

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 9 March 2021 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Oliver Gerrish (Chair), Jack Duffin (Vice-Chair), Colin Churchman, Garry Hague, Shane Ralph and Gerard Rice

Councillor Rob Gledhill, Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Public Protection and Anti-Social Behaviour

In attendance: Sean Clark, Corporate Director of Finance, Governance and Property
Mary Patricia Flynn, Communications - Strategic Lead
Ian Hunt, Assistant Director Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer
Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service
Lucy Tricker, Senior Democratic Services Officer

Before the start of the meeting, all present were advised that the meeting was being recorded, and was being live-streamed onto the Council's webcast.

32. Minutes

Councillor Rice highlighted pages 14 and 15 of the agenda, and stated that he had asked a question regarding the draft capital programme and the Stanford-le-Hope Interchange project, and asked if he could receive an answer. The Corporate Director Finance, Governance and Property replied that this was an outstanding action, but a response would be provided.

The minutes of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 21 January 2021 were approved as a true and correct record.

33. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

34. Declaration of Interests

There were no interests declared.

35. Memorandum of Understanding - Local Government Reorganisation

The Chair stated that Councillor Gledhill would be presenting the report in his role as Leader of the Council, and thanked him for his attendance at the meeting.

Councillor Gledhill introduced the item and stated that a discussion had taken place at the previous Cabinet meeting in February regarding the proposed Memorandum of Understanding with Basildon Council, which related to proposed local government reform. He stated that in between lockdowns in 2020 the government had proposed local government reform and devolution, which had been a long-term manifesto commitment, and had decided upon three trial local authorities in September 2020, which had required full Member consent. He explained that proposed local authority reorganisation now only required majority Member consent, and stated that any potential reorganisation would not take place for the next few years. Councillor Gledhill then described how Thurrock had become a unitary authority in 1998, and as a unitary authority had responsibility for all income and expenditure, including for adult social care. He stated that the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) would open the conversation between Thurrock and Basildon regarding any future reorganisation, and would explore the positives and negatives of any proposed merger. He stated that a merger between the two local authorities would double the resident population, which could increase business rate income, but would also increase expenses for adult social care, as currently Basildon was not responsible for this area of expenditure, and instead paid a precept to Essex County Council.

Councillor Gledhill commented that the MOU would look at all aspects of any proposed merger, including potential costs and impact on services for residents and businesses. He felt that there were currently a lot of unknowns regarding any potential merger, and more information was needed which would be sought through the signing of the MOU. He felt that a merger of the two local authorities could be a positive endeavour, but highlighted that both councils wanted as much information as possible. He explained that any proposed merger would not begin now, but felt that central government were pushing for local government reform, and Thurrock needed to be moving forwards.

The Chair thanked Councillor Gledhill for this presentation and report, and questioned the broader context for a merger. He asked whether the current local government operating processes would not be viable in future. Councillor Gledhill replied and stated that in 2020 central government had felt that unitary authorities should have a resident population of 300-500,000, and Thurrock would be able to reach this figure if a merger took place with Basildon Council. He highlighted that he could not speak for central government, but felt that there was currently no rush for local authority mergers or any central government commitment to scrap current local government organisation. The Chair asked if local government reorganisation would be a medium term goal for central government, and questioned what would happen if the Council did not act immediately. Councillor Gledhill responded and stated that Thurrock wanted to be on the front foot for any government reform, and wanted to be in a strong position which had been carefully evaluated, in case central government began to push local government reform in future. Councillor Gledhill stated that the MOU would mean that Thurrock and Basildon could officially consider the possibility of mergers, but did not mean that Thurrock could not look at other options for

reform. He added that if the MOU found that there would be no benefit merging Thurrock and Basildon then the process could be stopped.

The Chair then questioned how residents would be engaged in the process, and if they would be able to have their say regarding any mergers. Councillor Gledhill stated that although he could not pre-empt central government policies, Thurrock residents would be able to have their say if the Council decided to merge. He explained that the Council needed to consider all costs and benefits, as well as looking at all proposals in a greater level of detail, before asking residents for their opinion, and stated that the MOU would promote openness and transparency throughout the process. The Chair asked what the next steps in the process would be. Councillor Gledhill replied and explained that there was currently not a high enough level of detail to be able to outline any detailed next steps. He felt that all costs and benefits needed to be worked through before any decisions were made, but explained that Thurrock wanted to ensure it was the right size and decisions were still made locally and had a local impact. He stated that there needed to be more discussion between Thurrock and Basildon, but the MOU would outline these discussions and could be used as a national template.

Councillor Duffin thanked Councillor Gledhill for his report and felt that the Council needed to understand all positives and negatives of the proposed merger, and needed as much information as possible. He felt that central government were proposing lots of changes in the next ten years, and Thurrock wanted to be at the forefront of this change. He added that a proposed merger could be a good future opportunity, but highlighted the need to consider all options, as well as what it could look like if Thurrock maintained the status quo. Councillor Ralph agreed that a potential merger could be a good opportunity, but wanted to ensure that residents in the west of the borough would continue to be considered in all decisions. Councillor Ralph also sought assurance that Thurrock would not become the housebuilding area of the new authority, as he felt that other Councils could use Thurrock to meet housebuilding targets, particularly with the news of the successful Freeport bid and the growth this would bring. Councillor Gledhill responded and stated that approximately 30,000 new houses needed to be built within Thurrock, and he understood resident's concerns about new houses being built within their local communities. He stated that if Thurrock and Basildon merged, there would still be a planning regime, as well as a Local Plan, which would ensure Thurrock did not bear the brunt of housebuilding requirements. He stated that the new Freeport would improve infrastructure, the local economy, and the lives of local residents, and felt that a larger unitary authority could maximise this benefit across the south Essex region.

Councillor Rice stated that as Thurrock continued to build houses, the population was predicted to rise from 170,000 to 300,000, which would bring it into line with government's proposed guidelines for the size of a local authority. He felt that Thurrock had experienced lots of growth, including through the Local Plan and housebuilding, and asked if this would be enough so that Thurrock could remain a separate unitary authority. Councillor Gledhill responded that the MOU would look at future aspirations across both

boroughs, and would work to understand both Local Plans and local development schemes, including the impact this could have on housebuilding and local population levels. He agreed that Thurrock had experienced lots of growth, and explained that the MOU could find a merger would not be beneficial and would therefore look at other options. He felt that a merger between Thurrock and Basildon could be a good opportunity as Basildon currently had lots of industry and infrastructure, including the largest tractor plant in Europe, and Thurrock could benefit from this too.

The Chair summarised and thanked Councillor Gledhill for his attendance and presentation.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

1. Commented on the report and the proposal for consideration by Cabinet at their meeting on 10 March 2021.

Councillor Gledhill left the meeting at 7.59pm

36. Communications Update

The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service introduced the report and stated that it provided an update to the Communications Strategy as well as the Local Government Association (LGA) health check and action plan implementation. She stated that the draft strategy would be coming to the Committee in June and welcomed Member comment and feedback which could be included in that report. She explained that the LGA had let independent peers look at the Council's communications approach, including speaking to internal and external stakeholders, as well as helping Thurrock to learn from best practice.

The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service highlighted some of the positives from the report, which included good crisis communications; good stakeholder relations during the COVID-19 pandemic; and a flexible team who were proactive, committed and responsive. She added that the health check had also shown that internal communications had improved since 2017 when the last LGA health check had been completed, and communications were now more campaign-led. She stated that the report also included some recommendations for improvement, such as commissioning a 'who reads what' survey to better understand how residents consumed their media and received their information, which would help develop the strategy and provide a deeper level of insight.

The Chair thanked the Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service for her hard work on the report, and felt it provided a good level of detailed feedback. He thanked the communications team for their hard work during the COVID pandemic, and felt pleased to see constructive feedback and the accompanying action plan. He stated that in previous years the Committee had invited local editors to their meeting, and welcomed the

recommendation to improve the speed of responses and to introduce a more streamlined process. He emphasised how important it was for the communications team to build good relationships with local editors, which could be partly achieved through providing timely responses to their questions. He also felt it was good to see the team were trying new approaches and new ways of working, such as video briefings and the use of social media. The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service stated that some other local authorities provided online briefings for local media, for example when there was a drastic change to a service, and explained that this allowed local media editors to do a question and answer session with service representatives, which could provide a more immediate response compared to a press release. She stated that as part of the health check, the LGA had spoken with local media editors to understand what was working well and what areas needed improvement, which was something that the communications team would continue to explore going forward. She added that the team were also considering new ways of using technology, for example technology which had been developed due to the pandemic. The Communications Strategic Lead added that the use of online briefings and video briefings would be considered as an option, and utilised by the team if appropriate, as it provided immediate responses to questions.

The Chair questioned the budget challenges and asked if members of the communications team would be lost due to financial pressures, or if their roles were protected. He felt that the new approach and strategy needed to be deliverable, whilst being aligned with financial pressures. The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service replied that the local authority would be considering all areas in regards to financial pressures. She added that the team had worked very hard during the pandemic to communicate government guidelines and changes, and she felt they had been critical during the pandemic. She stated that she had no current plans to make changes to the team, but all directorates would be considering all areas for efficiencies.

Councillor Duffin thanked the communications team, and the director, for their hard work during the pandemic, and felt that more positive news stories needed to be shared with local media outlets and on social media. He added that it was good to see responses being sent to local media outlets within 24 hours, and felt this was a high standard. He also questioned the format of media briefings, and questioned whether Members or Portfolio Holders could be involved, to increase engagement, particularly through video briefings. The Communications Strategic Lead replied that the 'who reads what' survey would look at where residents were getting their information, and the team would then consider which information was distributed to which sources, for example print media, Facebook, Instagram or YouTube. She stated that this would increase engagement and ensure more residents were viewing good news stories. She added that the communications team also needed more examples of good news stories, particularly those which had a direct impact on residents' lives. The Communications Strategic Lead added that the majority of local journalists now had a more modern approach, and also directly received their information from social media. She commented that

Members could play an important role in distributing important messages and content, as Members often were active on social media community pages, and could reach residents who did not want to engage directly with the Council. Councillor Duffin suggested that the communications team could introduce a mailing list, so Members could share any press releases with residents on community forum social media pages, for example road issues in their area. He also stated that any videos should remain short, as people often lost interest.

Councillor Ralph agreed that it was good to see the use of videos being included in the communications strategy, and felt that sometimes communications could be slow, particularly regarding the good news of COVID numbers falling. He also felt it was good to see social media being included in the strategy and its usage increased as the team could push messages more easily on social media, and residents could see important information more quickly. He stated that using social media was also cheaper than other methods of communication, and felt that all team members should develop the skills to use social media well. He also felt it was good to see deadlines for responding to press enquiries.

Councillor Hague added that the Council needed to increase the amount of press releases that were provided digitally, as the majority of people now used social media to view their news. He felt it was important for the 'who reads what' survey to cover a broad range of people, including community groups and forums. Councillor Ralph questioned how the 'who reads what' survey would be distributed to residents to ensure a broad range of views and a high rate of completion. The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service replied that the team were currently considering how the survey would be undertaken, but were looking into an independent market research company undertaking the survey on the Council's behalf. She explained that an independent company could get high responses from across the borough, as well as ensuring the responses reflected the population of Thurrock, rather than just people responding who were interested.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

1. Commented on the LGA report and the progress made on implementing its recommendations through the response and action plan, and made any additional recommendations to inform the development of the new communications strategy.

37. Quarter 3 (April-December 2020) Corporate Performance Report 2020/21

The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service introduced the report and stated that it covered the period from April to December 2020, and that 66% of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were on target, and 50% were the same or better than in 2019/20. She highlighted that this report was similar to the Quarter 1 Corporate Performance report as they both covered

periods of lockdown and increased restriction, compared to Quarter 2 when restrictions had been eased. She explained that this would continue into Quarter 4, which began in January 2021 and was again characterised by a period of national lockdown. She described how the report set out which KPIs had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and these had been provided with a 'route to green' where appropriate. She summarised and stated that this report was not necessarily a reflection on service performance, but was rather a reflection on national circumstances.

The Chair thanked the Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service for her work on the report, and stated that it was clear to see the impact that COVID-19 had had on some KPIs. He highlighted the KPI on page 57 regarding fixed penalty notices, and felt it was understandable that performance was lower this quarter due to the pandemic and continued leniency, but asked when normal enforcement would return. The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service replied that this KPI was currently under review, since the Prime Minister's roadmap announcement. She explained that all services were now considering how their KPIs aligned with the proposed roadmap, and feedback on this would be provided during the End of Year/ Quarter 4 Corporate Performance Report.

Councillor Ralph felt that this was a good report that clearly showed the impact COVID-19 had had on some services. He questioned the KPI on page 53 regarding the number of volunteer placements in the Council, and questioned how volunteers were classified, and if this included COVID specific volunteer roles. The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service replied that she would look into this query and reply to the Committee in writing. She stated that staff from some services that had been closed, for example in libraries, had been redeployed to help with the Thurrock Coronavirus Community Action (TCCA), and some services had not been able to offer volunteer placements due to the pandemic.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

1. Noted and commented upon the performance of the key corporate performance indicators, in particular those areas which are off target and the impact of COVID-19.

2. Identified any areas which required additional consideration.

38. Financial Update

The Corporate Director – Finance, Governance and Property introduced the report and stated that it was the final financial update for the 2020/21 financial year, and reflected previous reports. He explained that Corporate Overview and Scrutiny had the overall remit to look at the budget, but specific service issues would be scrutinised by the relevant overview and scrutiny committee. He then highlighted the table at section 4 of the report, which showed the impact of COVID-19 on various services, and explained that COVID-19 had cost the Council approximately £17million in increased expenses and reduced

income. He stated that the Council had received £14.2million in government grants, and a further £2.1million towards the furlough scheme and income compensation scheme. He explained that some services had underspent this year, but some services had seen service pressures, such as Children's social care which had seen an increased number of high need placements. The Corporate Director Finance, Governance and Property summarised and stated that the Council were currently predicting a breakeven position, but had had to use surpluses to achieve this, and had therefore removed any future surpluses.

The Chair stated that the Committee had regularly reviewed and debated the financial position of the Council, but felt pleased to see new information pertaining to detailed service level spend and their outturns, as it was good to see individual service pressures. He highlighted page 73 of the agenda regarding the Children's social care overspend of £851,000, and the Children and Family Services overspend of £1.5million, and questioned whether these were driven by placement costs. He stated that although the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee would look at this in detail, he questioned how this position was being managed, and sought assurance that the Council was providing a quality service whilst also getting best value for money. The Corporate Director of Finance, Governance and Property responded that the children's services team was being challenged on their finances both internally and externally. He stated that the children's finance team had been strengthened in terms of numbers and seniority to check and challenge the children's services and procurement teams. He added that the service also held weekly placement meetings with the Corporate Director, who was very hands on with placements, and other senior officers to ensure these were monitored. He stated that there was also a regular independent review of placements, from other officers within the wider directorate. He explained that the communications team were also running regular campaigns to increase the number of Thurrock foster carers, which reduced the need for more expensive external foster care agencies.

The Chair highlighted point 6.5 of the report and questioned whether the recruitment freeze would lead to an increase in the need for expensive agency staff. The Corporate Director Finance, Governance and Property responded that 90% of all current posts which were being recruited came from the Adult Social Care and Children's Social Care teams, as these were seen as essential posts. He explained that social workers were often from agencies, but the team had managed to reduce this to 30 agency social workers. He described how the £4million vacant post savings would be measured by the gross salary level of employees against the entire employee budget, which included both internal and agency staff members. He summarised and stated that the Council were still on track to deliver the £4million vacant post savings, and had reduced agency costs from £11-12million in recent years to circa £7.5million.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

1. Commented on the MTFs and the forecast outturn position for

2020/21.

39. Asset Disposals

The Corporate Director – Finance, Governance and Property introduced the report and stated that the Committee had raised a point regarding capital receipts and Member involvement in January 2021, and this report responded to those comments. He explained that in 2016 the Council had agreed the 3Rs policy, but since then the process had not moved quickly. He stated that because of the financial pressures from COVID-19, this process would now be commenced and assets would be brought forward in three categories which included; operational assets such as the Civic Offices and libraries; community assets such as community halls; and other assets which did not fall into either of these categories. He explained that these other assets were being reviewed now, followed by operational assets in the next few months, and finally community assets, which would be looked at separately. He commented that the team were currently looking at surplus land, and stated that ward members would be informed of any disposals that were being proposed in their area. He stated that the assets included in the report had largely been included as they were assets that current, in-situ tenants wished to purchase. He stated that the site at Dell Road had been included as it had previously been agreed for disposal, but the sale had fallen through, and was now being brought forward again to ensure full transparency. He mentioned that the Constitution had also been changed the remove officer delegation for any disposals, and explained that disposals under £200,000 had to be agreed by the Leader, and disposals over this figure had to be agreed by Cabinet. He summarised and stated that the proposed asset disposals would be brought forward in tranches, and any operational asset disposals would be included as part of the budget, which would be scrutinised by overview and scrutiny before being brought to Cabinet, to ensure full transparency.

The Chair welcomed the report and felt pleased to see that Members were being included in the process. He questioned whether residents would be able to have their say on any disposals, and asked if this would form part of the communications approach. He also questioned whether local amenities such as parks and open spaces would be protected from disposal. The Corporate Director Finance, Governance and Property replied that any asset proposed for disposal would need to go through the relevant consultation. He added that parks were usually protected from disposal without due process and thorough rationalisation, including looking at the state of repair of the park. He stated that the asset disposal team were currently only focussing on surplus assets, as some of these were not being used and costing the council money.

Councillor Ralph thanked the Director for bringing the report to scrutiny, and emphasised the need to get market price on any assets that were being disposed of. He then queried if there was a difference in classification between a park and an open space. The Corporate Director Finance, Governance and Property replied that he would provide a written answer to that question, but stated that any asset brought forward for disposal would be

clearly classified.

The Chair summarised and put emphasis on the need for parks and open spaces to be protected against disposal, as well as ensuring that residents were consulted.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

1. Commented on the content of the report and proposed policy set out as Appendix 1.

40. Work Programme

The Chair asked for an item regarding future ways of working be included on the Work Programme in the next municipal year, including how to use remote working in the future and learning outcomes.

Councillor Duffin also requested regular updates regarding the Communications Strategy and action plan. The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service replied that detailed report was coming to Committee in June, but regular verbal updates could be provided throughout the next municipal year.

The Corporate Director Finance, Governance and Property stated that the Committee would again consider any financial reports in January 2022, but stated that a report would also be brought before Committee in June 2021 to consider the future financial and budgetary approach. He stated that dependent on when Cabinet and Corporate O&S meetings fell in June, an extraordinary meeting may be necessary to consider this report.

The Chair stated that this would be his last Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting, as he was not standing for election in May. He thanked all the Officers and Members for their hard work throughout the years, and particularly thanked the Senior Democratic Services Officer for her hard work, both with the usual Committee proceedings and also with the scrutiny review. Councillor Duffin thanked the Chair on behalf of the Committee for his hard work and dedication over the past four years, and felt they had been an excellent Chair and Vice-Chair team.

The meeting finished at 8.52 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**