

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 1 November 2023 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Martin Kerin (Chair), Robert Gledhill, Georgette Polley, John Kent (Substitute) (substitute for Valerie Morris-Cook) and James Thandi (Substitute) (substitute for Jack Duffin)

Apologies: Councillor Jack Duffin

In attendance:
Dr Dave Smith, Chief Executive and Managing Director
Commissioner
Asmat Hussain, Director of Legal and Governance and
Monitoring Officer
Matthew Boulter, Head of Democratic, Scrutiny and Member
Services
Mark Bradbury, Interim Director of Place
Steven Mair, Interim Chief Financial Officer/Section 151 Officer
Rob Large, Assistant Director Property
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.

14. Items of Urgent Business

There were no urgent items of business.

15. Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

16. Call-in to Cabinet Decision 110667 - Asset Disposals Programme - Recommended next tranche of properties for disposal

The report presented outlined the call-in made to the Cabinet Decision 110667 - Asset Disposals Programme – Recommended next tranche of properties for disposal, highlighted the reasons why the call-in was made and the alternative proposal being put forward. The report offered advice to the committee on how to manage the call-in through the committee process and should be used as a summary document to help understand the overview of this particular call-in.

Due to Councillor Green unable to attend the meeting due to illness, the chair agreed to read out the statement provided by Councillor Green:

I was supposed to be here this evening to object to the selling of land in Purfleet on Thames, which is distrusted into three sections. First being the Purfleet Medical

Centre car park, to be sold for potential ground rent. With the Integrated Medical Centre project now up in the air and HOSC is now waiting for a report what next. Will they be happening? Will it be done on a smaller scale? No one knows. All we know is we are waiting and a potential area for expansion could be the rear of the Purfleet Medical Centre which could potentially house any future medical centre building. But with all this aside expect people to pay to park in there hour of need, we are in a cost-of-living crisis, council tax and rent hikes, residents cannot be expected to fork any further expenditure. The next pieces are two pieces of land located off Water Lane and St Clements Courts and Tank Lane and Purfleet Primary School. Purfleet on Thames has seen many developments over the years and no local infrastructure, which the long-anticipated regeneration was supposed to rectify. But unfortunately, just like the Integrated Medical Centre the regeneration is up in the air. I strongly object and why is Purfleet on Thames potentially losing their green belt to 'the lungs of Thurrock'. In closing I ask you all to support my call-in and call on cabinet to make the right decision.

The chair asked the Portfolio Holder to speak, the following points were made:

- The land referred to by Councillor Green as green belt was actually white land.
- This was not recreational land; it was a piece of land the council no longer had any use for.
- Although the land was idle, the council still had maintenance liability for it.
- Questioned why land that the council had no use for, should be retained.
- Supported the disposal as there were no identifiable need or use for the land.
- Planning processes would still need to be undertaken for whomever purchased the land.
- Recommended to proceed with the disposal of the land at a market value.

Officer updated members on the small piece of land which said "ground rent" this was an old note and should not have been included on the plan.

The Chair asked members for their questions, the following points were made:

- Members sought some clarification on the relevant parcels of land that were included within the disposal as there had been some confusion over postcodes.
- Member noted that reports and documentation presented to members needed to be accurate ensuring that the detail presented was correct.
- Member had concern over the disposal of the land without any consultation or discussion with the community.
- Member questioned what process and due diligence had been undertaken to identify this land for disposal.
- Member questioned that going forward would there be an opportunity for ward members and communities to see cabinet papers, to comment and put forward any objections on land disposals.
- Member stated this felt like a "test case" and there had to be due process in place before further asset lists came forward and that lessons could be learnt from tonight's meeting.
- Officer agreed that information would be shared earlier and much wider, to be available in advance to try and avoid further call-in meetings.
- Member highlighted as the land was fenced off, access should only be available to those with permission.
- Member questioned whether the land had or could be called in for a community asset.
- Members discussed the planning process which would include looking at tree preservation orders.

The Chair agreed that Councillor Watson could speak, who raised her concerns in particular the amount of infrastructure being proposed for Purfleet on Thames, the uncertainty of the Integrated Medical Centre, loss of part of the NHS car park, questioned how these would fit into the local plan and to think about residents and what communities need.

The Chair thanked members for their robust debate and summarised the following comments - thanked Councillor Green for his call-in; Portfolio Holder disputed the call-in by stating no planned use of the land; Members were here to scrutinize reports; the lack of detailed information had been noted; uncertainties raised on the use of the land; questioned the due diligence process; members appreciated the financial situation of the council; consideration of consultations; awareness of future disposals and to improve communication; be mindful of any tree preservation orders; thanked officers for their comments; Chair's personal view was there was no reason to dispose of council land; noted Councillor Watson's comments that backed up Councillor's Green statement; the words "consultation" and "unsure" were heard a lot this evening; referred to the principles of the call-in made by Councillor Green to refer back to cabinet.

The Chair called a vote to which 6 members voted for, 0 against, 0 abstained.

RESOLVED

- 1.1 The Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to accept the call-in and refer back to Cabinet.**
- 1.2 The Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee ask Cabinet to re-consider the decision based on due regard to communities.**

At 7.50pm, Mark Bradbury and Rob Large left the meeting.

17. Call-in to Cabinet Decision 110676 Resources to Support the Council's Budget

The report presented outlined the call-ins made to the Call-in to Cabinet Decision 110676 Resources to Support the Council's Budget, highlighted the reasons why the call-ins were made, and the alternative proposals being put forward. The report offered advice to the committee on how to manage the call-in through the committee process and should be used as a summary document to help understand the overview of this particular call-in.

The Chair asked Councillor J Kent to speak, the following points were made:

- Understood how difficult it was to identify large savings from the Council's revenue budget.
- Paying Price Waterhouse Coopers (PwC) £800,000 to identify £5.2million saving was disproportionate.
- Confusion on what the Portfolio Holder had said at Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the 5 October 2023 against the report that had been presented to Cabinet only seven days later.
- This was unreasonable and the council should be looking to its own members and officers first to identify those savings.

- The council should not be looking to bring in outside agencies such as PwC at extortionate fees to do the council's job.

The Chair asked Councillor Speight to speak, the following points were made:

- Referenced comments made by the Portfolio Holder for Finance at cabinet in regard to the poorly resourced finance team.
- Referenced also comments made at the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee only four working days later at Cabinet by the Portfolio Holder for Finance on his confidence of the finance team and its findings.
- Noted it was mentioned at both meetings that PwC were currently working within the council. Having looked into this no payments had been made this year to PwC.
- Raised his concerns, alongside the uncertainty of members and members of the public and recommended that the decision be referred back to cabinet.

The Chair asked the Portfolio Holder to speak, the following points were made:

- Since Section 114 and the BVI inspection it had become clear that significant revenue savings needed to be made.
- PwC had already been in-situ in the council before he had taken the role of Portfolio Holder.
- PwC were helping the council identify ways and means of making savings and putting systems in place. There were a lot of change, the council did not have the resources to undertake these changes without outside assistance.
- The council did not have the resources or knowledge within the officer staff in the finance team. PwC would pass on skills and methods of working to those council staff and retain those skills learnt for the future.
- Confirmed that what had been said at previous committees had been true.
- Recommended the call-in be rejected.

The Chair asked members for their questions, the following points were made:

- Members agreed there was some confusion on what was said at both committee meetings.
- Members questioned the sudden decision that extra support was required.
- Members questioned what due diligence had been undertaken across all aspects of the council.
- Members noted there had been no financial payment to PwC in this calendar year.
- Members agreed there needed to be honesty, trust, openness and have a professional relationship between members and officers.
- Members also agreed that honestly would stop any further call-ins being made.
- Member questioned whether the potential to lose PwC had instigated the urgent paper to cabinet.
- Member questioned the loss of PwC based on potential demand of the company.
- Member were informed as the report had not been on the forward plan it had proceeded on urgency decision rules.
- Member agreed this was the right time to ensure officers were skilled to deliver the savings.
- Members agreed there needed to be a timeline and approach to quantify the PwC expenditure.

The Chair thanked members for their robust debate and summarised the following comments – thanked Councillor J Kent and Councillor Speight for presenting their call-ins; acknowledged Councillor Kent's comment on disproportionate effect and Councillor Speight's comment on the speed the report was presented to cabinet; noted the contradiction of what had been said at both committees; noted the Portfolio Holder and chief executives comments; noted the need for resources and reasonings; noted that Councillor Polley and Councillor Gledhill were against the call-in; noted what could be learnt from PwC; noted Councillor Worrall's comment on discussion of this specific call-in; Chair's personal view was to support recommendation 1.1 as both call-ins had aligned the consistency with the budget setting approach and timelines; noted the urgency decision so that PwC could start working and there was sufficient concern on the comments made by the Portfolio Holder to refer both call-ins back to cabinet.

The chair called a vote on both call-ins to which 3 members voted for, 3 voted against, 0 abstained. With the vote being tied, the chair exercised his second and casting vote and announced that recommendation 1.1 be carried with 4 votes for and 3 votes against.

Councillor Gledhill stated he wished a minority report to be lodged for Cabinet's awareness. The points Councillor Gledhill wished to be raised with Cabinet were as follows:

- Referred to the need of the urgent item to Cabinet due to forward plan requirements and no other factors.
- Questioned whether the ED2 had been presented before or after the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- Noted there had been an urgent need to continue otherwise the council would not be able to fully deliver next year's budget.
- Noted that the ED2 process had been pursued prior to the urgent item to Cabinet. The Monitoring Officer confirmed this was the case.
- Agreed this was the right report at the right time for the right processes to ensure officers are skilled to deliver the budget and also deliver the expectation of the budget.
- Questioned that after the 22 weeks there would not be a requirement to extend for another 22 weeks and another £800,000.
- Noted and acknowledged the proposed PwC offered 10% discount from the published framework rates.
- Requested at the 22 weeks point, the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny committee be provided with an update.

RESOLVED

1.1 The Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to accept both call-ins and refer back to Cabinet.

1.2 The Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee ask Cabinet to re-consider the decision based on consistency with the Council's budget framework.

The full meeting can be viewed from the following link:

[Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Wednesday 1 November 2023, 7:00pm - Thurrock Council committee meeting webcasts \(public-i.tv\)](#)

The meeting finished at 9.06 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**