

Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on 12 February 2025 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors John Kent (Chair), Lynn Worrall (Vice-Chair), Vikki Hartstean, Victoria Holloway, Mark Hooper, Valerie Morris-Cook, Sara Muldowney and Lee Watson

Apologies:

In attendance:

Ashley Baldwin, Chief Planning Officer
Dawn Calvert, Chief Financial Officer S151
Claire Demmel, Executive Director Place
Daniel Fenwick, Executive Director Corporate Services/Monitoring Officer
Cristina Hall, Chief of Staff to the Commissioners – Thurrock Council
Alex Powell, Assistant Chief Executive
Kerry Thomas, Chief of Staff
Nicole Wood, ECC Best Value Commissioner
Rhianon Whiteley, Senior Democratic Services Officer

Before the start of the Meeting, all present were advised that the meeting may be filmed and was being recorded, with the audio recording to be made available on the Council's website.

129. Minutes

The minutes of the Cabinet meeting held on 22 January 2025 were approved.

130. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

131. Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

132. Statements by the Leader

The Leader confirmed that Thurrock Council has been added to the priority programme for Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation. It has already been agreed that a Members Working Group will be set up and Councillor Worrall has agreed to chair this. The elections in May have been postponed and a themed Full Council meeting will be arranged in April or May 2025. The Leader also updated the meeting that the call for a public inquiry

into the financial collapse of the council has been rejected again. The Leader stated that he is due to have a meeting with the minister soon. Any inquiry needs to be on a statutory footing to compel people to attend to give evidence such as John Clark, Lyn Carpenter and Rob Gledhill.

133. Briefings on Policy, Budget and Other Issues

There were no briefings on policy, budget or other issues.

134. Petitions submitted by Members of the Public

No petitions were submitted by members of the public.

135. Questions from Non-Executive Members

There were no questions from Non-Executive Members.

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

There were no matters referred to cabinet for consideration by an Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

137. Delegated Decisions taken since the last meeting

The Leader confirmed that a list of delegated decisions taken since the last meeting were listed in the agenda and published online.

138. PAS Review Update - Planning Service Improvements

Councillor L Watson introduced the report and explained that it highlights the key achievements of the planning service. There has been a significant reduction in the application processing backlog from 119 down to 30. There has also been a successful recruitment of key members of staff. The next quarterly update will provide feedback from the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) who visited this month.

Councillor Hooper welcomed the report and stated that it shows the planning service is moving in the right direction and the right officers are in the right place.

Councillor Morris-Cook stated that the introduction of the new dashboard is a game changer. Councillor Morris Cook commented that people can see in real time what is happening and she hopes it is rolled across the rest of the council.

Councillor Muldowney congratulated Councillor Watson and the Planning service and highlighted that she was happy with the financial implications and that the risks identified are being managed.

Councillor J Kent noted that there is some way to go but there have been some real improvements over the last 6 months. Councillor J Kent thanked the Chief Planning Officer Ashley Baldwin for his hard work and Councillor L Watson for her leadership.

RESOLVED:

2.1 Cabinet noted the progress made regarding the development and implementation of the Planning Service Transformation and Improvement Plan (PSTIP) since the previous update report presented to Cabinet in October 2024.

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

139. Planning Development Management Performance

Councillor L Watson introduced the report and commented that it contained a comprehensive review of the Planning team's management and achievements since 2015. The motion approved for comprehensive review is a commitment to continuous improvement. Councillor Watson stated that the Power BI Dashboard has increased transparency.

Councillor Morris-Cook stated that she was surprised to note the amount of decisions made by the conservatives against officers recommendations advice that impacted the green belt. Councillor Morris-Cook also noted that one particular developer came up repeatedly. Councillor Morris-Cook highlighted that the report shows complete transparency.

Councillor L Watson commented that the Planning Committee have been great this year and have received lots of training.

RESOLVED:

2.1 Cabinet noted the findings of the report on the performance of Thurrock Council's Planning Department, covering the period from 2015 up until November 2024, including the analysis of applications received, those dealt with by delegation, those progressed to committee, and those passed or rejected contrary to officer recommendations; and

2.2 Cabinet noted the contents of the raw data contained in Appendix A.

2.3 Cabinet agreed the contents of this report as a response to the motion set out at paragraph 1.2 of this report.

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

140. Local Plan Timetable Delay, Analysis and Implications

Councillor L Watson introduced the report and explained that it outlines the progress made against the recommendations made by Stantec in its in-depth review of Thurrock's Local Plan. Councillor L Watson clarified that the Local Plan has not been withdrawn, just delayed. The Stantec review highlighted 50 key failures and it will take 12 months to address the failures. The delay is essential to ensure Thurrock has a sound local plan otherwise it could put the council into another intervention. This administration is rescuing the local plan, the previous administration had 8 years and did nothing but sit on their hands.

Councillor Worrall stated that despite the political grandstanding, no conservative members were present at cabinet tonight. Councillor Worrall commented that she had sat through the previous local plan briefings and it did not have the legs to succeed. Councillor Worrall stated that it is the right decision to delay the local plan and she looked forward to seeing a plan that is fit for purpose.

Councillor Hooper requested a bit more detail on the timescales.

Councillor Muldowney thanked Councillor Watson for her leadership. Councillor Muldowney noted that there has been a cost implication to delaying the local plan but to continue with the plan would have compounded those losses and made the financial situation even worse.

Councillor J Kent stated that it is essential that the council has a robust and defensible local plan.

RESOLVED:

2.1 Cabinet noted the progress made regarding the preparation of the Thurrock Local Plan based on the 50 recommendations outlined in the Stantec Local Plan review report (Appendix A).

2.2 Cabinet noted the implications of the extended timetable.

2.3 Cabinet agreed the contents of this report as a response to the motion set out at paragraph 1.2 and 1.3 of this report.

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

141. Adoption of Thurrock Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan

Councillor V Holloway introduced the report and stated that she was pleased to introduce Thurrock's first Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan. Councillor V Holloway stated that Thurrock has received over a million pounds

to help improve its infrastructure and it is hoped the plan will enable the council to access further funding.

Councillor L Watson stated that she was pleased to see traffic calming measures and queried if this will be put in the local plan.

Councillor V Holloway responded that they take the local plan seriously and this will help support the delivery of it. It will also ensure future funding can be accessed.

Councillor Muldowney commented that she is always in favour of more cycling and walking as it will help to meet climate change ambitions. There are no financial implications but it will allow the council to submit future grant funding applications.

Councillor Morris-Cook stated that she was pleased to see the 20mph limit on Argent Street.

Councillor Hooper stated that he welcomed the plan and it was about developing safer and clearer ways to travel and keep people healthy. Councillor Hooper stated he would like to see more children cycling to school to reduce congestion. Councillor Hooper commented that he would like to have the community's buy-in on this and he would like to see cycle map similar to a tube map with different coloured routes identified.

Councillor Worrall stated that anything to get people out of their cars and walking and cycling is a good thing. Councillor Worrall queried how residents were consulted.

Councillor Hartstean commented that she was pleased to see Pilgrims Lane on the plan as residents have difficulties getting across the roundabout.

Councillor J Kent also welcomed the plan and noted that without it the council would not have the chance to bring in further funding.

Councillor Holloway responded that an external consultancy had looked at the Thurrock area and identified missing gaps for cycling. It is hoped the plan will link communities together. Public engagement took place in the summer of 2024 and amendments were made to the plan following feedback being received and additional routes were brought in.

RESOLVED:

1.4 Cabinet approved the Thurrock Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan for adoption and publication.

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

142. **NEC Direct Award for R&B and NECDM**

Councillor Muldowney introduced the report and explained that it relates to the contract for a critical system that deals with the collection of council tax and business rates and the distribution of benefits. A direct award to NEC is recommended to provide service continuity, cost savings and reduce unnecessary risk. Councillor Muldowney confirmed that commissioners had made the following comments on the report “*An appropriate risk based decision process has been followed to achieve best value for Thurrock whilst seeking to address the prospects of Local Government Reorganisation.*”

Councillor Morris-Cook queried whether Local Government Reorganisation could impact the contract and expressed concern about overpaying.

The Executive Director of Corporate Services and Monitoring Officer stated that there is risk with any contract. The provider is the market leader and a termination clause will be negotiated. The risk matrix notes that one supplier would not engage with us and the other could not meet the contract requirements. The council is likely to receive a fair amount of notice as to when Thurrock Council will cease to exist.

Councillor Worrall commented that although Thurrock Council wont exist in the future, services will still be needed. The procurement team is working tirelessly on this.

RESOLVED:

2.1 Cabinet approved the award of a contract for the provision of a core Revenues and Benefits processing system to NEC Software Services (UK) Ltd using the CCS Frameworks Vertical Applications Solutions (RM6259), for a period of five years (with an option to extend for a further two periods of twelve (12) months each) with a total contract value of £1.63 million, commencing December 2025.

2.2 Cabinet agreed to delegate the award of the contract to the Executive Director of Corporate Services in consultation with the portfolio holder for Resources.

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

143. **HRA Rent Setting and Budget 2025/26**

Councillor Muldowney introduced the report and explained that the HRA is the most important tool to provide genuinely affordable homes. Councillor Muldowney stated that this year there is a proposed increase to rents of 2.7%. This is a smaller increase than last year. It is essential to increase rents due to rising costs and inflation. It is important to make sure the HRA is financially

sustainable. This budget is about making a difference for our residents and having a safe and affordable home is so important.

Councillor Hooper welcomed the report and stated that the increase in rent is much lower than the private sector and the money is needed to keep the housing stock to a good standard.

RESOLVED:

2.1 Cabinet approved the Rent Flexibility approach of Formula Rent plus 5% for new tenancies in properties governed by formula rent, and 10% for new tenancies in supported housing (as explained in paragraphs 4.4 and 4.5 of this report). Please note this is only applicable in the event of relets.

2.2 Cabinet approved the increase in rents, in line with Government Policy on rents for social housing, (as explained in paragraphs 4.7 to 4.9 of this report) to 2.7%.

2.3 Cabinet approved the increase in Tenant and Leasehold Service charges and other HRA fees and charges for 2025/26, (as explained in paragraphs 4.11 to 4.14 of this report) and detailed in Appendices 1 and 2.

2.4 Cabinet approved the setting of an indicative balanced HRA budget for 2025/26 (as per paragraph 4.34 and Table 3 of this report).

2.5 Cabinet approved the 5-year HRA Business Plan for 2025/26–2029/30 (as per paragraphs 4.35 to 4.38 of this report) as detailed in Appendix 3 and note that this is an extract from the 30-year HRA Business Plan.

2.6 Cabinet noted the ongoing HRA capital programme composed of two main strands, Transforming Homes and the Demolition, Rebuilds and Acquisitions programme of which the next five years are presented at £80m and £104m respectively. Approval of these is sought via a separate Cabinet report that will be presented to February 2025 Cabinet as part of the Council's overall capital programme.

Reason for the decision: as outlined in the report

This decision is subject to call-in

144. Final Capital Programme 2025-26

Councillor Muldowney introduced the report and explained that the capital programme reflects the councils financial reality and the strict borrowing controls in place. The programme is tightly controlled and fully focussed but space has been found for the following: -

- Replacement of Orchard Road Footbridge
- Fleet renewal

- Investment in an Education Case Management System
- Improvements to Grangewaters
- Funding for Stanford-Le-Hope station
- Thameside Condition Survey Improvement Works

Councillor Muldowney stated that robust business cases are required for all new projects. There is more oversight on slippage, tighter project management and financial scrutiny.

Councillor L Watson stated that she was really to pleased to see Stanford-Le-Hope station on the capital programme.

Councillor Morris-Cook stated that she was pleased to see the Thameside on there and commented that 90% of residents support the Thameside and this shows an ongoing commitment to provide the survey that is so needed.

Councillor J Kent stated that the capital programme is so much more limited than we would like it to be and it doesn't reflect the breadth of their ambition.

RESOLVED:

- a) **Cabinet noted the proposed new capital projects in line with the 2025/26 stipulations and criteria as set out in table 3 (appendix B).**
- b) **Cabinet approved in principle the proposed financing of the additions to the capital programme as set out in table 4 (appendix C).**
- c) **Cabinet noted the draft capital programme of £316.718m over the 5 year period from 2025/26 to 2029/30 as set out in table 4 (appendix C).**
- d) **Cabinet approved the implementation of the Governance Improvements section (paragraph 4.5)**

Reason for the decision: as outlined in the report

This decision is subject to call-in

145. Annual Treasury Management Strategy Statement 2025-26

Councillor Muldowney introduced the report and explained that the Treasury Management Strategy marks a significant step in restoring Thurrock Council's financial stability. It ensures the failures of the previous administration do not happen again. The BVI inspection revealed the reckless approach to borrowing and investments. It is hoped that the report restores confidence that transparency and accountability has improved.

Councillor Morris-Cook stated that it was a good report and applauded the finance team and Councillor Muldowney for their hard work. Councillor Morris-Cook commented that it is sad that every person who lives and works in Thurrock is paying the price and there is a need to ensure that critical services are not affected in the upcoming budget. The council is on the right road albeit a long and winding one.

Councillor J Kent stated that the toxic Tory debt continues to cripple the council. The current debt stands at £867 million pounds and £64 million pounds will be spent next year servicing that debt.

Councillor Muldowney confirmed that the MRP policy has not changed this year and any changes will be reported to Finance Recovery Board and Cabinet.

RESOLVED:

Cabinet recommends Full Council to agree:

2.1 The proposed Treasury Management Strategy and prudential indicators for 2025/26, 2026/27, 2027/28 2028/29 and 2029/30 in 11.1, 12.4, 15.6, 15.8, 15.9, 16.16 and 17.2.

2.2 The proposed change in the Authorised Limit 2024/25 to £1.4bn, and the approval of a £1.4bn Authorised Limit in 2025/26 and the following four years, as set out in Section 15.10.

2.3 The proposed MRP Policy for 2025/26 as set out in Section 13 and will be reviewed for 2026/27.

2.4 The proposed Borrowing Strategy as set out in Section 15.

2.5 The proposed investment policy as set out in 16.

2.6 The actual prudential indicators for 2023/24 shown at Appendix A.

Reason for the decision: as outlined in the report

This decision is subject to call-in

146. Final Revenue Budget 2025/26 and Final Medium Term Financial Strategy 2025/26 to 2028/29

Councillor Muldowney introduced the report and stated that the councils position remains very challenging and Government support is needed to set the budget this year and for years to come. A £71 million pound loan from the Government is required to balance the 2025-26 budget. Council Tax will rise by 4.99%. Thurrock's Council Tax remains the lowest in Essex. The Lead Commissioner has noted the increased pace of improvement on the recovery. The council still has a long way to travel towards financial sustainability .

Councillor Worrall commented on the tremendous amount of work that had gone into the budget. Councillor Worrall commented that she was proud of this administration and the work completed across all portfolios. This administration said it would be an enabling council and this budget focusses on delivering to residents. Councillor Worrall also commented on the good work completed by scrutiny and confirmed that their recommendations had been listened to and changes made accordingly.

Councillor Hooper stated that he cannot be the councillor he wants to be because of the councils financial position. Councillor Hooper thanked officers for their hard work and stated that other councils could learn from Thurrock in the way the budget has been set.

Councillor J Kent thanked everyone who had contributed to the budget and stated that none of the cabinet members came into this job to make cuts but it is the hand they have been dealt. Councillor J Kent commented that residents have to come first and they have done their best to protect front line services. The 5% council tax increase is a welcome change from the 10% and 8% over the last two years.

RESOLVED:

Cabinet agreed to:

- a. Recommend the 2025/26 budget to Council for approval, being mindful of comments from the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee, to enable the Council Tax for 2025/26 to be set (Appendix 2)**
- b. Recommend the Model Council Tax Resolution 2025/26 to Council for approval as set out in Appendix 9;**
- c. Recommend to Council that, in accordance with Section 38(2) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, the Chief Executive be instructed to place a notice in the local press of the amounts set under recommendation 2 above with a period of 21 days following the Council's decision;**
- d. Approve the Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2025/26 to 2028/29 for referral to Council (Appendix 2);**
- e. Note the intention to increase Council Tax by 2.99% in 2025/26 (Table 7);**
- f. Note the intention to increase Council Tax by a further 2% in 2025/26 in respect of the adult social care precept (Table 7);**
- g. Note the 2025/26 budget for Public Health as set out in Appendix 5;**

- h. Note the Council's revised Capitalisation Direction Requirement of £691m which is set at a point in time and will continue to be subject to change (Paragraph 7.4 and Table 5);**
- i. Approve to continue with the 100% deployment of the Household Support Fund through the Essential Living Fund (Paragraph 5.1);**
- j. Agree that Thurrock's 2025/26 Early Years funding formula be implemented as stated in paragraphs 8.7 to 8.13. This is consistent with previous decisions to maximise the funding rates that providers receive;**
- k. Approve the repurposing of the recurrent revenue contingency budget as detailed in paragraph 12.5; and**
- l. Recommend the 2025/26 Members Allowance Scheme to Council for approval (Appendix 10)**

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

147. Decision Notice

The meeting finished at 8.34 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