Corporate Director of Finance, Governance and Property responded that this work was still in very early stages, but the size of the funding gap and the speed at which the pandemic was moving would not allow the Council to make permanent changes currently, as the consultation process was too long. He stated that the Council would continue to limit recruitment and maintain vacancy freezes, but there was likely to be a reduction in the number of posts at the Council. He added that the Council were also in the very early stages of asset review, which included putting together a catalogue of all council assets and challenging the use of the buildings, which included 60 operational buildings; 50 community assets; and 180 areas of land and other buildings.

Councillor Duffin stated that other Councils had also had to change their investment approach due to the pandemic. He stated that he felt disappointed due to some media reports regarding the investment approach, which had caused the Council to lose investment streams and therefore money for the frontline. He asked that all Members be aware of the facts before talking to any media outlets. Councillor Rice queried the overspend of the A13 and asked how this funding gap would be covered. The Corporate Director of Finance, Governance and Property responded that this topic would be covered in the Standards and Audit Committee, as well as Planning, Transport and Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee. He added that any overspend on the A13 would not impact the budget in this financial year, and would only potentially start to have an impact in 2021/22. He added that currently the level of spend was within the original budget envelope, and was grant-backed through the South Essex Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP). He stated that the Council had a contract with Kier to complete the works, even during the difficult COVID pandemic, and if necessary would seek additional funding through grants or private bodies. He commented that any outstanding balance on the scheme, if grants could not be found, would be paid for through capital receipts of prudential borrowing.

The Chair then queried the Investment Committee and asked if the Director could update the Committee on their work. The Corporate Director of Finance, Governance and Property replied that Councillor Hebb had invited group leaders to a meeting to discuss the Investment Committee and how this would be set up. He stated that the group had looked at the governance surrounding the new committee had it had largely been supported. He added that officers were currently looking at timescales, membership, the Terms of Reference, and any updates needed in the Constitution, but until this had been completed

the Committee would run as a Shadow Committee comprised of the group leaders.

RESOLVED: That:

The Committee:

1. Commented on the assumptions and financial implications set out in the report.

22. Mid-Year/Quarter 2 (April-September 2020) Corporate Performance Report 2020/21

The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service introduced the report and stated that 77% of key performance indicators (KPIs) had been on target for the period outlined the report, which included three KPIs that had been missed for the quarter one period. She added that COVID-19 continued to have an impact on some services, but the majority of services had adapted quickly and had been able to re-open. She commented that there may be an adverse direction of travel in quarter three, due to the current lockdown, but that a route to green was included for all KPIs which had missed target.

The Chair stated that there were currently thirty KPIs being monitored, and asked if this had decreased compared to last year due to COVID. The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service replied that the team were currently unable to report on seven KPIs do the pandemic, but that the number of KPIs was reviewed and updated every year. The Chair then highlighted page 113 of the agenda and the KPI regarding tenant satisfaction, as he felt there was lots of work being undertaken to understand why the KPI had missed its target, rather than improvements. The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service replied that the tenant satisfaction KPI did vary from quarter to quarter, but felt that tenants were more satisfied when they were received more information from the council and felt more engaged. She stated that the housing team were currently working to understand why this was, and that a number of detailed measures and questions were being put to tenants to expand the breadth of tenant consultation. She added that this KPI was monitored closely by the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, but the service recognised the work it needed to do to engage with residents.

Councillor Duffin highlighted the KPI regarding the number of apprenticeships, but mentioned that he understood why the KPI had been missed due to the pandemic. The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service replied that the quarter three report would include details and outcomes from the virtual apprenticeship event.

RESOLVED: That:

The Committee:

1. Notes and commented upon the performance of the key corporate performance indicators, in particular those areas which are off target and the impact of COVID-19.

2. Identified any areas which require additional consideration.

23. Work Programme

The Corporate Director of Finance, Governance and Property stated that the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January would need to be moved to a later date, to ensure comments from January's Cabinet meeting could be discussed by the Committee. The Chair and Committee agreed to this strategy, and asked the Senior Democratic Services Officer to find a suitable alternative date.

The meeting finished at 9.09 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**