Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 16 November 2021 at 7.00 pm

Present:	Councillors Susan Little (Chair), Colin Churchman (Vice-Chair), Adam Carter, James Halden, John Kent and Bukky Okunade
In attendance:	Andrew Brittain, Strategic Lead Revenue and Benefits Sean Clark, Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery Sarah Welton, Strategy Manager Lucy Tricker, Senior Democratic Services Officer

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

13. Minutes

The minutes of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 7 September 2021 were approved as a true and correct record.

14. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

15. Declaration of Interests

Councillor John Kent declared a non-pecuniary interest as he worked for Thurrock Lifestyle Solutions, which was owned by Thurrock Council.

Councillor Carter declared a non-pecuniary interest as he also worked for Thurrock Lifestyle Solutions, which was owned by Thurrock Council.

16. Medium Term Financial Strategy and Budget Proposals

The Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery introduced the report and stated that it provided an update on the financial situation of Thurrock Council. He explained that two reports had been presented to Cabinet in July and September that outlined potential savings, and a draft budget would be presented to Cabinet in January, before coming to the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee and returning to Cabinet and Council in February. He stated that the budget gap had been £34million over the next two years, but due to actions undertaken, the gap was now £3.9million. He highlighted section two of the report which outlined the Council's financial base, and explained that Thurrock had one of the lowest council tax bases in the country, as 70% of properties were within Bands A-C. He mentioned that Southend-on-Sea Borough Council had a council tax base approximately £15million higher than Thurrock. He added that business rate collection had been impacted by COVID-19, and Thurrock could only keep 3% of business rates collected, the rest being given to central government for redistribution.

The Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery moved on and explained the CIPFA Resilience Index, which he felt was a useful tool to compare local authorities around the country. He explained that, according to the CIPFA Resilience Index, currently Thurrock's Adult Social Care service were classified as 'at risk', due to the low council tax base and therefore comparatively low percentage spend on adult social care.

The Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery highlighted the government's comprehensive spending review which had occurred in October, and had stated that local authorities would receive a funding increase of 5.4% from central government. He explained that this increase would be calculated from a re-based position, and therefore the percentage increase would not take into consideration funding that had been granted from central government for COVID. He added that a more detailed announcement from central government was expected on 15 December 2021, and the team would then work on identifying the impacts and implications for the Council. He stated that previously the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) had provided a three year funding settlement to local authorities, but they had recently indicated that the distribution of this funding would be changing, which created uncertainty for local councils.

The Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery explained that the government had retained the council tax increase cap at 1.99%, but had granted an additional 1% adult social care precept increase. He explained that this would be voted on by all Members at the February Full Council meeting. He added that the government had also increased National Insurance contributions, which would go towards funding the NHS and social care. He explained that the Council's National Insurance contribution would also increase by between £900,000 and £1million, but central government could reimburse this to the Council, although this could come out of additional funding.

The Corporate Director Resource and Place Delivery highlighted points 3.1 and 3.2 of the report and stated that the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) assumed core funding would increase by approximately £1.7mn, due to assumed council tax increases and other savings. He stated that the council's finances might be affected by areas such as: a reduction in council tax collection next year due to the ongoing impacts of COVID-19; a reduction in government grants, an increased spend on pay awards, and could be affected by the proposed increase in inflation, for example regarding contracts and fuel payments, which could all affect the assumptions outlined the MTFS. He stated that spending on the treasury would also increase due to the phasing out of maturing investments, increased interest costs due to increased borrowing costs and debt, and an increase in Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) from set aside debt repayments and funding the capital programme. He explained that the Council would also have to deal with other pressures such as social care, the reduction of COVID grants and the phasing out of reserve usage, as this was not a sustainable method of managing the MTFS in the long-term. He stated that in 2023/24 the Council would not use reserves or capital receipts to balance the MTFS.

The Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery explained that the Council had begun the savings process by looking at individual services, but it had been hard to identify large enough savings areas. He stated that the team had then started to look at subjective budgets, which looked at where money was spent within the Council overall, such as staff and contracts. He explained that the Council had 16 subjective budgets that were over £1mn, which were outlined in points 4.6 and 4.7 of the report. He stated that the largest budget was staffing cost at £100mn, followed by adult social care placements at £40mn; children's social care at £30mn; interest payable at £16mn; and the MRP at £9mn. He stated that the Council could not alter spend on the MRP, and spend on interest payable also brought in £30mn profit through investment. He stated that there were other budgets over £1mn such as concessionary fares which was a central government scheme and could not be altered, and home to school transport which was already under consideration. He added that the Council were also considering the assets budget which equated to £3mn and would be discussed during the next report.

The Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery explained that the Council would therefore be targeting employee costs by reducing posts, and were aiming to reduce employee costs by £20mn within the next two years. He stated that this would equate to roughly 500 full time employees (FTEs) with an average salary of £40,000. He stated that assets had been targeted in July with a proposed savings target of £1mn, but this savings target had been reduced to £850,000, which would be met through the proposed closure of the Thameside Complex and the decision not to renew the lease on the multi-story car park. He explained that the detail of this was included at appendix 1 and 2 of the report. He stated that even with these proposed savings the Council was still facing a budget gap of £3.3mn next year and £500,000 the following year, so significant staff savings still needed to be identified. He explained that appendix 1 outlined the decisions that would need to be agreed by Cabinet, after discussion at the relevant overview and scrutiny committees, and appendix 2 outlined decisions that could be made by director delegation. The Corporate Director Resource and Place Delivery summarised and stated that the July finance report to Cabinet had considered a new charge for the collection of green garden waste, but this had not been supported by the Portfolio Holders so had been removed from this report.

The Chair highlighted page 23 of the agenda and clarified that the finance report would be presented to Cabinet in December rather than September. Councillor Okunade queried the savings proposals on page 26 of the agenda at appendix 1, and asked if the £100,000 proposed saving on town centre cleansing would have an impact for residents. The Chair asked if any town centres had been identified in terms of these savings. The Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery stated that this proposed saving had been reported to the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and explained that although the team would work to ensure the saving would have a limited impact on residents, this could not be guaranteed. He stated that Thurrock's financial pressures were not unusual, and Council's around the country were having to deal with pressures and make savings. He added that the Portfolio Holder and Director would be making the decision regarding which town centres would be impacted by this saving.

Councillor Kent highlighted the savings figure of £20mn over the course of two years in regards to staffing costs, and asked how many redundancies this would be. The Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery replied that the team estimated it would be between 200 and 250 redundancies over two years, working on an average salary of £40,000. He explained that the Council would work to protect staff as much as possible through re-training and redeployment. Councillor Kent queried which directorates these jobs would come from, as well as how senior officers would identify these posts. The Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery replied that the first stage of redundancies would have a minimal impact on the community as it would be a transformational programme that would include robotic process automation. He stated that a digital efficiency review would be carried out and would review up to 200 posts. He stated that each director would be assessing their entire directorate to find post savings, which would then be taken to Directors Board and recommendations would be brought forward. Councillor Kent stated that £10mn of staff savings had already been identified, and asked if process notices had been given to the staff affected by this. The Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery replied that the majority of this saving had been met through vacant posts. He explained that where people were in post, a three month consultation on redundancies was being undertaken, that was due to finish at the end of November. He stated that phase two of redundancies would be begun in the New Year, and Members would receive the detail of this when completed. He stated that unions had been briefed on the redundancies and consultations. Councillor Kent queried how these redundancies would be funded. The Corporate Director Resource and Place Delivery replied that pay awards had not been granted in 2021, the monies from which equated to £1.5mn and would be used to fund redundancies. Councillor Kent then highlighted point 3.2 on page 19 of the agenda, and the £12.1mn of treasury spend. He felt that not a lot of detail on this spend was outlined in the report, and queried how this policy would be taken forward. The Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery stated that CIPFA were currently undertaking a Prudential Code update, which could potentially affect the Treasury Management Policy. He stated that no new investments would be undertaken by Thurrock Council as this was no longer supported by the Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) or central government. He added that any treasury borrowing would be used for the capital programme and Thurrock Regeneration Limited.

The Chair queried how savings could be made on vacant posts. The Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery explained that the all actual posts were included in a directorate’s budget, even those posts that were vacant. He stated that if those vacant posts were removed, the directorate would therefore make savings equivalent to the posts salary. The Chair asked if the £1mn retraining fund would be enough, and queried how the team had arrived at this figure. The Corporate Director Resource and Place Delivery replied that this budget had been derived from the pay awards of £1.5mn that had not been granted in 2021. He stated that this money had been kept separate and would be spent on severance or retraining, and if not enough then could be increased through reserves.

Councillor Halden thanked the Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery, and the finance team, for their hard work on the report, particularly decreasing the budget gap by approximately 90%. He stated that the Council were unable to change the council tax base, other than through the Local Plan, and felt that financial pressures in social care could only be resolved through local government reform, such as expanding unitary authorities or devolution. The Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery stated that local authority reorganisation decisions would be taken by Members, and would be resourced by officers. He stated that capacity in Thurrock would reduce due to a reduction in staffing. He felt that both adults and children's social care were experiencing funding issues around the country, and fundamental changes in local authority funding would need to be implemented. He highlighted that all local councils were currently unaware of what local government reform would look like, but once the detail was known then officers would begin to implement this for Thurrock.

Councillor Kent questioned why Members were only being asked to comment on appendix one in the recommendations, and why appendix two was not mentioned. The Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery stated that the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee only had the remit to consider the whole budget, rather than individual responsibilities, but would take this point on board and update the recommendation. He explained that comments made at scrutiny would be included within the Cabinet report in December.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

1. Noted and commented on the financial forecasts included within the report.
2. Considered the proposals set out within the report, and provided comments to Cabinet.

17. Report on Asset Related Savings

The Chair stated that two members of the public wished to speak on this item. Mr Murray James read his statement: "Grays has been offered a once in a generation opportunity to connect the town with its Thames foreshore through the £20m Town Fund. This could unlock huge recreational potential on the river – potential that is also recognised by the Port of London Authority through its Active Thames programme which aims to increase participation in recreational activity along the full length of the river. Our stretch of the Thames has some unique advantages for sailing in particular, but strong tides, deep mud, and commercial shipping traffic mean it is a challenging area for novices. A degree of both competence and confidence are required to enjoy our waters safely. Grays is a coastal town with a proud maritime history and at Thurrock Yacht Club we firmly believe that we need to be putting a focus on maritime sports in an area that suffers from high levels of inactivity – a problem that members will know leads to a higher long term demand on scarce council and NHS resources. Thurrock is fortunate in that it already has a fantastic facility at Grangewaters. Following the winding down of sailing at Stubbers in Upminster, Grangewaters is now the only safe learning water within easy reach of Thurrock. It is also ideal as a feeder site for other aquatic sports that can transfer to the Thames including paddle sports and rowing. Our club is currently working with the team at Grangewaters to establish regular recreational sailing activities that span both their site and our established sailing area on the Grays waterfront. A joined up offer of this nature creates opportunity not only for the people of Thurrock – it will attract people to come from surrounding areas to regularly enjoy leisure time in our wonderful borough and prove that we are more than just a place to shop. We urge this committee to do everything within their remit to ensure the full long term financial impacts of disposing of Grangewaters are fully explored before any decisions are made, including its important role in ensuring the Grays Town fund project does not leave Thurrock stranded with a new generation of unproductive public assets. Grangewaters is more than a cherished community asset – it is a vital enabler for bringing recreation to the Thames."

The Chair thanked Mr James for his statement and asked if Grangewaters was listed as an Asset of Community Value. She also asked how many members Thurrock Yacht Club currently had. Mr James replied that Grangewaters was listed as an Asset of Community Value. He explained that membership of the Yacht Club had been growing rapidly due to the closure of Stubbers in Upminster. He stated that there were currently 130 members from across Thurrock, Havering and Brentwood. He added that the Club had also recently been gifted numerous dinghies to ensure that sailing and river activities remained accessible and affordable for everyone.

Ms Samantha Byrne then read her question: "the report talks about the importance of arts and culture. Can you please explain how you can consider closing the Thameside Complex that houses the theatre and museum before the elements of the new culture strategy, details of which haven't been released, are successfully running in its place?" The Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery thanked Ms Byrne for her question and stated that Cabinet would be making the final decision in December, but her question and comments would be included as part of the consultation with scrutiny for Cabinet Members to consider when making their decision. He stated that the report set out what work had already been taking place with interested parties, and one roundtable meeting with community representation had taken place, with another planned for the next couple of weeks. He added that papers on the draft Cultural Strategy would be taken to the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee when completed. Ms Byrne thanked the Corporate Director Resource and Place Delivery for his response and stated that the roundtable meeting had taken place in September. She explained that a second meeting had been planned, but had been cancelled due to the tragic death of Sir David Amess MP, along with all Council meetings in Thurrock and across Essex. She stated that the next roundtable meeting was scheduled for the end of November at High House Production Park, and concern was being felt amongst residents that this would not be enough time for their feedback to be considered by Cabinet at their meeting in December. Ms Byrne stated that the report discussed issues with the building, not with the service itself, and asked if income received from the Thameside Theatre had been included in funding figures. The Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery replied that the service itself would be included in the Cultural Strategy, which was still being debated, but the building itself came under the remit of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee. He stated that comments made at the roundtable meeting on 30 November 2021, would be included either within the Cabinet report, or updates would be provided by the Portfolio Holders at the meeting verbally.

The Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery introduced the report and stated that it covered three areas, the first being the Thameside Complex. He stated that the capital cost of the Thameside Complex was £16mn, and 3.3 of the report outlined the outturn of the Complex in 2020/21 was £601,970 and the budget in 2021/22 was £629,566, which was similar to previous years. He stated that as the cost of utilities had increased and there had been limited use during 2020 due to the pandemic, which had affected the Complex's revenue and income streams. He stated that a breakdown had also been provided of work that needed to be undertaken, and these figures had been produced by mechanical and technical engineers. He added that a modernisation and refurbishment assessment had been carried out approximately five years ago, and these figures had been outlined in the report, although these could have changed due to inflation and other issues. The Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery added that only £300,000 had been spent on maintenance work on the Thameside Complex within the past ten years, with only £100,000 of this being spent within the past eight years. He explained that the proposals would move the library and registrars service to the Civic Offices, but the Complex would not close before the end of March 2022, if agreed at Cabinet.

The Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery explained that the second area within the report was Grangewaters, which would also be included in the December Cabinet report. He explained that no direct plans had been agreed for the Grangewaters site, but it had been identified for examination in July. He stated that no immediate plans for development had been agreed, but this process could be explored as the site would remain open for the foreseeable future. He stated that the third area outlined in the report was regarding libraries, which would remain open. He explained that this was the reason why the savings target for assets had been reduced from £1mn to £850,000.

The Chair questioned if the Thameside Complex was an Asset of Community Value. The Corporate Director Resource and Place Delivery explained that Grangewaters was an Asset of Community Value, which meant that should Thurrock Council decide to dispose of the site, the community organisation would get first refusal and a six month decision period. He explained that an application for the Thameside Complex to be an Asset of Community Value had been received and returned for amendment. He explained that these amendments had now been made and application returned. He stated that the application would now be assessed and a decision made within the next three to four weeks. He added that the Council had also been approached by a community group regarding a Community Asset Transfer for the Thameside Complex, and a meeting was scheduled for later in the week to better understand these proposals.

Councillor Kent queried if progress had been made regarding the sale of other assets that had been listed in the Cabinet reports in March and July. The Corporate Director Resource and Place Delivery responded that some assets had had no revenue costs, so had been disposed. He explained that Thurrock Adult Community College had already moved from the building on Richmond Road. He explained that the site was now being demolished and asbestos being cleared, although this would not bring any direct savings. He explained that the additional £250,000 needed to reach the asset savings target would mostly come from the decision not to renew the lease with the multi-story car park. Councillor Kent stated that any asset disposal would incur legal costs, which were not outlined in the report. He stated that some assets also brought income into the Council, and asked how much income would be lost from the sale of these assets. The Corporate Director Resource and Place Delivery responded that any legal cost from disposal would be capitalized against future capital receipts. He added that any income generated from the assets, including the Thameside Complex, had been included in the budget calculations. He stated that the Thameside Theatre had seen an income reduction of £50,000 in 2020 due to COVID-19.

Councillor Kent stated that he was opposed to the closure of the Thameside Complex, but felt that it did not need to be operated by Thurrock Council. He felt that the timescales presented in the report were tight, and felt that the Council should not work towards making the full saving this year to allow time for conversations with community groups and partners to conclude satisfactorily for everyone’s needs. He felt that the Thameside Complex did not need to be demolished as it was structurally sound and watertight, and could be refurbished. He added that it would be more environmentally friendly to refurbish the building rather than demolish it, and would reduce carbon emissions in the borough. Councillor Kent commented that if the Thameside complex were to close, it should not do so until a new complex had been opened. The Chair felt that the borough could have a new theatre complex, as the current offer did not meet the need of the community. She stated that the current theatre could not hold larger audiences, and a new library setting could increase engagement. The Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery stated that there were currently no plans in place regarding the building and future of the site, including any plans to demolish or renovate.

Councillor Halden welcomed the statement and questions from local residents, and queried if the figure of £16mn was for refurbishing or maintaining. The Corporate Director Resource and Place Delivery replied that the majority of this figure was for maintenances, but did include some elements of modernisation and refurbishment. He stated that this was outlined in the table on page 31 of the agenda, and the figure of £6.6mn for refurbishment was based on a study completed in 2015, and could be more or less now. Councillor Halden stated that he had recently toured the new Civic Offices and had felt the new registrar’s area was more spacious and private than the offer within the Thameside Complex. He stated that theatre provision within Thurrock should be modern and improve the cultural offer of the borough.

Councillor Okunade felt it would be good to see the outcome of the roundtable meeting being held on 30 November 2021, and felt the community needed to agree with the Council on the decisions made regarding the Thameside Complex. Ms Byrne queried the timeframe for the £16mn spend on the Thameside Complex. The Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery replied that all comments from scrutiny and residents would be included in the report to Cabinet. He added that Councillor Coxshall and Councillor Huelin would be attending the roundtable meeting on 30 November 2021 and would be reporting back to Cabinet. He stated that the figures on page 31 covered a period of ten years, but the majority of the work would need to be carried out in the next five years, as some work was quite urgent.

Councillor Kent moved to add a second recommendation reading: “The Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee ask Cabinet to give adequate time for conversations between community groups and the Council to reach conclusion, even if no in-year savings can be made.”

A vote was held, with two voting in favour of the proposed recommendation and four voting against the recommendation. The proposed recommendation was not agreed.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

1. Commented on the report for consideration by Cabinet at their meeting on 8 December 2021.

18. Local Council Tax Scheme

The Strategic Lead Revenue and Benefits introduced the report and stated that it set out the Council’s annual obligation to consider its Local Council Tax Support Scheme (LCTS) for working age people. He explained that the report recommended that the current scheme for working age people remain unchanged for the forthcoming financial year. He stated that this would enable an ongoing, accessible means tested assessment process, which currently saw high collection rates and low complaints. He commented that the recommendation had been made in view of the ongoing difficulties lower income households could face following COVID-19, and provided consistency by maintaining current support levels. He summarised and stated that the Council was required to consider the LCTS annually, and the scheme would continue to be considered in future years when the situation regarding COVID had stabilised, and future demand and supply could be more confidently assessed.

The Chair thanked the Strategic Lead Revenue and Benefits for his work on the report and asked if there were any risks associated with the scheme remaining the same. The Strategic Lead Revenue and Benefits replied that there was a risk at the current time in claimant numbers and the cost of the scheme rising, however the team felt that maintaining the current scheme would be the better option, rather than implementing changes with no real insight on the impact. Councillor Okunade highlighted point 3.2 on page 37 of the agenda and asked if the increased numbers of people receiving Universal Credit had affected the number of people receiving LCTS. The Strategic Lead Revenue and Benefits replied that no impact had been seen to date. He stated that the claim process had been streamlined for residents who applied for Universal Credit and also wished to claim Council Tax Support. Councillor Halden thanked the Strategic Lead Revenue and Benefits and his team for their hard work in ensuring that collections were compassionately collected and vulnerable residents were supported.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

1. Noted the analysis of the current scheme.
2. Supported the recommendation that the current scheme remains unchanged for 2022/23.

19. Quarter 2 (April to September 2021) Corporate Performance Report 2021/22

The Strategy Manager introduced the report and stated that it provided an update on the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) from April to September 2021, which included the period when the UK was moving out of COVID-19 lockdown. She stated that at the end of September 71% of KPIs had met their target, and 60% were better than the previous year. She stated that questions that had been raised by the Committee at the previous meeting had been included at point 3.6 of the report.

Councillor Okunade thanked the team for their hard work in meeting the targets, and highlighted page 48 of the report and the KPI relating to older people still at home91 days after discharge from hospital into reablement or rehabilitation. She asked how this KPI was calculated and specifically why the commentary stated that five people were in hospital, which seemed to contradict the definition. The Strategy Manager replied that the indicator included people who had been readmitted to a hospital within three months after returning home, not necessarily for the same reason for which they were initially in hospital. She explained that the definition for this KPI was nationally set. Councillor Okunade moved on and highlighted page 51 of the report and the KPI relating to the turnaround and re-let time for properties. She felt that Thurrock had an issue with homelessness and should be reducing the turnaround time to ensure all residents had a safe place to stay. She asked what incentives were being utilised to get residents into these houses. The

Assistant Director Housing replied that the housing team worked closely with other teams to incentivise people to bid for certain houses, and ensured that people lived well together. She stated that the majority of hard to let properties had now been filled, so the KPI was on track to meet its target during the next quarter.

Councillor Hebb arrived 8.42pm

Councillor Halden highlighted page 53 of the report and the KPI relating to the number of children receiving initial health assessments within 28 days. He stated that this KPI had reduced from 80% to 61% of children receiving these assessments due to families not consenting and/or procedural delays. He asked for clarification on the percentage of these cases not receiving an initial health assessment for the latter reason compared to the former, and more information on what was being done to improve this. The Strategy Manager stated that she would liaise with colleagues in Children's Services to reply in writing.

Councillor Kent thanked the Strategy Manager for the responses to the questions asked by the Committee, outlined on page 57. He highlighted the KPI relating to new homes built this year and stated that only 195 new homes and been built last year, and felt this should be higher. He also stated that the KPI relating to the payment of fixed penalty notices should be improving and asked to see a clear action plan put in place to ensure it met its target next quarter.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

1. Noted and commented upon the performance of the key corporate performance indicators, in particular those areas which were off target and the impact of COVID-19.
2. Identified any areas which required additional consideration.

20. Fair Debt Update

The Strategic Lead Revenue and Benefits introduced the report and stated that it provided an update to the Committee on the enhancements and initiatives that had been delivered within the Debt Recovery Service, following an external review in 2017 and the Fair Debt Summit in 2018. He stated that work on the project was ongoing, and although much of this development work had paused last year due to COVID-19, progress had continued to be made. He stated that the report outlined the Single View of Debtor, which brought together information from multiple systems on amounts owing to the Council and potential vulnerability. He explained that the report also discussed financial inclusion, which provided additional dedicated officer support to people in extreme circumstances, to ensure they could access the relevant available support. He stated that the team had also adopted breathing space legislation, which provided a pause in recovery action to enable organisations assisting people with their finances time to identify a resolution. He explained that the team were now focussed on early resolution through delivery of effective communications, including delivering the right message, in the right way, at the right time.

The Strategic Lead Revenue and Benefits stated that the report also provided a summary of how the service tailored its approach to provide additional support to residents and businesses throughout the pandemic, whilst maintaining high collection rates. He stated that appendix 1 included the draft Fair Debt Policy, which had been developed in collaboration with Fair Debt Summit attendees and supported an enhanced approach to ensure that those who couldn't pay were assisted in gaining appropriate support, and those who deliberately avoided payment were brought to justice using all legislative means available.

Councillor Okunade asked how the team differentiated between those residents who couldn't pay and those who refused to pay. The Strategic Lead Revenue and Benefits replied that the system currently relied on residents contacting the team, but the Single View of Debtor, which was currently in beta, provided an outline of people's ability to pay, which improved the teams' ability to appropriately intervene. Councillor Halden felt it was a good piece of work and was pleased to see the team differentiating the approach between compassion and justice. He highlighted point 5.2 on page 65 of the agenda and stated that the Council currently had £1mn of unpaid debts from residents who refused to pay. He queried how many people were included in this figure. The Strategic Lead Revenue and Benefits replied that approximately 200 people owed £1mn of unpaid debts, most of which was long-term outstanding debt. He stated that the team were currently implementing an enforcement plan that took these people to magistrate's court to undergo a means inquiry. He stated that if they were found to have the means to pay, but still refused then they could be sent to prison for up to sixty days. He explained that the team were building the capacity to do this by recruiting one fixed tem post, which was hoped would bring 20% of the £1mn outstanding debt back to the Council. Councillor Halden queried how the team were using programmes such as Xantura and big data to collect debt. The Strategic Lead Revenue and Benefits replied that the first phase of the Single View of Debtor had worked to collect the necessary data, and the second phase, which was being entered into now, would utilise this information to help those with outstanding debt where appropriate. He stated that the debt collection team would work with other teams, such as the Troubled Families team, to deliver the necessary messages, based on the information provided to them by Xantura. He explained that the historic system simply sent a letter to those people with debt, but the new system would help those in debt by communicating the right message, at the right time, by the right people.

Councillor Kent welcomed the early intervention with debtors, and felt that intervention should start in primary schools. He asked if the Council could engage with local primary schools to ensure they were teaching appropriate debt management lessons. He highlighted appendix one on page 91 of the agenda and asked how the new policy differed from the old policy. He also questioned how the team would work to identify vulnerable people to compassionately collect debt. The Strategic Lead Revenue and Benefits replied that the team had been working on a Vulnerable Person Policy, which would guide the approach to vulnerable residents regarding their debt, depending on their vulnerability. He stated that where residents made contact with the team, matters would be considered on a case-by-case basis to ensure that people had the opportunity to gain the necessary support to enable them to pay their debt. He stated that the team worked closely with internal support and external organisations, and in extreme cases the Financial Officer would provide assistance and could be a conduit between the person owing money and the relevant support.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance thanked their Committee for their work on Fair Debt. He stated that the Council would continue to help those who wanted to pay but could not. He explained that the Fair Debt Summit in 2018 had discussed how to help vulnerable people with the IRV and John Cruise, who was a leading practice lawyer working on sensitive approaches to debt collection. He added that the Single View of Debt consolidated a residents' debt into one holistic problem, meaning they only had to deal with one team within the Council and the problem became simplified. He stated that those residents who could pay but refused were often habitual and routine non-payers, and the Council would work to ensure that their debt was collected and justice served if necessary.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

1. Noted the initiatives delivered since the Fair Debt Summit.
2. Reviewed and commented on the performance.
3. Reviewed and commented on the draft Fair Debt Policy.
4. Endorsed that the Council uses all legal powers available to it to recover money owed by those who "can pay by won't" including committal.

21. Thurrock's Scrutiny Review: An Update

The Senior Democratic Services Officer introduced the report and stated that it provided an update on the Scrutiny Review that had been agreed by the Committee and Cabinet in November 2020. She explained that the report outlined each of the recommendations and the work that had been undertaken to implement these, as well as actions still outstanding. She stated that some scrutiny Committees had adopted some of the recommendations, and some scrutiny Committees had adopted other recommendations, but due to the nature of the review this was to be expected. She summarised and stated that due to the cultural changes required within the review, work was still ongoing on the implementation process, and would continue over the coming year.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

1. Commented on the implementation of the review recommendations thus far, as outlined in Appendix 1.

22. Work Programme

The Chair explained that Councillor Coxshall would be invited to the next meeting to provide an update on his Portfolio. She added that Councillor Hebb would also be invited to the meeting in March to provide an update regarding Fair Debt.

The meeting finished at 9.05 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