

Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on 7 December 2022 at 7.00 pm

The deadline for call-ins is Monday 19 December 2022 at 5.00pm

Present: Councillors Mark Coxshall (Leader), Deborah Arnold (Deputy Leader), Qaisar Abbas, Jack Duffin, Andrew Jefferies, Barry Johnson, Ben Maney, Graham Snell and Luke Spillman

Councillor Joycelyn Redsell, Ward Member for Little Thurrock Blackshots

In attendance: Jackie Hinchliffe, Director of HR, OD & Transformation
John Jones, Director of Legal and Governance, and Monitoring Officer
Ewelina Sorbjan, Interim Director of Housing
Ian Wake, Acting Chief Executive
Lucy Tricker, Senior Democratic Services Officer

Before the start of the Meeting, all present were advised that the meeting was being live-streamed and recorded; and would be uploaded to the Council's website.

61. Minutes

The minutes of the Cabinet meeting held on 9 November 2022 were approved as a true and correct record.

62. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

63. Declaration of Interests

There were no interests declared.

64. Statements by the Leader

The Leader began his statement by explaining that the Council were currently in a financial deficit position of approximately £479m and a Best Value Inspection was currently being undertaken by the Commissioners. He felt determined to put things right and engage with all Councillors regarding this issue to change the culture at Thurrock Council. He thanked officers for their hard work during this difficult time. He added that the Quarter 2 financial update report on the agenda would be deferred until the Cabinet meeting on 14 December, to ensure that Corporate Overview and Scrutiny could make comments and feedback on the report at their next meeting.

65. Briefings on Policy, Budget and Other Issues

Councillor Johnson thanked local businesses and residents for the support they had shown to the Give a Gift project. He explained that the project was currently in its seventh year, and this year approximately 1400 gifts had been received which would be distributed to 1000 vulnerable children in the borough. He thanked officers for their hard work organising the Give a Gift campaign.

66. Petitions submitted by Members of the Public

No petitions had been submitted by members of the public.

67. Questions from Non-Executive Members

No questions had been submitted by non-Executive Members.

68. Matters Referred to the Cabinet for Consideration by an Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Other than those items already contained within the agenda, no items had been referred to the Cabinet for their consideration by an overview and scrutiny committee.

69. Financial Update - Quarter 2 2022/23 (Decision: 110628)

Councillor Snell explained that the report would be deferred to the extraordinary meeting on 14 December 2022 to ensure the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee can share their views.

RESOLVED: That Cabinet:

1. Deferred the report to the extraordinary Cabinet meeting on 14 December 2022, to ensure Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee can feedback and comment.

70. Thames Freeport: Governance Structure (Decision: 110629)

The Leader introduced the report and felt that the Thames Freeport provided a good opportunity for the borough, with closer collaborative working with other local authorities including the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, and the London Borough of Havering. He stated that the Freeport could bring investment and new jobs to the borough.

The Director of Legal and Governance added that a briefing note regarding the report had been received from the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Councillor Snell highlighted the concern from the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee that Thurrock officers could become overstretched with the additional workload from the Freeport, and asked how the Council could ensure this did not happen. The Leader stated that this issue had been raised with the commissioners and central government, and

some income from the Freeport would be ringfenced to allow for increased officer capacity. He felt that the Freeport would be vital to help deliver growth within the borough, and help Thurrock in its recovery. He added that the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee had also raised concerns regarding the change from borrowing against future business rates to waiting for business rates to be accrued. He stated that the monies collected through business rates would be deferred rather than lost, as the Council now needed to do things differently.

Councillor Abbas supported the report and felt the Freeport would be beneficial to Thurrock as it could increase the number of jobs in the area. Councillor Johnson sought clarification regarding recommendation 4, and asked if the recommendation would need to be changed in the future if the Acting Chief Executive became permanent. The Director of Legal and Governance explained that the recommendation did not need to be amended as it had to reflect current titles, but would automatically be changed if titles were updated in the future.

RESOLVED: That Cabinet:

- 1. Considered and approved the Thames Freeport proposed governance structure (Section 4).**
- 2. Approved the appointment of the Leader of the Council or nominated representative to the Thames Freeport Governance Board (Section 4.4, 4.5 & 5.3).**
- 3. Endorsed that relevant Officers support the Leader of the Council or nominated representative at the TFGB to participate in and represent the Council on the various Thames Freeport Sub-committees as necessary, delegating authority to the Acting Chief Executive to appoint Officers to appropriate sub-committees e.g., Skills, Levelling Up and Regeneration (Section 4.10).**
- 4. Delegated authority to the Acting Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader of the Council to enter any Memoranda of Understanding with government and Freeport bodies to deliver the activities of Thames Freeport (Section 4.2, 4.13 & 5.4).**
- 5. Noted the approach to investing retained business rates in regeneration and infrastructure projects as the rates become available to Council (Section 2.4).**

*Reason for decision: as outlined in the report
This decision is subject to call-in*

71. Digital and Customer Experience Strategy (Decision: 110630)

Councillor Duffin introduced the report and stated that the new strategy would not exclude those who wished to continue using non-digital channels, but

would make systems as easy as possible for all residents and improve the level of support residents received. He explained that the strategy provided a long-term outlook and would help implement ideas such as introducing a portal whereby residents could see the status of their enquiry, which could help improve the Council's efficiency and visibility to residents. Councillor Duffin highlighted the Local Full Fibre Network phase 2, which had been funded through central government and would help improve connectivity within the borough. He also highlighted that 89% of Freedom of Information requests had been processed within 20 days, which was above the Council's target. He stated that although this was above the target set, the team were working to reach 100%. He added that 98,000 Thurrock residents were subscribed to the Council's e-newsletter, with 65% of these opening the newsletter.

Councillor Redsell asked if the contact centre could be given more up-to-date information, particularly regarding housing issues, as some information was out of date and therefore not useful to residents. Councillor Duffin stated that he would take this feedback away and liaise with the contact centre. The Leader felt pleased to see that residents would be able to track their enquiries and looked forward to seeing this project progressing. Councillor Duffin agreed and felt this would help improve transparency and would utilise technology to improve resident's experiences when dealing with the Council. Councillor Maney felt concerned that the increased use of digital portals would mean that residents received procedural responses, rather than detailed responses from officers regarding their enquiry. Councillor Duffin explained that the new strategy would help to streamline processes. He added that a reviewing system could also be added so that when an enquiry was completed the resident could provide a star-rating or qualitative feedback on their experience. He felt that this could provide tangible data that officers could analyse to see which areas needed more work, or which areas were doing well and could provide learning. Councillor Spillman felt that qualitative responses at the end of the enquiry process was a good idea and would allow for more detailed feedback. He felt that this would be useful with vulnerable residents to understand more about their lived experiences. Councillor Duffin explained that every service user could be offered a star-rating review system at the end of their enquiry, and then those services with lower star ratings could be offered qualitative feedback systems.

The Leader felt that this strategy would help improve services at the Council and work towards a culture and behaviour transformation. He stated that the Council had lots of learning to undertake. Councillor Duffin highlighted that the report had gone to the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee who had raised concerns regarding the exclusion of people without access to digital channels, but had agreed the recommendations.

RESOLVED: That Cabinet:

1. Agreed the Digital and Customer Experience Strategy at Appendix 1.

*Reason for decision: as outlined in the report
This decision is subject to call-in*

72. Housing Allocations Scheme Update 2022/23 (Decision: 110631)

Councillor Spillman introduced the report and stated that it provided a more modern and human policy, as it allowed officers to make common sense decisions. He felt that it would improve the efficiency and empathy of the Council when allocating council properties, and thanked officers for their hard work on the report. He added that the report had gone to the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee who had supported the recommendations, and thanked them for their contributions to the report.

RESOLVED: That Cabinet:

1. Agreed the recommended changes to the Housing Allocations Policy as set out in section 3.2, 4.2, 5.2, 6.2, 7.2, 8.2, 9.2, 10.2, 11.2, 12.2, and 13.2.

*Reason for decision: as outlined in the report
This decision is subject to call-in*

73. Blackshots Estate: Proposals for the Way Forward

Councillor Spillman introduced the report and stated that it requested resources to ensure the three high rises in Blackshots were knocked down and replaced with something better for the residents. He explained that as the flats were not in a good condition, it would cost approximately the same amount to refurbish them as to knock them down. He stated that the residents had been consulted with and the majority had wanted the tower blocks demolished, and highlighted that new housing regulations were due next year, which would impact the high rises if they remained.

Councillor Redsell spoke as Ward Member for Little Thurrock Blackshots and thanked Councillor Spillman for his work on the report. She stated that she did not want remedial work to take place on the high rises, as the damp and mould in the buildings could not be fixed. She explained that the last major works on the high rises had been undertaken in 1990, and the outside of the buildings did not conform to current regulations. Councillor Redsell requested clarity on what the new homes would look like, as homes would be needed for the current high-rise residents, but they had to be right by design. She expressed concern that the new homes would remove greenbelt land, and felt that residents in the tower blocks did not want to be moved to Horndon-on-the-Hill, which was one of the proposals within the report. She sought reassurance that the Council would work closely with Fields in Trust to ensure greenbelt land was protected. Councillor Redsell added that she had received lots of feedback from residents following the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and felt pleased to see that residents were engaging with the scrutiny process. Councillor Redsell summarised and stated that the towers needed to be demolished due to the damp and mould conditions within the

building. Councillor Spillman stated that the issues within the flats regarding damp and mould were well documented, and felt that the tower blocks were now inadequate places for people to live. He explained that consultants would choose the most viable option for the new buildings. Councillor Maney agreed that the tower blocks were no longer fit for purpose and did not meet the current required standards. He thanked the local MP for her support in demolishing the tower blocks, and felt that it was now the right time to move forward with the proposals and regenerate the area.

Councillor Abbas thanked officers and the Portfolio Holder for the report, and asked how the consultancy fees would be funded. He also felt concerned regarding the use of greenbelt for the new houses. Councillor Spillman explained that the £200,000 consultancy budget would be used for visibility and preliminary works. He stated that he had consulted with Ward Members regarding the greenbelt option, and felt that it was needed as the footprint of the space had to be increased to ensure all residents could remain in the same area. He felt that this would maintain the community in the area where they currently lived, and although using greenbelt was not ideal he felt it was a small parcel and would improve the lives of residents in the flats. Councillor Snell felt cautious regarding the finances of the project, as it still had to be agreed by commissioners. He asked how the residents would be decamped from the tower blocks. Councillor Spillman explained that the team would be putting together a case for the project that would be presented to the commissioners. He added that the team would also be working on detailed proposals for the decampment of residents. The Leader added that the project would be funded through the Housing Revenue Account, rather than the general fund. The Deputy Leader highlighted point 3.15 of the report and asked if the homeowners within the tower blocks would receive the same service as council tenants. Councillor Spillman explained that homeowners would receive a different service as their homes would be compulsory purchased, but they would be integrated and included in all conversations and developments.

RESOLVED: That Cabinet:

1. Commented and agreed on:

1.1 The proposed approach to developing proposals for the future of the Blackshots estate.

1.2 The requirement to carry out essential remedial works to the Blackshots tower blocks.

1.3 The principal of redeveloping the estate to deal with the issues affecting the existing blocks, to provide good quality housing and to enhance the available stock of housing in Thurrock.

1.4 Note that a consultancy budget of £200,000 has been identified from within the existing Housing Revenue Account feasibility reserve to develop proposals for the future of the estate including appointing

Independent Tenant Advisors.

1.5 The proposal to commence detailed design and planning for a proposed scheme to consult on with residents and the proposed approach to consultation.

74. Annual Public Health Report 2022

The Deputy Leader introduced the report and stated that it sought agreement from Cabinet to publish the report. She explained that the Director of Public Health had a statutory duty to publish an annual report, but it could be on any topic relevant to the borough that could inform service areas and achieve positive outcomes. She explained that the public health team had worked with a variety of health partners on the report, and was linked with other policies such as the Health and Wellbeing Strategy, and the Better Together: A Case for Future Change policy. She commented that this year's focus was cardiovascular disease, which linked into health inequalities within the borough such as obesity, diabetes, and smoking. She added that the report would also help to inform the NHS and other partners about the issues within Thurrock and would bring together stakeholders.

RESOLVED: That Cabinet:

1. Noted the contents of the Annual Public Health Report 2022 and approved its publication.

The meeting finished at 8.00 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**