

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 3 February 2015 at 7.00 pm

Present:	Councillors Yash Gupta (MBE) (Chair), Shane Hebb (Vice-Chair) and Terry Brookes
In attendance:	Councillor John Kent, Leader of the Council Steve Cox, Assistant Chief Executive Matthew Essex, Head of Regeneration Sean Clark, Head of Corporate Finance Richard Parkin, Head of Housing Jackie Hinchliffe, Head of HR, OD and Customer Strategy Matthew Boulter, Principal Democratic Services Officer Chris Pickering, Principal Solicitor - Employment & Litigation

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.

22. Minutes

The Minutes of Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee, held on 15 January 2015 were approved as a correct record.

23. Declaration of Interests

No Interests were declared.

24. Terms of Reference for Proposed Thameside Complex Review

The Committee was informed that the stage one options appraisal on the Thameside had been released today and a large amount of work had already been done to progress the options for the Thameside services and building. The Council wanted to make a decision on the Thameside by the summer of this year so that savings could be made in the 2016-17 year. Members were asked to look at the terms of reference and either compact the timescale or choose a working group, which would be more flexible and responsive.

Councillor Brookes felt a working group could work although councillors Gupta and Hebb felt that a task and finish group was more thorough and gave a better message to the public.

Following discussion it was ultimately concluded that the best way forward was for a Task and Finish group to be convened as soon as possible with a date for the first meeting set in March. The Task and Finish Group would set a work programme for officers to carry out over the election period with the Task and Finish Group reconvening after the elections to review the results. Group

Leaders were to be asked to nominate representatives who were not up for election within the current cycle.

RESOLVED: That a task and finish group be convened and to complete its work in the summer of 2015 for consideration by Cabinet. Group Leaders to be asked to nominate representatives for a first meeting in March, date to be agreed.

25. Shaping the Council and Budget Progress Update

Officers explained that the council would receive a reduction in grant from central government by £10.168 million. Despite this reduction, the Council was still delivering a balanced budget. Officers confirmed that the £168,000 was being covered by the use of a reserve but added that all services were being asked to work within a budget envelope even though reserves for population growth and an increased pressure on services had been put aside.

The Committee discussed council tax and learnt that by taking a grant from government to freeze council tax would deny the council £460,000 that would be received if it raised council tax by 1.99%. Director's Board was recommending that council accept the 1.99% rise.

Officers outlined some of the savings that had yet to be delivered and these included funds linked with Adult and Children's Social care and the Better Care Fund to the ongoing issue of staff pay and conditions. Officers stated that the trades unions were currently not receptive to the proposals presented to achieve the savings and if this continued then heads of service would be asked to make specific savings in relation to staff costs instead. Savings from Serco also had yet to be delivered. Officers added that conversations about future savings proposals were already underway and being developed. Members stated that the impact on the staff and services was becoming greater and officers agreed that it would continue as savings were made.

Officers were asked whether the rise of the academy schools meant savings could be made in the education department as the responsibilities of the local education authority must have reduced. Officers confirmed that the department had zero base budgeted its service some years ago and was continuing to monitor that. In the finance department the service they provided to schools had been reduced accordingly.

RESOLVED: That the Committee note the report, including the recommendations set out below agreed by Cabinet on 14 January 2015.

- That the Cabinet note the impact of the Local Government Draft Finance Settlement and the subsequent budget forecasts;
- That the Cabinet agree to the funding recommendations as follows:
 - As explained in the report, the government top slices New Homes Bonus (NHB) funding from the overall pot available for

local government finance. The amount taken is always in excess of the amount distributed and is distributed in a later announcement. Considering past allocations, it is recommended to budget for an additional grant of £0.200m:

- Further to paragraph 2.5, the remaining £0.800m of brought forward pressures be utilised;
- As stated in previous reports, there remains a £0.500m contingency in 2015/16 for demographic pressures. The balance of £0.168m should be met from this sum; and
- That officers be instructed to identify those savings required for the remainder of the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and implement as many as possible in 2015/16 to increase resilience.

26. Budget 2015-16 - Proposed Fees and Charges

Members were informed that the legal costs aimed to make full cost recovery and were comparable with the market. It was highlighted that the same services by a private practice would cost much more.

The Committee discussed hop leases and suggested that a gradation of fees could apply to encourage small businesses and fairly charge larger businesses. The Committee also heard that most fees and charges had been increased by a minimum of 3% if not more.

RESOLVED: That

- 1. The fees and charges are noted.**
- 2. The Legal Services Department look to grade their costs for shop leases to reflect the size of the business applying for the lease.**

27. Budget 2015-16 - Capital Proposals

Capital funds were used to modernise services and maintain assets. The capital fund had yet to be allocated to projects and the report contained all the projects which were currently being considered. Not all would be funded.

The Committee felt there was an anomaly between spending money to refurbish IT and the civic offices and the need to make redundancies. Officers explained that this reflected two separate funds that could not be crossed over. Modernising the offices would save money by maximising space and increasing the potential to rent office space to external companies in CO-1.

Councillor Hebb felt three test should apply to each capital bid to see whether it related to health and safety or statutory compliance or whether it was discretionary. Officers agreed with this approach.

There was a brief discussion on the council chamber and Councillor Kent stated that the modernisation of the offices should include the ground floor

where a re-design could increase public access to meetings, improve general access to council services and free up potential commercial space.

RESOLVED: That the report is noted.

28. Customer Services/Channel Shift

Members were taken through the three key avenues of channel shift, which were:

- A new website and an increased digitisation of council work through 'my account' where the public could access services direct online.
- Review the role and use of the contact call centre.
- Implement a modern telephony system.

Officers agreed with Member comments that the contractual targets to answer phone calls were not the best. Members felt it was better to lengthen the target time to answer a call and increase percentage success rate rather than reduce target response rate and lower percentage success rate. Officers stated the targets were historic.

Officers confirmed the Council was looking into pop-up windows to capture customer experience online and also working with Serco to provide a modern customer service which could include responsive twitter feedback to signpost customers to the right services when they tweet about the council. Members stated they had good experiences of the 'Report it' function on the council's website.

Members noted the 100% satisfaction rate with the front desk and officers assured the committee this was captured via an anonymised method. However, the council was currently validating all the performance statistics of Serco services. Mystery shopping could be one way to validate the service desk performance but could prove costly if an external company was brought in.

Officers briefly clarified that there was a 'you said, we did' section on the council website to show the public how the council responded to complaints but this only related to the formal complaints procedure.

RESOLVED that:

- 1. The Committee recommend officers to include pop-up windows to allow online users to provide their feedback on services.**
- 2. The Committee support and encourage the Council to validate satisfaction scores where possible.**

29. Review of the Employee Performance Framework

The Committee was informed that pay progression in the Council was performance related and that 44% of staff received an increment last year with 53% receiving it the previous year. This did not represent a reduction in performance but mostly staff reaching the top of their grade. The Staff Survey demonstrated that one-to-ones were valued and completed to a high level. Officers stated that IIP Gold standard had been awarded to the Council because it could demonstrate a clear 'golden thread' from the council's priorities to the objectives and performance of staff.

It was clarified that holiday entitlement was not part of the review of pay and conditions. Councillor Hebb, in response, stated that holiday entitlement did have an impact on the finances of the council as an extra five days for those receiving a thirty day entitlement could incur overtime costs for other staff. Members did note, however, that sickness absence figures had improved this year.

RESOLVED that:

- 1. The Committee recommend and encourage the performance management of staff to continue to align with corporate priorities.**
- 2. Aspects of the corporate scorecard feature in management objectives with a focus on data.**
- 3. The Council consider calibrating incremental awards within a directorate based on that directorate's performance against its targets.**

30. Work Programme

RESOLVED: That the work programme is noted.

The meeting finished at 9.01 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