

12 January 2022		ITEM: 11 Decision: 110595
Cabinet		
Report on Asset Related Savings		
Wards and communities affected: All Wards	Key Decision: Key decision	
Report of: Councillor Mark Coxshall, Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Strategic Planning and External Relationships		
Accountable Assistant Director: Michelle Thompson – Acting Assistant Director of Property		
Accountable Director: Sean Clark – Corporate Director of Resources and Place Delivery		
This report is public		

Executive Summary

Members have received a number of reports on the budget pressures that Thurrock Council face, totalling some £34m over the two year period 2022/23 to 2023/24.

The Cabinet report on 7 July 2021 targeted reductions of £1m through Assets and the closure of the Thameside building was identified as a significant contributor towards this.

The Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee received an update on these savings at their meeting on 16 November 2021 and there has been three Roundtable meetings with interested parties from the community.

This report updates Cabinet on those meetings and recommends that discussions continue with a further Cabinet report in March 2022 to make a final decision on the building.

1 Recommendations:

- 1.1 That Cabinet note the main points from the meeting with Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 16 November 2021;**
- 1.2 That Cabinet note the main points from the community based Roundtable meetings; and**

- 1.3 **That Cabinet support the relevant Portfolio Holders and Officers to continue with further discussions with the community over the future of the Thameside building and related services.**

2 Background

- 2.1 The Cabinet received reports on 7 July 2021 and 8 September 2021 on the council's financial forecasts and projected two-year budget pressure of £34m.
- 2.2 Thurrock Council, like all councils nationally, face pressures every year but, since 2018, has managed to meet these pressures through commercial income generation.
- 2.3 As this is no longer possible, the main focus of meeting these challenges going forward is through expenditure reduction and, as one of the larger cross-council budgets, a targeted reduction in the cost of the council's assets was identified.
- 2.4 The Thameside building was identified as a potential saving with a net cost in excess of £0.5m per annum. In addition, the building requires significant investment, currently estimated at £16m, after only minor capital works over the last decade.

3 Corporate Overview and Scrutiny

- 3.1 The Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on 16 November 2021 and received a report on asset related savings that included the Thameside building.
- 3.2 Before the report was presented and opened for debate, the Chair allowed a question from a member of the public, Ms Samantha Byrne. The draft minutes covering the questions and responses are as follows:

“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.”

- 3.3 Once the debate started, there was a question on the levels of income relating to Thameside that had been published in the report. It is accepted that these are under stated with some income being coded against the Corporate Landlord centralised budgets. This has the effect of reducing the net cost but these would still be in excess of £0.5m as originally reported in July 2021.
- 3.4 Discussion ranged from being against any closure to the requirement of a new Theatre and that any provision should be modern and improve the cultural offer of the borough.
- 3.5 The printed recommendation was for the committee to comment on the report. Cllr J Kent moved a second recommendation: “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.” The recommendation was not agreed by a vote of four to two.

4 Roundtable Meetings

- 4.1 Meetings with interested representatives of the community took place on 22 September, 30 November and 13 December 2021. Cabinet should note that the second meeting had been planned for an earlier date in October but was deferred due to the tragic death of Sir David Amess MP, along with all Council meetings in Thurrock and across Essex at that time.
- 4.2 The Portfolio Holders for Regeneration, Strategic Planning & External Relationships and Adults & Communities and various officers represented the council.
- 4.3 Whilst the first meeting was mainly about ensuring the strength of feeling in the community was known, along with challenges to the rationale for closure and concerns over the impact on cultural services, the following two meetings concentrated on a proposal from the community to manage the building and related services.
- 4.4 To date, conversations have been positive although there is still significant

work required on a business case and some issues to be resolved from the council's side.

- 4.5 In addition, meetings have also taken place with individuals and groups as part of ongoing engagement to develop a shared Cultural Strategy for Thurrock with partners.

5 Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 5.1 There are three clear options relating to the Thameside building:

- Do nothing. This is not recommended as the ongoing revenue cost is prohibitive, significant capital investment would be required and the necessary improvements to the Cultural offer will not be made;
- Close the building. While Cabinet recognised in July 2021 that the building is not considered fit for purpose in the medium to long-term, this is not recommended at this time whilst meaningful discussions are taking place with the community representatives; or
- Continue with discussions and the development of a business case that could see a community organisation taking over the Thameside building including the transformation of the building and related cultural services. Recommended in principle but with a final decision to be made in March 2022 to ensure savings can be made and the future is clear to all interested parties.

- 5.2 Whilst there has also been discussion about the future of the library situated in the building, any decision on possible relocation is linked to the future of the building and will be considered at the Cabinet meeting in March 2022.

6 Reasons for Recommendation

- 6.1 The recommendations allow for ongoing discussions with community representatives to determine the future of the Thameside building.

7 Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

- 7.1 The future of the Thameside building was subject to debate at the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 16 November 2022, with community representatives at three separate Roundtable meetings and with affected staff.

8 Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

- 8.1 Whilst the decision is about the future of a building, it is difficult to separate that decision from the impact on the services currently provided within it. Running parallel to these discussions is the development of a new cultural strategy that will be debated in due course.

9 Implications

9.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Sean Clark**
Corporate Director of Resources and Place Delivery

Savings of circa £500k are currently targeted from the closure of the Thameside building. Any delays in decision making will impact on achieving a full year saving in 2022/23.

The outline business case currently being proposed by the community also requires ongoing support, on a reducing basis. This will need to be considered in the March 2022 Cabinet report.

9.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Gina Clarke**
Corporate Governance Lawyer

The Council is generally empowered to dispose of assets which are underperforming or surplus to requirements. Each asset will need to be checked to ensure its formal ownerships and appropriation enable general disposal with terms to be confirmed.

9.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Becky Lee**
Team Manager – Community Development and Equalities

The Asset Disposal Policy sets out considerations for bringing agility to land and property assets so that the delivery of the Council's goals and objectives are realised in a sustainable manner, at the right time and on budget. The policy itself will be the subject of a Community Equality Impact Assessment to mitigate the risk of negative impact on citizens and communities. Where community assets are identified for disposal, the process set out for the implementation of the CAT Policy and principles of the Collaborative Communities Framework will be applied, this includes the completion of CEIA's on a case by case basis, engagement with the voluntary and community sector, and an assessment of social value that includes support for Thurrock's recovery from COVID-19 and building resilience within communities and voluntary sector networks.

9.4 **Other implications (where significant)** – i.e. Staff, Health Inequalities, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, Impact on Looked After Children

The Thameside is used for a range of purposes including direct service delivery, use by community groups and residents. The council recognises the value and positive impact culture, arts and heritage can have on the health and wellbeing of residents and this will be reflected in the new strategy.

Staff and volunteers based at the Thameside building have been kept informed of the ongoing considerations about the future of the building since July 2021 including the possible implications for the services where appropriate. They have also been actively engaged in the development of the Cultural Strategy.

Due to the lack of capital investment in the building and its age, it does not currently have a positive impact on the council's carbon emissions.

10 **Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- None

11. **Appendices to the report**

- None

Report Author:

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