

Minutes of the Meeting of the Council held on 24 November 2021 at 8.52 pm

- Present:** Councillors Sue Shinnick (Mayor), James Halden (Deputy Mayor), Qaisar Abbas, Abbie Akinbohun, Alex Anderson, Chris Baker, Gary Byrne, Adam Carter, Daniel Chukwu, Mark Coxshall, Jack Duffin, Tony Fish, Mike Fletcher, Robert Gledhill, Shane Hebb, Deborah Huelin, Andrew Jefferies, Barry Johnson, Tom Kelly, Cathy Kent, John Kent, Martin Kerin, Steve Liddiard, Susan Little, Ben Maney, Fraser Massey, Allen Mayes, Sara Muldowney, Bukky Okunade, Augustine Ononaji, Maureen Pearce, Terry Piccolo, Georgette Polley, Jane Potheary, Shane Ralph, Kairen Raper, Joycelyn Redsell, Elizabeth Rigby, Jennifer Smith, Graham Snell, Luke Spillman, James Thandi, David Van Day, Lee Watson and Lynn Worrall
- Apologies:** Councillors Gary Collins, Victoria Holloway and Sue Sammons
- In attendance:** Lyn Carpenter, Chief Executive
Matthew Boulter, Democratic Services Manager and Deputy Monitoring Officer
Jenny Shade, Senior Democratic Services Officer
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Before the start of the Meeting, all present were advised that the meeting was being recorded, with the audio recording to be made available on the Council's website.

64. Items of Urgent Business

There were no urgent items of business.

65. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

66. Announcements on behalf of the Mayor or the Leader of the Council

The Mayor stated she had attended the funeral of Sir David Amess this week which had been a very moving service. Councillor Gledhill thanked the Mayor for attending this on behalf of Thurrock Council.

67. Questions from Members of the Public

A copy of the transcript of questions and answers can be viewed under the relevant meeting date at <http://democracy.thurrock.co.uk/thurrock> and are attached at Appendix A at these minutes.

68. Petitions from Members of the Public and Councillors

Councillor Van Day presented a petition on calling on the Council to rename the B1335 (Aveley bypass) 'Lance Corporal Nicky Mason Way'. That this would be a fitting and lasting tribute to Lance Corporal Mason, a former Aveley resident, who gave his life whilst on active duty in Afghanistan on 13 September 2008.

Councillor Muldowney presented a petition calling on the Council to resurface Claudian Way, a main bus route in Chadwell St Mary.

69. Petitions Update Report

Members received a report on the status of those petitions handed in at Council meetings and Council offices.

Councillor Redsell requested an update on her Motion submitted on the 26 February 2020 - Council calls on Cabinet to consider a new wood and bluebells to be planted on a piece of land at the edge of Woodside.

70. Appointments to Committees and Outside Bodies, Statutory and Other Panels

The Mayor enquired whether Group Leaders wished for any changes to be made to the appointments previously made by Committees and Outside Bodies, statutory and other panels.

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Gledhill, stated he had no changes to make.

Councillor J Kent, Leader of the Labour Group, stated he had no changes to make.

Councillor Byrne, Leader of the Thurrock Independent Group stated he had no changes to make.

Councillor Massey stated he had no changes to make.

71. Assistant Director Children's Social Care and Early Help Appointment

Councillor Gledhill introduced the report and sought the approval from Council to appoint to the permanent Assistant Director Children's Social Care and Early Help. Following a robust search and selection process, General Services Committee interviewed on 3 November 2021 and agreed to recommend the appointment of Janet Simon as Assistant Director Children's Social Care and Early Help.

Councillor Massey thanked the stakeholder panel for their part they played in the recruitment exercise and stated the internal recruitment process had worked well.

Councillor Johnson stated he was pleased to welcome Janet Simon into her role.

Councillor Gledhill summed by thanking the stakeholder panel and the Looked After Children for the part they played in the recruitment exercise.

The Mayor called a vote on the recommendation to which this was carried.

RESOLVED

Approved in accordance with the Council's Constitution the appointment of Janet Simon as the permanent Assistant Director Children's Social Care and Early Help.

72. Political Assistants

Councillor Gledhill presented the report detailing the employment of political assistants to support identified political groups. In October 2019 the General Services Committee received a report entitled 'Review of Constitution and Process' and as part of that report recommended that political assistants be appointed to political groups with more than six members to aid in research and support. The General Services Committee resolved to defer a decision on this to allow further discussions to take place. Local authority political assistants were local government employees who undertook research and provided administrative support for the main political groups of the council.

Councillor J Kent referred to an earlier announcement made by Councillor Gledhill on the loss of job, where 300 council staff would be losing their jobs. To bring forward a recommendation to appoint political assistants to the two largest political groups at an estimated cost of £100,000 was the wrong thing to do and at the wrong time. That this was insensitive to the extreme and would not be supporting the recommendations.

Councillor Byrne questioned how these posts could be justified and what the return or value would be and indicated his disgrace.

Councillor Massey agreed the timing was not appropriate and the discussion should be referred to a future meeting.

Councillor Worrall agreed this was not the right time with Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee reporting only last week on an unbalanced budget and agreed this was not the time to be signing off redundancy consultation notices.

Councillor Johnson stated the timing was perfect as members understood senior officers had a lot of pressures of dealing with the budget and this would take the burden off them and allow them to concentrate on what they were good at doing.

Councillor Potheary stated this was not the way forward and appropriate at this time. That Cabinet had agreed a £100,000 pay cut from the front line environment team which were four full time posts plus a van to which this

money could have paid for. The priority should be on front line workers keeping our streets clean and all the other services the Council offered to residents.

Councillor Hebb echoed Councillor Johnson's comments and referred to page 18, paragraph 3.3 of the agenda "the council is reforming the staff base to reflect the post pandemic situation. To help reduce the requirement for members to rely on existing officers for policy interpretation, this recommendation will provide members with a separate policy resource, outside of the current restricted officer corps, releasing them to spend more time delivering a leaner organisation". There would be a requirement for senior leaders within the organisation to be expected to lead more operationally and the policy support would not be available within the organisation.

Councillor Jefferies referred to the comments made on the £100k cuts to front line services who had made this clear at overview and scrutiny committee that these cuts were about cost savings, cost efficiencies, using machinery, a better way of working and it was not about cutting staff to the tune of £100k.

Councillor Gledhill stated this was the right time with Thurrock evolving and moving forward and with that there needed to be the right level of support in making decisions or even challenging decisions and to do these effectively.

The Mayor called a vote on the recommendations to which were carried.

RESOLVED

- 1. That Full Council decide whether to employ political assistants to support the Conservative and Labour Groups (referred to in this report as the 'qualifying groups').**
- 2. That, if agreed, the Council, in consultation with group leaders effected, set out the contract terms and conditions for such posts in line with the statutory requirement for these posts.**

73. Report of the Cabinet Member for Central Services

Councillor Duffin presented his report as read in the agenda.

Councillor J Kent questioned when the Civic Office would be open to the public to which Councillor Duffin stated he did not have the exact timeline to hand. Councillor J Kent asked for the portfolio holder's assurance that members of the public can come into the Civic Office with any issues and speak with real people. Councillor Duffin stated staff were on hand to support members of the public in the Civic Office and also support residents digitally. Councillor Duffin made reference to the potential move of the central library into the Civic Offices.

Councillor J Kent referred to the Communications Strategy presented to Cabinet in September 2021 and questioned with the October Cabinet being cancelled, the decision to agree the communications strategy had been made by the leader and questioned what changes had been made to that strategy which had satisfied the concerns of Councillor Duffin. Councillor Duffin stated that editors had been written to with only one reply being received back within the timeframe and that feedback had been very positive.

Councillor Byrne questioned the levels of secrecy that Thurrock Council continued to have with members of the press and those submitting member questions. Councillor Duffin stated the one response received back was positive and the Council worked well with partners and would continue to do so.

Councillor Potheary asked for confirmation that the Grays Library would be relocated to the Civic Office as stated by Councillor Duffin and raised her concern that it would not be appropriate for librarian staff to be used to support and man the main reception area. Councillor Duffin stated that this was an option to move the library to the Civic Office and that work was being undertaken to look at office based support and the answers to those questions would be got out as quickly as possible.

Councillor Kerin questioned whether the completion of the new Civic Office was on scheduled to be completed by early 2022 and within budget to which Councillor Duffin responded yes.

74. Questions from Members

The Mayor informed the Chamber that no questions to the Leader had been received and seven questions to Cabinet Members. Those questions not heard would either receive a written response or have the option to withdraw and resubmit.

A copy of the transcript of questions and answers can be found at Appendix A to these minutes.

75. Reports from Members representing the Council on Outside Bodies

No reports were presented.

76. Minutes of Committees

The Minutes of Committee as set out in the Agenda were received.

77. Update on motions resolved at Council during the previous year

Members received an information report updating the progress in respect of Motions received at Council.

78. Motion submitted by Councillor Fletcher

The Motion, as printed in the Agenda was proposed by Councillor Fletcher and seconded by Councillor Byrne. The Motion read as follows:

That this chamber recognises the unique community value of the Grangewaters Outdoor Education Centre as a place where our young people learn the skills, values and understanding of their environment that our borough urgently needs; and as an essential training facility for local groups as diverse as schools, triathletes and the Grays yacht club and that this chamber urges Cabinet to halt any plans to sell or close the centre.

Councillor Fletcher presented his motion. Councillor Fletcher was very passionate to preserve this community asset where a lot of fabulous work had been undertaken by the centre to local schools and with schools and students from outside the borough. The centre offered a wide group of activities including the Angling Club that attracted a lot of interest and was self-sustained, the Thurrock Yacht Club used the centre as a safe place for training, and there was a Residential Centre and the lake for open water training for triathletes. The centre served as a valuable purpose to the community and did so in a sustainable manner and even during Covid the centre had come in at around net zero cost. The centre was able to do this because of its reputation and being able to offer services that were unique. The centre was not just a community hub but was self-sustaining and at no cost to the council to keep the centre open. If the services were marketed more effectively those services could increase the income coming in. This improved the council's reputation and had set good examples of health and wellbeing. There was no downside to this facility, this was not a difficult decision and urged members to support this proposal, to look at ways to work with the centre, not to shut it, not to sell it but to maximise the possibilities of the community hub.

Councillor Byrne agreed with the comments made by Councillor Fletcher.

Councillor Coxshall stated there were no plans at this stage to close this facility but whether the council should be running such a facility. This would be looked at and how that facility was ran. That it was good practice to look at all facilities and how improvements could be made. Look at where we were, what facilities were being offered, would it be better ran by the community and would be open to conversations with a wide range of people across the borough on how best to run this facility.

Councillor Johnson echoed Councillor Coxshall's comments and stated the lake would not be big enough for all 400 members of the angling club, the yacht club only now used Grangewaters as it could no longer use Stubbers. Had conversations with Head Teachers who had stated that Grangewaters was not fit for purpose. This was not a statutory duty of the Council to run this facility and agreed the Council could not run this facility properly and needed to listen to the community. Councillor Johnson had asked Officers to make a note of how many people used and attended the open day scheduled for the 4 December.

Councillor Muldowney stated as part of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee had heard from officers how much use the post 16 year old SEND children got from the facilities at Grangewaters, a provision made in response to the SEND Ofsted inspection. Councillor Muldowney questioned Councillor Johnson's comments about schools not using the facility but it was acceptable to be used by the most vulnerable. Councillor Muldowney echoed the comments made by Councillor Fletcher and having spoken with residents and how passionate they were of Grangewaters, the facilities that it offered and being a safe place to teach these sports. That outdoor education was absolutely essential for all children and this venue supplied outstanding facilities that would help us recover from Covid.

Councillor Spillman stated the point of the review was to open doors and look for greater potential for an underused asset. That opening this asset up for consideration would open it up to other activities and possibly seasonal events.

Councillor Johnson stated in response to Councillor Muldowney's comment regarding sending most vulnerable children to Grangewaters but not good enough for some schools, that most of the use by schools was with children with special educational needs and they enjoyed those facilities. The question that should be asked was should the Council be running this facility and whether it could be done better by someone else.

Councillor Worrall stated the successes of Grangewaters were not shouted out enough, agreed much more could be offered and that it should be a residential site that required a complete overhaul to make it into a real money spinner. Councillor Worrall stated that other authorities were able to offer residential courses and questioned why Thurrock could not. That the site needed investment and a refresh to secure it for the future.

Councillor Gledhill stated those outside organisations who were community based had the facility to attract extra money that the Council could not do and would be voting against the motion as the Council had to continue to see what could be provided that was better.

Councillor Fletcher summed up by stating there were shared opinions of the site and an agreement more could be done with this asset but disagreement on whether Grangewaters should be sold and whether this was the answer. That it was great news there was no intention of closing the facilities and its value was appreciated and asked all members to consider what more could be done, what marketing could be undertaken to make the most of the facilities and questioned was there not just another way forward.

The Mayor called a vote on the motion to which the majority of members voted against this motion to which the Mayor announced the motion lost.

79. Motion submitted by Councillor Worrall

The Motion, as printed in the Agenda was proposed by Councillor Worrall and seconded by Councillor J Kent. The Motion read as follows:

This Council shares the concerns of residents living around the former Grays Adult Education College and Alf Lowne Scout Centre about the future of the site. Council calls on Cabinet to bring forward a comprehensive plan for the future of the whole site and halt any demolition or development, on this site until that plan has been consulted on and agreed.

Councillor Worrall presented her motion by stating the demolition or development of the site should halt until agreement had been sought from residents. This was the key part of this motion that all residents affected should be spoken to not just a handful. There were no reasons why this demolition was happening and the new gate would remove six parking spaces. This was a missed opportunity for ward members and residents to comment and that a comprehensive plan should be presented on the whole site with the demolition halted until that plan had been agreed.

Councillor Hebb stated it was incredulous for Councillor Worrall, as a former cabinet member, to ask all members to support this motion when in the past a decision to dispose of a piece of land had been made, even though a ward member had asked for this not to go ahead, and was still causing residents issues, even 10 years later.

Councillor Coxshall stated that the Council would still pay business rates on empty buildings and took the point made by Councillor Worrall on consultations and agreed that consultations should be undertaken with residents and ward members.

Councillor J Kent stated if the site was right for development the Council had to work with residents and also stated that a demolition plan, access plan and survey had not been seen and a step should be taken back to look holistically at this site and come back with a proper plan.

Councillor Worrall summed up by stating the demolition should be halted until the proper consultation process had been undertaken and to work with residents and ward members. Going ahead residents and members should be properly informed of these decisions and not have to see these on planning lists. Councillor Worrall reiterated that the demolition should be halted, reviewed until a plan had been agreed and to this, Councillor Worrall requested a requisition vote.

For: Councillors Abbas, Chukwu, Fish, Fletcher, C Kent, J Kent, Kerin, Liddiard, Muldowney, Okunade, Pothecary, Raper, Shinnick, Watson and Worrall (15)

Against: Councillors Akinbohun, Anderson, Carter, Coxshall, Duffin, Gledhill, Halden, Hebb, Huelin, Jefferies, Johnson, Kelly, Little, Maney, Mayes, Ononaji, Pearce, Piccolo, Polley, Ralph, Redsell, Rigby, Snell, Spillman, Thandi and Van Day (26)

Abstain: Councillors Baker, Byrne, Massey and Smith (4)

To which the Mayor announced the motion lost.

80. Motion submitted by Councillor Muldowney

Councillor Muldowney deferred her motion until the 26 January 2022 Council meeting.

The meeting finished at 10.37 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**