

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 5 October 2023 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Martin Kerin (Chair), Robert Gledhill, Valerie Morris-Cook, Georgette Polley, Lynn Worrall, Paul Arnold (Substitute) (substitute for Jack Duffin) and Graham Snell

Apologies: Councillor Jack Duffin

In attendance: Steven Mair, Interim Chief Financial Officer/Section 151 Officer
Jenny Shade, Senior Democratic Services Officer

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.

8. Minutes

Councillor Worrall requested that the numbered action points relate to the points risen, this would make the minutes more comprehensible.

Members stated that no updates had been provided to the actions within the minutes and asked for these to be provided following this meeting.

Members also requested that an Action List be presented at the next meeting.

Following the above being made, the minutes of the 11 July 2023 Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee be approved as a correct record.

9. Items of Urgent Business

There were no urgent items of business.

10. Declaration of Interests

No declaration of interests were made.

11. 2023/24 Quarter 1 Forecast Revenue and Capital Outturn

The report presented set out the estimated forecast revenue outturn position for 2023/24 for the General Fund, Housing Revenue Account (HRA), Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) and Public Health Grant.

The following points were made:

- Member referred to recommendation 2 of the report and stated it would be helpful for committee members to have directorate budgets itemised as to what their mitigations were.

- Member referred to paragraph 3.3.5 and questioned what affect would the higher rates have and having some comparisons would have been beneficial to members.
- Member referred to paragraph 3.9.2, Members needed to understand more about what the debt recovery team. It was also noted the good work being undertaken by the debt recovery team. Officers will take away action to look at the currently recruitment exercise. (see action point 17)
- Member thanked officers for the detailed report.
- It was recorded that a Member had had a lot of interaction with the financial inclusion team who undertook some amazing work for residents.
- Member referred to paragraph 2.1, questioned how much of the hardship fund of £0.616m had been used this year. (see action point 18)
- Member made a general statement in regard to Children's social care, and this needed to be tackled nationally.
- Member referred to paragraph 3.3.4, questioned how this overspend would impact those children.
- Member referred to paragraph 3.4.3, commented on the cost of postage increases in year with the council trying to be more digital.
- Member referred to paragraph 3.8.4, questioned whether the CO2 was now completely empty and if so could this be temporarily taken out of ratings. (see action point 19)
- Member referred to paragraph 3.10.3, questioned why there had been a reduction in registrar services as the new Town Hall had more facilities to offer these services. (see action point 20)
- Members also stated the council should be exploring more registrar services to generate more income.
- Member referred to paragraph 4.1, Inflation, Energy Services, questioned the fluctuations and how could this be happening if the council had bulk purchased. (see action point 21)
- Member referred to paragraph 3.15.5, questioned whether this additional level of income had been a positive income of an action that had been agreed by the council.
- Member questioned when the financial accounts for 2020/21 would finally be completed.
- Members questioned how confident officers were on the final figure.
- Member stated the HRA Capital Program remained on track for delivery as no new capital programmes would commence.
- Member referred to Right to Buy Receipts and questioned whether there was a business case that these could be used.

The meeting adjourned at 7.36pm.

The meeting reconvened at 7.38pm.

- Member referred to paragraph 3.25, had concerns that the underspend had been achieved but these services had been reduced and were at risk of being lost. She questioned whether the best use of funding from external resources was being used.

- Member requested an update home to school transport and whether everything was undertaken to ensure that every child got to school. (see action point 22)
- Members noted and commented on the overspend against the ICT budget.
- Member referred to the intervention commissioner costs and questioned was everything being done.
- Members agreed that money being spent on garages could be better spent.
- Member referred to page 43, Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) and questioned whether this had already moved. (see action point 23)
- Member questioned the difference between the Tilbury Towns Fund (accelerated funding) and Tilbury and Grays Town Funds normal spends.
- Member referred to the overspend of ICT and that every committee held had experienced some form of ICT issue.
- Member raised concern on expenditure being spent on car parks and requested more information. (see action point 24)
- Member referred to the Projects on Hold and that health and safety had to be a consideration when deciding which projects should be put on hold.
- Member referred to paragraph 3.3.6 and questioned what the substantial shortfall in funding and what action was being undertaken.
- Member requested when grant money was received this could be coded to identify this as not council money but money that had been received into grants. Members were happy that this could be provided at a total level rather than individual projects.
- Member requested that recommendation 1.1 be amended to add the following words “Dependent on previous years accounts being signed off”.
- Member requested that recommendation 1.2 be amended to add the following words “The mitigating action figures are brought back to committee”.

Actions:

16. Steven Mair to report comments made to the debt recovery team and provide feedback on team vacancies.
17. Steven Mair to confirm figure on hardship fund.
18. Steven Mair to confirm situation of CO2.
19. Steven Mair to explore the reasons behind the shortfall of registrar services.
20. Steven Mair to check whether energy contracts were in place.
21. Steven Mair to provide update on school transport.
22. Steven Mair to question whether the PRU had already moved.
23. Steven Mair to obtain information on what car parks were expenditure was being spent.

RESOLVED

- 1. That Committee noted the overall forecast general fund outturn position for period 3 was an underspend of £1.036m. Dependent on previous years accounts being signed off.**

2. That Committee noted that directors with significant adverse variances would continue to review directorate budgets and identify mitigating actions to resolve the forecast pressure against the 2023/24 budget. The mitigating action figures are brought back to committee.
3. That Committee noted the potential risks to the position listed noted in section 4 and the following specific risks noted within the report:
 - a) There are an ongoing assessment of the investment portfolio values which will need to be reflected on an ongoing basis with the next update scheduled for Quarter 2.
 - b) The requirement to change the accounting for cloud-based IT costs continues to be assessed in both the current and prior years and is likely to have a material short-term impact.
 - c) There are ongoing wider financial accounting assessments related to prior periods which may also need to be considered. That Committee noted the HRA, DSG and Public Health project to deliver the budget within the existing funding envelopes.
4. That Committee noted and comment on the capital programme, the current projected slippage of £7.46m and the impact on MRP.
5. That Committee noted that the position will remain provisional as further substantive work is undertaken, notably in preparation of historic accounts, which could have an impact on current or future years.

12. Report of the Cabinet Member for Finance, HR and Payroll/Financial Strategy Update

Councillor Snell presented his portfolio holder report for Finance, HR and Payroll/Financial Strategy Update.

The following points were made:

- Member acknowledged the work undertaken by officers in producing this very detailed report.
- Member referred to paragraph 4.15 and discussed the 7% Public Works Loan Board.
- Member referred to paragraph 4.18 and discussed the £103 investment in the CCLA Property Fund as to whether this was a safe long-term return.
- Member referred to the savings of the £18.2 million from the revenue budget and questioned how confident the portfolio holder was this would be met.
- Members discussed the targets for 2024/25 and 2025/26.
- Member referred to how and when assets were sold, with officers reiterating that the council had an explicit direction to pay down debt and referred members to the notes on hurdle rates within the report.
- All members discussed the purpose of pink papers.
- Member noted the dates in the report were out of sequence to events.

- Members agreed that a robust and up to date Asset Register should be available.
- Member referred to Table 2, noted the expensive administration fees and questioned how confident the portfolio holder was in a return of those costs.
- Member stated for some this would be the first time they had an opportunity to see the council had a vast array of investments and acknowledged there was going to be a significant loss.
- Member referred to paragraph 3.8 and stated there was no mention in the bullet points that it was the reduction of the central government grant over time. With less money coming in the administration was over reliant on investment incomes and questioned whether this had been considered as the council developed their accounts in the future.

13. Work Programme

Members requested that an updated Action List be presented.

The chair requested that the Portfolio Holder Annual Report: Transformational Change, Communications and Governance be moved from the 1 February 2024 meeting to the 7 December 2023 meeting.

Members requested an update on the Investment Advisory Panel.

Any Other Business

Councillor Morris-Cook stated how uncomfortable she had felt, but had remained at this important meeting, on how inappropriate it was that Councillor Gledhill was now a member of this committee. Councillor Morris-Cook stated he had been the leader when the finance issues arose and with him now asking the current portfolio holder questions on finance was totally inappropriate.

Councillor Gledhill responded to say this had been an appointment made at the 27 September 2023 full council meeting made by the leader, with no objections being made. Councillor Gledhill stated the comment made by Councillor Morris-Cook had also been inappropriate, as a member he was entitled to sit on this committee like any other member and to hold the council to account.

The chair agreed for these notes to be included in the minutes.

Recording of Meeting

The full recording of the meeting can be viewed from the following link:

[Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Thursday 5 October 2023, 7:00pm - Thurrock Council committee meeting webcasts \(public-i.tv\)](#)

The meeting finished at 8.47 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**