

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 5 June 2018 at 7.00 pm.

- Present:** Councillors Oliver Gerrish (Chair), Jack Duffin (Vice-Chair), Colin Churchman, Mike Fletcher (arrived 7.10pm), Andrew Jefferies
- Apologies:** Councillor Tim Aker
- In attendance:** Sean Clark, Director of Finance and IT
Detlev Munster, Assistant Director – Property and Development
Rory Patterson, Corporate Director of Children’s Services
Steve Cox, Corporate Director of Place
Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services
Matthew Boulter, Democratic Services Manager and Deputy Monitoring Officer
Lucy Tricker, 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.

1. Minutes

The Minutes of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 23 January 2018 were approved as a correct record.

2. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

3. Declaration of Interests

There were no interests declared.

4. Business Rates Relief

The Director of Finance and IT presented the report and explained that this was an information item. The report informed Members on the business rates support to local, small, and medium sized businesses. It also provided the Committee with details of the range of support and reliefs currently available in respect of business rates; details of award levels for 2017/18; and the financial impact on Thurrock Council. The Director of Finance informed the Committee that he had widened the framework of the report to include the

various types of reliefs that businesses can get. He stated that in 2017/18, £16.1 million in business rates were awarded, at a combined cost of £6.8 million to the Council. He also mentioned that more work would be done on this later in the year.

The Chair welcomed the report and asked what major changes have been seen in terms of the development of the scheme with discretionary rates of relief. The Director of Finance and IT specified that the Council had no say over mandatory rates of relief, but that the Council can decide on what discretionary rates of relief can be given to support the voluntary sector, as well as small to medium sized businesses. Councillor Duffin queried how much of the rates the Council retained, and it was confirmed that 49% were retained.

Councillor Churchman queried the definition of a part-occupied building, and how long were the part-occupied buildings not paying rates. The Committee was advised that if a business can prove evidence that they are not using the premises, they will receive business rates, but that the Council will report back to Members on how long they did not have to pay rates for.

RESOLVED: That:

1. The Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered and commented on the Business Rates Relief Report and the comments made in the above minutes be noted by Officers.

5. End of Year Corporate Performance Report 2017/18

The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services presented the report which outlined the corporate performance monitoring for 2017/18. It detailed the information the Council uses to monitor the progress and performance against the Council priorities. This was the outcome of a full and thorough review of key performance indicators (KPIs) in line with recommendations from Corporate Overview and Scrutiny in 2015/16. The Officer advised the Committee that the report provided a final position in relation to the performance of those KPIs, including a focus on some specific highlights and challenges. This report will go on to Cabinet in July.

The Chair drew the Committee's attention to page 22 of the agenda, point 3.2 which discussed better and worse performing KPIs versus 2016/17. He wanted the Committee to note that it doesn't include KPIs which have been removed. The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services stated that fourteen KPIs had been removed, of which 60% were on target, which is similar to the overall position outlined in the report.

The Chair then moved on to discuss the highlights from the report. One particular item he drew mention to was the success that 97% of schools in the

borough achieved a 'good' or better rating. The Chair felt this was an impressive move up the scale, considering eight years ago Thurrock was in the bottom quartile. He also drew attention to the number of affordable housing units that had been directly delivered, and how good it was to see this was above ambition. Next he wanted to see ambitions raised so more units could be delivered.

The Chair then highlighted page 24 of the agenda, to the point regarding street cleanliness where three quarters of the data was using a new methodology. He underlined the Council's poor performance during the fourth quarter, which was 14%, in comparison to the second and third quarter which were 8.5% and 6.5% respectively. He then questioned the Council over the differences in these performance figures during the year. The Officer replied that she was unsure for the reasons in the last quarter and would ask the service for a response.

The Chair then examined the missed target of sickness and absences within the Council. The target was 9 days absence, compared to 10 days absence which was achieved. He also pointed out that the future target was still 9 days absence, and questioned whether this was an achievable figure next year. The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services replied that this was an achievable figure as the Council are doing everything they can within best practice to meet this figure. She also asserted that there was a positive direction of travel for absence and sickness leave within the Council.

Page 26 in the agenda was the next point that the Chair wanted to draw everyone's attention too, which was regarding the percentage of refuse bins that were collected on the correct day. He noted that this was a missed target, and asked what improvements were underway to improve this number. The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services replied that there were more difficulties in bin collections towards the end of the week, and they have already identified challenges regarding this, such as blocked access to properties. She stated that the Council are working to tackle the specific reasons, but during the fourth quarter there had been an increase in the amount of bins collected on the right day, even though the end of year target wasn't hit. Councillor Churchman then commented on the adverse weather we have had this year, and wondered whether this had had an impact on bin collection. The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services answered that although this had an effect, the fourth quarter was not hit as much as expected.

Councillor Fletcher observed that although KPIs had not been met, there was no 'route to green' listed in the report, and enquired what action would be taken to hit targets in the coming year. Councillor Duffin noted that with the volunteer KPI, it does not specify what the volunteers are actually doing. He

asked the Director to potentially change the focus of the KPI to volunteer hours, rather than the number of volunteers. This was taken on board by the Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service.

During discussions a point on the number of potholes filled was raised, and the fact that this number was disappointingly off-target, even though the filling of potholes had seen much extra investment. The Chair asked whether or not any analysis had been performed of the investment to discover its return, to which the Director of Finance and IT stated there was continued review, although there was not a traditional return on investment analysis. It was also mentioned by Councillor Fletcher that there was nowhere to go to find out specifically which areas had had potholes filled, rather than simply borough wide analysis. Councillor Duffin also observed that due to bad weather, maybe the Council should be more pre-emptive in their fixing of potholes in the coming quarter.

A discussion then commenced on the proportion of waste which was reused, recycled or composted within the borough, and that it was disappointing the target had not been hit this year, and that there was a negative direction of travel. The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services replied that this was being further looked into by the Cleaner, Greener, Safer Committee who would be undertaking a detailed update in July including work undertaken into recycling within flats, which was more challenging.

The Chair drew the Committee's attention to point 3.6 of the report, which was regarding the drop of 3% in average household earnings. The Chair commented that with the rising cost of inflation this would lead to a big hit in buying power for Thurrock residents, and asked what was driving these trends. The Corporate Director of Place responded that it was the changing nature of jobs within the borough, and the need to create a diverse range of jobs and economy.

The Chair moved onto to Appendix 1 of the report and asked how many KPIs had been removed from the list, and what they were. The Director of Strategy, Communications, and Customer Services replied that six were removed, and the majority were one-off initiatives that had finished, or KPIs where significant progress had been made so they were being monitored at service rather than corporate level.

RESOLVED: That:

1. The Committee noted and commented on the performance of KPIs for 2017/18, and commented on indicators of 2018/19 and identified areas that required additional consideration in the next monitoring cycle.

6. Delivering Our Free School Programme – Land Disposal

The Director of Children's Service introduced the report which lays out Thurrock's plan to build new schools, and to dispose of land to be able to do. The Chair made the point that the Committee was only considering the first recommendation, and informed that the other recommendations for Cabinet, the Committee could only comment on.

The Chair started by asking what the process was in identifying sites as suitable for disposal. The Director of Place answered that the Education Skills and Funding Agency (ESFA) worked with the Council to identify suitable sites, which was difficult as getting planning applications on brownfield land was a challenge. The sites also had to be a certain size and in the right location to meet the needs of schools within the borough. Then the negotiations with the ESFA began to be able to build the school, during which the ESFA sought pre-planning advice and decided that two of the sites identified (Orsett Heath and Treetops) were satisfactory.

A discussion then began on the current usage of the sites, and it was shown that the site at Orsett Heath is public open space and the site at Treetops is vacant space. The Trustee of Thurrock Rugby Club was invited to speak by the Chair and told the Committee that the site at Orsett Heath is used regularly by Thurrock Rugby Club, and had been since 1978. He stated that 200-300 children use the site for youth rugby and festivals, and as well as Thurrock children it also benefited children from outside the borough who travelled in for tournaments. He went on to state that the public open land is used every Saturday and Sunday during the rugby season for matches, as well as weekdays for academy and training. In addition, the pitches were critical to the survival of the rugby club as without youth rugby and the associated festivals the club could not bring in enough revenue to maintain itself.

The Chair asked Officers if they had consulted with residents on uses of the site. The Assistant Director of Property and Development stated that there were two separate pitches, one which was rugby club land and another which was open public space; and that the Council had no intention to use Thurrock Rugby Club land. He specified that part of negotiations with the ESFA would be regarding out of hours use of pitches for the rugby club, or multi-use pitches. He went on to mention that part of the process would be public consultation, and the result of which would be taken on board before the disposal of the land. Therefore, this was why one of the recommendations would be to delegate the decision to officers and Cabinet members. The Chair asked for clarification regarding the next step in the process for Cabinet, which was explained as the report would be going to Cabinet in June for approval and the decision would then be delegated.

The Chair felt concerned about the identification of the sites, and agreed that although it was a duty to provide sufficient school spaces, it could not be at the expense of amenities to the residents and local clubs.

Councillor Churchman echoed the comments of the Chair and asked Officers if they will leave other sites for the rugby club to use. The Assistant Director of Property and Development stated that the Council will not take away land that is Thurrock Rugby Club's, as there are two separate sites. The Trustee of Thurrock Rugby Club replied that the public open space land had five pitches and that it was used more than occasionally. He went on to observe that if the Committee agreed this report the club would lose revenue as they could not use the pitches during the day as the school would need them for PE lessons.

The Chair felt that the loss of amenity if the site is used is inevitable, even with other pitches available. A discussion then began regarding why the Council are proposing this site, and if it was because they believed the pitches were used less often than they actually are.

Councillor Fletcher observed that there was a need to find land for schools, but that there needed to be an awareness of Thurrock Rugby Club. Councillor Duffin then made a point on process, and if it was suitable for the Committee and Cabinet to agree to dispose of the land before any public consultation had been undertaken. He asked that before approval was given if the result from consultation could come back first. He also made the point that the club was already losing revenue as they could not plan for future events as their future did not look permanent. The Director of Place responded that there will be a consultation on the loss of the public open space land as part of the planning application.

The Chair then summarised the findings of the Committee that there was no argument on the need to find school places within the borough, but that there was concern as the future of Thurrock Rugby Club and loss of their revenue needed to be considered. He stated that the Committee wanted to see real resident engagement during consultation, and the alternatives offered if the Orsett Heath site is rejected. The Committee was also of the view that this should not be a delegated decision, and that it should remain in the public domain to ensure the required level of scrutiny. In addition it was felt, Recommendation 1.2 should be reworded to identify that the land shouldn't be disposed of until after consultation. Councillor Duffin then made the point that consultation should be wider than simply asking the public's views, and should include negotiations with Thurrock Rugby Club. There was a brief discussion about the Treetops site which led to the Chair pointing out there may be similar problems and due diligence should also be given.

RESOLVED: That:

- 1. Corporate Overview and Scrutiny note the proposed Cabinet recommendations 1.1 to 1.5.**
- 2. The decision related to these land disposals not be completed under delegated powers.**
- 3. Disposal of any land is not finalised until wider consultation with communities.**
- 4. Cabinet consider the comments made in the above minutes at June Cabinet.**

7. Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme 2018/19

Members discussed the Work Programme for the municipal year.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That the Communications Team Update scheduled for September be widened to an update on the Communication Strategy, and include members of the local press.**
- 2. Long term investment strategy be added to the Work Programme.**
- 3. January meeting to include the draft budget before February Council.**

The meeting finished at 8.15pm

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
Democratic Services at Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk