

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 31 January 2019 at 7.00 pm

Present:	Councillors Oliver Gerrish (Chair), Jack Duffin (Vice-Chair), Colin Churchman, Mike Fletcher and Garry Hague
Apologies:	Councillors Andrew Jefferies
In attendance:	Matthew Boulter, Democratic Services Manager and Deputy Monitoring Officer Sean Clark, Director of Finance & IT Tracie Heiser, Operational Services Lead Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service 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.

24. Minutes

The minutes of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 20 November 2018 were approved as a correct record.

25. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

26. Declaration of Interests

There were no interests declared.

27. The Overview and Scrutiny Functions and Motions Process

The Democratic Services Manager introduced the report and began by stating this had come to committee due to Councillor Spillman's motion which was outlined on page 15 of the agenda. He clarified that Councillor Spillman had been made aware the report was coming to Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee. He outlined that the report was divided into two sections, with the first section relating to the overview and scrutiny function, and the second relating to the motions process. He commented that the report found Thurrock's overview and scrutiny function conformed with national guidelines, and asked what Members would like to see from the overview and scrutiny function. The Democratic Services Manager then drew Members attention to point 2.4.4, 3.10 and 3.11 and asked Members to undertake a project outside

of the Committee meetings regarding overview and scrutiny. He stated that he understood present limitations and felt this report could be the impetus to enhance overview and scrutiny. He moved on to discuss motions and felt that the report highlighted motions were working well and progressed once they had been agreed on at Council.

The Chair began by stating he welcomed the report, and the discussion around the role Members could play in the future regarding motions and overview and scrutiny. He added that consulting with other Members would be good, and from there overview and scrutiny could start making effective decisions and undertaking policy decisions. He felt that the overview and scrutiny process could improve and go further by allowing overview and scrutiny committees to have more decision-making power. He also felt that recommendations were part of the shortcomings in the process as often decisions made in overview and scrutiny committees were not relayed to Cabinet and Council, and felt that the executive branch should officially respond to recommendations made. The Chair then mentioned that he would like to see a more robust role for overview and scrutiny committees regarding the call-in function, as often decisions could not be called in as they had undergone a form of pre-scrutiny, even if changes had been made at the Cabinet meeting. He added that he understood overview and scrutiny was not part of the executive branch of government, but felt they could delay the implementation of proposals for further discussion and could involve a higher number of Councillors. He commented that as Chair he had lots of support from officers and reports were of high-quality and included feedback he had given. He finally stated that overview and scrutiny committees could be more active in requesting site visits, but that the capabilities they possessed was the most important aspect.

The Chair then opened the debate to other Members and Councillor Churchman began by drawing the Committee's attention to point 2.4.4 and stating that he would appreciate specific overview and scrutiny training sessions throughout the year as knowledge was important to make decisions on committee and he did not want Members to feel they were falling behind if they missed some meetings. Councillor Duffin continued and stated he felt frustrated as the Council was a Cabinet run body, and felt that overview and scrutiny committees were of less importance. He added that overview and scrutiny reports were of high quality, but felt that Cabinet could do more to take on board recommendations made at overview and scrutiny meetings. He stated that he was unhappy with the motions process as they were often reworded to ensure other bodies made decisions and felt this was frustrating as he felt overview and scrutiny should have decision making power.

Councillor Fletcher then discussed Appendix 1 of the report and agreed with other Members that recommendations made at overview and scrutiny were not discussed at Cabinet meetings, and Portfolio Holders rarely attended. He stated that as Portfolio Holders did not attend overview and scrutiny committees, it was hard to include decision-makers in discussions and processes. He then commented that he wanted relevant Portfolio Holders to be required to attend overview and scrutiny meetings to make them more

accountable.

Councillor Duffin then discussed a recent experience he had had where a press release about a project had been made before it had gone through the relevant overview and scrutiny committee, and mentioned that he had felt like decisions were already made without the support of overview and scrutiny. Councillor Hague echoed the sentiments made by other Members and drew the Committee's attention to 2.2 of the report and stated that more dialogue needed to take place between Cabinet and overview and scrutiny as officers spent a lot of time and effort producing reports for overview and scrutiny. He added that he would like to see more linked-up working between the executive and overview and scrutiny.

The Democratic Services Manager began by commenting on Councillor Churchman's point regarding on-going training sessions and mentioned that this had worked well in the past as previously the Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee had run workshops for Members before each meeting, which had ensured Members could talk knowledgeably on reports. He stated that the process could become more transparent and him and his team would undertake talks with Cabinet about what they wanted from the process, and would ensure that recommendations made at overview and scrutiny committees that went to Cabinet would be on the public record. He clarified for Members that due to law and governance limitations, overview and scrutiny committees were not a part of the executive, so could not have any decision making powers. He added that overview and scrutiny did have the power to do research, and felt it would be harder for Cabinet to refuse recommendations if these were supported with compelling evidence. The Democratic Services Manager added that one idea would be for overview and scrutiny committees to reflect on what they wanted to achieve at the beginning of the municipal year, so reports were not Cabinet led and could be community or resident focused. He then discussed Portfolio Holder's attending overview and scrutiny meetings and stated that Portfolio Holder reports had, in the past, come to overview and scrutiny rather than Full Council, but this had been changed as Members had wanted the Chambers to be able to comment on them, rather than specific overview and scrutiny Members. He felt that overview and scrutiny could be a good forum for them as they had more time to discuss them in detail, and all Members could be invited if they wished to attend. He added that overview and scrutiny could invite any Portfolio Holder to meetings, and Portfolio Holders could then give presentations or take questions. He summarised by stating that the Democratic Services team could support on any ideas, and would be happy to help.

The Chair mentioned that a progress report should come back to Committee as it would be useful to see how other Councils across the country ran their overview and scrutiny meetings, to be able to see other forms of good practice. He added it would also be useful for Members to understand the legal and governance rules which outlined overview and scrutiny's powers. Councillor Duffin felt that it would be good to see Portfolio Holders coming to overview and scrutiny committees as they could bounce ideas around and

receive detailed answers to questions. He added that if Portfolio Holders attended and recommendations were rejected they could question why, and the Portfolio Holder could understand the discussions that had taken place. The Director of Finance and IT clarified that the numbering in the recommendations had now changed so recommendation 1.2 should read “as outlined in 3.10 and 3.11”, and recommendation 1.3 should read “on evidence as presented in 3.12 and onwards”. The Chair then summarised the discussion and stated a progress report would come back to the March meeting of the committee.

RESOLVED: That:

1. The Committee noted and commented on the overview and scrutiny function’s current performance in relation to the Centre for Public Scrutiny’s Evaluation Framework, and potential areas for service enhancement as outlined in 2.4.4.

2. The Committee agreed to undertake a consultation with Councillors on the aspirations for future delivery of overview and scrutiny, as outlined in 3.10 and 3.11.

3. The Committee commented on the current effectiveness and performance of motions based on evidence presented in 3.12 onwards.

28. Customer Services Strategy Progress Update

The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services opened the report and described how the Customer Services Strategy had been approved by Cabinet in 2017, and how Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee had been asked to feed into the process and comment on the action plan before it was agreed. She commented that the committee regularly asked questions regarding online services and how residents were being supported to access these, and this report provided a focused item on this issue. She mentioned that this was an opportune time for the report due to the significant changes to the reception area of the Civic Offices and face-to-face areas. The Assistant Director Customer Services stated that there was a focus in the report on the changes in the face-to-face areas, and described how prior to these changes, customers were seen by advisers at individual desks. She commented that there were now 11 self-service tablets, new seated computers, and floor-walkers that could determine the appropriate service for a person and help vulnerable individuals see an individual specialist if they required. She continued by stating there was a new DDA area with rise and fall desks for disabled users and a private waiting area for those seeking housing and homelessness advice. She stated that since the changes there was a 50% decrease in the volume of customers visiting the Civic Offices this month and average wait times had decreased from 8 minutes to 1 minute in January 2019. She added that the decreased wait times meant that more time could be spent with vulnerable users who needed it. She summarised by stating that only one complaint had been received regarding the changes, and some services were now online only such as Council Tax exemption and

bulky waste collection. Finally, she added that the customer services department were CCA accredited and had received no non-conformities in the independent review.

The Chair thanked officers for the detailed report and recognised the shift towards online, as computers were now a fact of life. He added that he had some concern in making sure good access to services was still available to all users, particularly those that were vulnerable or elderly as he did not want online to become a barrier. He questioned what the team were doing to help residents with online services, and what Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were evaluating these services. The Assistant Director Customer Services replied that floor-walkers were there to assess customer's vulnerability and support them with their needs. She commented that there had been a decrease in people visiting the Civic Offices for basic transactions, but there was still a good level of service to residents which had seen few complaints. The Chair clarified that although some services were online only, support was still available to those that needed it. The Assistant Director Customer Services confirmed this was the case and floor-walkers were always there to assist visitors, as they could help residents complete forms or answer questions. She stated there was also support over the phone as contact centre workers could talk residents through the processes they needed to follow. The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services added that customer services' training was focused on identifying and helping vulnerable people. She stated that the training was also given to other front-line services too, as well as to people working and volunteering in community hubs and libraries.

The Chair then asked what was being done in libraries and hubs to signpost residents to services. The Director of Strategy, Communication and Customer Services replied that library staff, volunteers and other partners had been offered training to help signpost residents, and were aware of the changes happening in the Civic Offices. She commented that services were also promoted through Thurrock communication channels and at hubs so there was a level of consistency. Councillor Fletcher mentioned that he held his surgeries at the South Ockendon hub and had seen first-hand the increased value of this service, as most residents did not visit the Civic Offices. He felt that it was good to see a decrease in the number of people visiting the Civic Offices, and asked if officers had therefore seen an increase in the number of people visiting the hubs. He then commented on the communications via social media, but how some people did not use computers, so it was good for them to see friendly faces at the hubs. The Assistant Director Customer Services explained the 'Right First Time' training offered to front-line services, of which 532 people had undertaken since April 2018. She stated that once all front-line services had undertaken the training, it would then be offered to hub employees and volunteers, as the training was a key part of providing the online service, so both were aligned with each other. The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services replied that she did not have an answer regarding the number of people visiting the hubs, but will look into the question further and come back to the Councillor with an answer. She added that the communications team had been focusing on the Council's social

media presence for the past 6-8 months, but still ensured that hard copies, such as consultation documents, were sent to hubs, so there was a mix of communications channels.

Councillor Churchman stated that in the past year and a half he had received two residents complimenting the system and its ease of use, and two residents complaining about the service they had received over the phone. He stated it would be good if members of the contact centre team could undergo training so they could be more sympathetic to resident's needs. The Assistant Director Customer Services replied that all contact centre calls were recorded and could be checked they met all criteria. She added that the contact centre received 25,000-30,000 calls per month, but that they tried their best to monitor the quality of calls, and generally received a satisfaction level of 97-98%. The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service added that the team were currently developing a quality framework for all front-line services, so all calls, not just those through the contact centre, could be monitored. She stated that she felt it was a good opportunity to look at all front-line services that dealt with residents.

Councillor Fletcher commented that call centre advisers may have problems in helping residents as they might not understand the nature of the problem, if it was complex. He added that a 97-98% call satisfaction may not include people who had ended the call early, as they did not get a chance to complete the survey. Councillor Duffin asked where the £225,000 of savings stated in the report had come from, and the Assistant Director Customer Services replied that this had come from moving ground floor staff to the contact centre over the past two years and into vacant roles.

RESOLVED: That:

1. The Committee commented on the progress delivered against the Customer Services Strategy key actions.

2. The Committee commented on strategy actions currently in progress and provided suggestions for any further development areas.

29. Draft General Fund Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy Update

The Director of Finance and IT introduced the report and stated it had gone to Cabinet earlier in January 2019 and was coming back to the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee for comment, before being reconsidered by Cabinet and going onto Full Council in February. He commented that the old approach had used top-down cuts which risked creating false savings, and felt that the new approach outlined in the report increased income through investment and taxes, saved money through the 'Do More For Less' Scheme, and decreased demand through early intervention. He felt this was a successful approach, although overspends were still occurring. He commented there were three main points outlined the report, these being:

1. All savings outlined in the report for next year had already been achieved or

were a continuation of current savings.

2. Cabinet had recommended a freeze on council tax for the coming municipal year.

3. As outlined on page 49 of the report, the Council Spending Review (CSR) had introduced corporate wide savings targets, such as getting better contracts in the ICT digital sector, and decreasing the amount spent on people by reducing the number of agency workers sickness cover.

The Director of Finance and IT drew Members attention to the figures associated with the Children's Services budget and stated that £1million had been invested for early intervention and promoting in-house foster carers, rather than foster carers through an independent agency which were more expensive. He added that the savings from this investment would take time to come through. He then drew Members attention to the table on Page 53 and stated that the first column was the budget for this municipal year, the second column was extra changes that had been made this year due to various variances, and the fourth column was re-balanced and showed growth, such as the extra £1.78million in environment and highways to be able to meet, for example, waste disposal pressures. He summarised by stating that there had been some changes to the figures since it has been to Cabinet due to winter pressures and employee costs funding being allocated, and the position had changed again since this version had been published.

The Chair stated that the suggested recommendations, proposed a council tax freeze and felt Members had to have 2 simultaneous ideas, as they wanted affordable council tax for residents, but also wanted to ensure the council could provide and deliver all services. He stated that over the course of the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) the council would lose £2.1 million per annum income revenue if there was a council tax freeze, which equated to almost £11million over the course of the MTFS and commented that this would cause a deficit in the 5th year. He asked if the lost council tax revenue could be replaced with commercial income, so the council could remain in surplus. The Director of Finance and IT stated that the approach would always be to maximise income streams, so more money could be spent on services, which meant his recommendation was for an increase in council tax, but the decision could only be taken by Members. He listed his reasons for his view which included the uncertainties over the government comprehensive spending review which would determine business rates. He stated that the published government figure was currently £2.8million, which was higher than it should be, and as the government worked on a notional figure, and Thurrock was below average, it was classed as an 'underfunded' borough. He added that if there was a not an increase in council tax, the gap between Thurrock's actual business rate figure, and the government's notional figure, would increase. He also stated that all investments were finite and although the council was constantly trying to renew and replace investments, it was not viewed as a stable and sustainable source of income, compared to council tax. He added that as Thurrock had a lower base for the adult social care precept, the amount they could raise through council tax was already lower than other surrounding councils. He stated that his position was fully outlined in his Section 25 Statement, and although Members did not have

to follow this, they are required to bear it in mind when making decisions.

The Director of Finance and IT then drew the Committee's attention to the table on pages 43 and 44 of the report, which outlined what the increase in council tax would mean for residents in the borough, and stated that in the typical Band A to C properties, which made up 70% of all houses in Thurrock, it would mean an increase of £9.06 per year, or 19p per week. He felt that if council tax were increased then residents would receive better quality services, for the price of 19p per week. He stated that Appendix 1 fully explained the points outlined on page 41 and stated that if years 5 and 6 were to be balanced then a significant amount of input would be needed going forward and would increase the pressure on finding investments. The Director of Finance and IT felt that he did not want to be chasing investments, although new investments could be found as there was a long lead time.

The Chair asked what the budget would look like if the MTFs was extended to include the next 8 or 9 years, and if the £1.8million deficit in year 5 would grow. The Director of Finance and IT replied that the deficit would grow if the MTFs was extended to include the next 10 years, but currently the team were expanding investments so they covered longer than a 10 year period, although they were still being negotiated. He added that this would have an impact on a 10 year MTFs. The Chair asked if Annual Council in February could see the 10 year MTFs to have a longer term view. The Director of Finance and IT replied that statutorily the MTFs only needed to be 3 years long, but it was right for Members to see the longer term picture. He answered the Chair's questions by stating he needed to consult with officers.

The Chair stated that it was good to see longer term investments and savings as outlined on page 49, and asked how deliverable those savings were, as the people sector was constantly targeted, and rental income was only a stretched target. He also asked for more detail regarding the £920,000 in savings to be identified. The Director of Finance and IT first answered the questions regarding people savings, as this target had been in place for 2 years, and had been successfully delivered. He added that a report on this was coming monthly to Directors Board meetings which focused on sickness rates and return to work processes. He commented that targets around agency workers were also going to Directors Board on a monthly basis which reported on the employee budget as a whole. He stated that the stretch target regarding rental income should also be seen in relation to fees and charges and was regularly challenged at Commercial Board and Directors Board. He clarified the savings regarding Children's Services and stated that savings of £3million had been signed up to by the Children's Services team, and had not been given to them as a target. However, as less than a £1million reduction was included within the proposed budget this effectively equated to growth of £2million.

The Chair then discussed Appendix 3 and stated it was a welcome change to see foster carer's being actively recruited, but sought reassurance that foster carers would still receive their allowances and benefits. The Director of Finance and IT replied that Thurrock wanted to promote and grow their

internal foster caring service, as although independent fostering agencies were good, they were more expensive than the in-house service. He stated that he had not heard of any changes to the foster caring allowance. The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services stated that the communications team were doing lots of work with the fostering recruitment team to promote the benefits related to being a foster carer, and was also not aware of any changes.

Councillor Duffin felt it was good to see a freeze in council tax, and asked if there was any investment growth to fund the freeze, or if it could come through savings. The Director of Finance and IT replied that he had not been asked to fund a council tax freeze, but the change to council tax had only been agreed in January's Cabinet meeting. He stated that a decrease in council tax would decrease surpluses for a five year period and meant the 5th year of the MTFS would be in deficit.

Councillor Hague thanked officers for their clear approach and felt pleased to see an aspirational council tax freeze. He commented that resident's wages often did not increase in line with inflation, and felt morally that council tax should be kept low. He felt that lots of work had been put into the budget and it was robust. He added it would be good to see a 10 year MTFS, but understood this would be hard to do as it was difficult to predict certain changes. Councillor Duffin thanked the Director of Finance and IT, as well as his team, for their good work, and asked how far the increase in investments could be pushed. The Director of Finance and IT responded that it was a difficult question to answer as it depended on the nature of investments that come forward. Councillor Duffin then asked for clarification regarding business rates, and if 100% business rates could happen, and if they did how much money the Council could lose. The Director of Finance and IT replied that 100% business rates would happen, but required primary legislation from central government, although they were too busy to discuss this at present. He stated that although business rates were currently 49%, the government could bill the council on top of this headline figure and remove grants.

The Chair then asked if council tax could be decreased for the next municipal year. The Director of Finance and IT replied that his duty was to ensure the council remained viable for the next 3 years, and if council tax was reduced then the budget would remain balanced for the next 3 years. He stated that he would feel concerned if this became a pattern as an increase in council tax could prove more beneficial for residents through improved services. He stated that if, during the next municipal year, another council tax freeze or reduction was introduced he would be in a difficult position, although he could only provide advice or a Section 114 Notice, as had been given in Northamptonshire Council, but this was a last resort and Thurrock was nowhere near that position.

RESOLVED: That:

1. The Committee commented on the proposed council tax freeze with mind to the comments set out in the report.

2. The Committee commented on the draft budget as set out within this report to inform final budget proposals at Cabinet on 12 February 2019.

30. Capital Strategy 2019-20

The Director of Finance and IT introduced the report and stated this report was the new format for the treasury management report which set out the parameters for borrowing and investments. He stated it set out the capital financing requirements for the Council's capital programme, investments, and Thurrock Regeneration Ltd, and built up the notional indicator. He added that the figures would change based on proposals, but this was a statutory requirement.

The Chair began by thanking officers for the report and saying it was very clear. He drew the Committee's attention to page 78, point 2.17 and discussed the abolition of the housing debt cap. He felt there was much cross-party anticipation to build more council houses and asked when investment would begin. The Director of Finance and IT replied that the Council was looking at proposals and these would be in terms of months rather than years, but stated that the HRA budget was extremely tight as rent had decreased for 4 years, although this would be increasing as of 2020/21. He continued by stating the Council were looking to borrow to build houses as the HRA did not have to repay certain loans, just the interest on those loans. He added that this meant that some other costs such as maintenance could be absorbed, although some could not as the only income was from rent. He mentioned that at officer level, a paper was being developed to consider this issue.

Councillor Duffin asked if there was scope in the budget to upscale projects run by Thurrock Regeneration Ltd which did not have to go through Council. The Director of Finance and IT replied that only the parameters for 2019/20 had been set, but there was enough scope for capacity. He added it was often time consuming to get a business case for schemes, and then design and plan them.

RESOLVED: That:

1. The Committee commented on the 2019/20 Capital Strategy for consideration by Cabinet at their meeting on 12 February 2019.

31. Draft Capital Programme

The Director of Finance and IT introduced the report and stated there had been a change to approach in the past two years, such as the creation of the future and aspirational projects section. He outlined the changes as follows:

1. The addition of a £2million budget for projects that did not know their true cost or business case. The budget was for feasibility studies which would make the project more realistic and could then be presented to overview and

scrutiny committees and Members.

2. The creation of 'pots' such as property, ICT and digital, and service review, which were of a more operational nature to assist with issues such as replacing sprinklers or boilers, which allowed the Council to be reactive. This also meant that individual projects did not have to be agreed, but officers had to persuade the relevant board to release the money.

3. Appendix 3 which described 'new projects' of a strategic nature, such as east-facing slips at Lakeside and the upgrade to Stonehouse Lane. Page 102 of the report described schemes which needed additional funds such as the upgrades to Stanford-le-Hope and Thameside Theatre Complex, which was to be confirmed.

The Chair commented that there were many projects listed which Members would welcome, such as east-facing slip roads at Lakeside. He stated that the Committee were there to discuss the broader governance process, rather than details of the projects, and asked how individual capital projects had been scrutinised. The Director of Finance and IT replied that the projects still went to the relevant Boards, which were cross-departmental for scrutiny by senior directors, and then went to the relevant overview and scrutiny committee numerous times before tender. He described how before they were tendered, they had to be presented to Cabinet, and once tendered would be reported back to Cabinet on a quarterly basis.

Councillor Hague then asked what role Corporate Overview and Scrutiny were being asked to play. The Director of Finance and IT replied that it was under Corporate's constitutional remit to consider the capital budget and look at the budget as a whole, rather than individual projects. He commented that the committee were tasked with looking at deliverability and comment on the programme as whole, as well as the governance process. Councillor Hague commented that it would be good to see the report in the context of the council's strategic plan and priorities. Councillor Fletcher agreed with this statement. The Chair asked if a report could come back to the committee to consider the process and make it more transparent, as well as detailing projects and programmes, before the next municipal year. The Director of Finance and IT replied that he would bring the programme back, including a piece of work on how to bring capital forward.

RESOLVED: That:

1. The Committee commented on the specific proposals set out within the report.

32. Work Programme

After a brief discussion it was decided that a progress report on the Overview and Scrutiny Function and Motions Progress would come to the March meeting, and would be ongoing in the next municipal year. It was also decided

that a detailed report on the capital programme and a discussion on process would come to the March meeting. Councillor Duffin asked if a piece of work on commercialisation benchmarking and the council tax could come to committee, and it was decided a short piece would accompany the Work Programme at the March meeting, with more discussion in the new municipal year.

The meeting finished at 8.55 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**