

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 18 January 2022 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Susan Little (Chair), Colin Churchman (Vice-Chair), Adam Carter, James Halden, John Kent and Bukky Okunade

In attendance: Sean Clark, Corporate Director Resources and Place Delivery
Jonathon Wilson, Assistant Director, Finance
Grace Le, Senior Democratic Services Officer

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

23. Minutes

Councillor Halden mentioned that he had not received a response in relation his question on KPIs as minuted on page 15 of the agenda. Officers said that this would be followed up.

(At the request of the Chair, this response was added to these minutes:

In relation to the KPI defined as "of the children who reached their 28th day in care within the reporting period, % that had an Initial Health Assessment within 20 working days" Cllr Halden asked for clarity around the divide between those where consent is the issue and those which are procedural delays. Cllr Little also asked whether COVID had been a contributory factor to the underperformance.

The original report is at Agenda for Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Tuesday, 16th November, 2021, 7.00 pm | Thurrock Council

This response provides information regarding the Initial Health Assessment (IHA) performance between April to October 2021 (NB this includes an extra month's performance from the report that went to O&S). Two performance measures inform the data and success in children having an initial health assessment in time;

- Whether the referral for an initial health assessment is made by the local authority within 5 days*
- An initial health assessment takes place within 20 working days of a child entering into care.*

Impact of Covid

1 Initial Health Assessment was delayed because of self-isolation due to Covid.

3 Initial assessments were delayed due to sickness or capacity in health but it is not clear if this was Covid related.

IHA request made to health by social care within 5 days of child becoming looked after.

The average percentage completed in time from April to October 2021 was 82%

Between April and October 2021 there were 12 children with a delayed referral. Of these;

7 (58%) were due to parents either refusing or delaying in providing consent.

3 (25%) were due to procedural issues.

2 (17%) were due to other reasons

Reasons for delays included; parents refusing or delaying in providing written consent; procedural issues such as a child moving placement and the paperwork needing to be resubmitted and; request for consent being late or a child who is able to give consent refusing or going missing.

Initial Health Assessment taking place within 20 working days of a child entering care

The timeliness of referrals from social care to health can, but does not always, impact on assessments taking place in time. 3 assessments were late due to paperwork not being provided on time or incorrectly completed by social care and 5 because a Court Order was required due to parent refusing to provide consent.

The average percentage of initial assessments completed in time between April and October 2021 was 61%.

24 IHAs were completed out of timescale for the following reasons;

14 (58%) were due to procedural issues or capacity within health.

5 (24%) were due to Court Orders needing to be sought as parental consent not given.

1(4%) was due to a child isolating due to Covid.

5 (24%) were due to other issues.

Reasons for delays in children having an initial health assessment in time includes; parents refusing or delaying in providing written consent; procedural issues such as a child moving placement and the paperwork needing to be resubmitted; capacity within health due to sickness or otherwise, and other reasons such as clashes in appointments for the young person or a child being ill.)

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 November 2021 were approved as a true and correct record.

24. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

25. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

26. Portfolio Holder Verbal Update

Councillor Coxshall stated that he had been looking into the capacity levels within Thurrock Council to see whether the Council could survive alone as a Unitary Authority or if a Combined Authority was needed. Thurrock needed to ensure that they could survive as an entity and also be sustainable.

There were currently opportunities for Thurrock Council that would support the survival of Thurrock Council but the capacity issues needed to be considered. Thurrock currently had a large capital programme which was large in comparison to other Local Authorities. The current priorities for Thurrock were:

- A13 Widening Project;
- Stanford Le Hope Hub;
- Grays Town Regeneration;
- HRA Homes to transform places where people lived; and
- Purfleet-on-Thames Regeneration.

He went on to say that the New Towns Board had put a lot of pressure on Thurrock's projects. He mentioned that the SELEP plans to grow the Thames Estuary were also linked to Thurrock's programmes as it was part of Thurrock's future. The goal was 2050 to grow the Thames Estuary by but he felt that with the Freeport plans in Thurrock, this could be achieved by 2030. Referring to the Local Plan, Councillor Coxshall said that Thurrock was moving in the right direction and was looking at how the Local Plan could be delivered.

The Chair queried the timeframe for the delivery of the Local Plan. Councillor Coxshall explained that the Local Plan had been delayed due to the Lower Thames Crossing as it removed homes. The service hoped to bring forward Local Plan Consultations in the summer and hoped that the delivery of the Local Plan would be ready by 2024.

Councillor Halden raised concerns on the demographics of Thurrock and said that the service needed to ensure that Thurrock was ready for the Local Plan. He asked if the Association of South Essex Local Authorities (ASELA) solution was one to follow. He said that Thurrock would require complicated financial modelling and asked if the service had the capacity to lead on this. Councillor Coxshall agreed that there were demographic issues but stated that it was hard to say which was the right solution for Thurrock and whether Thurrock needed to find partners. He said that the service needed to see

where there were capacity issues and where it was needed. The service needed to find the best solution for Thurrock.

Councillor Okunade asked for an update on the Thameside Theatre and the Civic Offices. Councillor Coxshall said that the service had met with community groups since the last Corporate O&S meeting. They had been working together on a business case to find a company to manage the Thameside Theatre. The service needed to ensure that the theatre was a viable asset before handing it over and was helping the community groups to find funding.

In regards to the Civic Offices, Sean Clark said that this had been near ready to open in the first week of January. However, in the second week, the Council was informed of delays to the supply chain for the furniture. There were also cases of self-isolation which added to the delay. In regards to the Thameside Theatre, he added that there was a meeting with community groups next week which would be the third one since the last Corporate O&S meeting.

Councillor Okunade felt that Members should have been regularly updated on the progress of the Civic Offices as there had been no information about its delay. Councillor Kent also voiced his concerns over this and felt communications could be better. Sean Clark explained that the Council had been informed of the delay very recently but would look into the communication issue and feed back to Director's Board.

Referring to the regional and capacity issues in delivering regeneration projects, Councillor Kent mentioned that he had experienced a 'blockage' with Essex County Council in partnership working. He queried whether this was still the case. Referring to the government paper of Levelling Up, he commented that combining authorities would allow the government to recognise the extra capacity that was being brought in. This would help with funding as it would give the government confidence and trust in an entity of that size to deliver to its residents. He questioned what the service's thoughts were on the Levelling Up paper. He mentioned that Thurrock's Leader of the Council had signed a Memorandum on Understanding with Basildon's Leader last year to work on the position of both authorities. He asked for an update on this work.

In response, Councillor Coxshall said that Thurrock had reached out to new Leader of Essex County Council who was more open to working together. Regarding the Levelling Up paper, he said that it was Thurrock's decision to choose devolution unless the Secretary of State decided this instead. He stated that local authorities needed to be able to survive but it was hard to say how this could be done. He commented that ideas included looking into the centre of London or across the river as the Thames Estuary Board had suggested to be a centre just outside the city. He said that the administration had pushed to work on a combined Local Plan with South Essex which didn't work out. Then the administration looked to Basildon Council to work on a

combined Local Plan which led to the Memorandum of Understanding but now, the administration in Basildon had changed.

Councillor Kent pointed out that the administration change delayed progress and highlighted the need for a combined authority. Councillor Coxshall explained that the government did not agree with this as it was the 'vehicles of political changes'. Referring to the Local Plan, he said that Thurrock needed to work as 49 Councillors together which would give the government more certainty that everyone was committed and that the Council was moving in the right direction. He agreed that a combined authority with South Essex would work but had to be on the right terms and ensure that Thurrock would be sustainable.

The Chair asked when the A13 Widening Project would be completed. Councillor Coxshall replied that the project was nearing the end and it was hoped that all lanes would be open by the end of quarter 1 or the beginning of quarter 2. There would still be works going on in the background.

The Committee thanked Councillor Coxshall for his update.

27. Discussion Paper - Investments Committee

The report was presented by Sean Clark.

Referring to options 3 and 4, Councillor Halden said that he was fairly relaxed on these two options due to its processes. He stated that it was important that due diligence was done and that investment was consistent. He highlighted the importance of not buying assets or taking on management liabilities that would put the Council in breach of anything. Sean Clark explained that the service would be going back to a more traditional approach to investment that included lending surplus cash to other LAs if needed. Other opportunities for investment could be TRL as it linked to the Council's borrowing or into Thurrock's regeneration programmes.

Councillor Kent felt it was not the right time to establish a new committee and preferred option 3. He stated that Standards and Audit Committee were not the appropriate Committee for investment reports to be discussed. Neither was Corporate O&S due to the sensitive information in reports. Referring to General Services Committee, he pointed out that they were a shareholder to TRL so could not be neutral in the reports relating to investments in TRL. Sean Clark explained that General Services would work well to discuss investment reports but would not bring TRL discussions into that committee.

Agreeing with option 3, Councillor Okunade said that the current process for discussing investments were inconsistent. She highlighted the importance of the need to ensure that officers were competent with the right skills when considering investments. She pointed out that this also linked to Members in the relevant Committee who needed to be properly trained to scrutinise and consider the investments. She went on to say that option 4 was not viable as it would only monitor the investment portfolio. Sean Clark answered that

training would be provided by the consultants that the Council used if there were to be new investments made. He explained that the reports would be coming from Council officers and external consultants as well as specialists.

Councillor Kent agreed on the points about training and capabilities. He said that if investments were taken on by the General Services Committee, Group Leaders would be aware and insist on Members to take on the training that the S151 Officer felt was relevant.

Members agreed that option 3 was their preferred option.

RESOLVED:

That Members noted the report and considered the options set out.

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

The report was presented by Jonathan Wilson.

Councillor Halden mentioned that Essex County Council often lobbied for investments and funding which they were usually successful in. He pointed out that other forms of income such as business rates would help the Council's budget and that there were some areas that required funding. He said that the Council funded SEND and the NHS did not put any funding towards this. He felt that Thurrock needed to take the same approach as Essex County Council and build the capacity to lobby as well. Jonathan Wilson answered that the government's Fair Funding Reform would be released soon as it had been on hold prior to the pandemic. In regards to business rates retention, he said that this was less certain as Michael Gove did not seem to suggest this would be considered. Business rates was also dependent on what the Council would get. In regards to the lobbying power of Essex County Council, he said that Thurrock was part of their conversations in lobbying and also shared some of their lobbying efforts. He said that Thurrock had the capacity to take part in lobbying.

Adding to this, Sean Clark said that the report linked back to the Committee's earlier discussions on Levelling Up paper. He explained that the Chancellor had announced a 3 year department level budget for local government back in October and Thurrock had received a one year settlement back in December. This was because the government was looking to change the methodology of how funding would be distributed in the coming years. However, Thurrock had received a grant to cover the National Insurance expense. He went on to explain that once the Levelling Up agenda was ready, it would determine how funding would be distributed though it was uncertain what funding Thurrock would receive. In regards to business rates, he said that Thurrock were using these but did not keep the full percentage of the business rate. He stated that his section 25 statement highlighted that it would difficult to get through the 2022/23 financial year but the real concern lay ahead in 2023/24.

Referring to appendix 2, Councillor Kent asked how confident was the service in delivering the savings in the next financial year. Sean Clark answered that the next financial year would be challenging and the concern was the increase in the demand in social care. He stated that the council tax increase was not enough to cover cost in Children's Social Care. There was less concern on delivering the budget and savings as there was more concern on the cuts to be made. He said that the savings had to be implemented to secure the budget for 2023/24 as there was a concern on the demographic growth of Thurrock too.

Councillor Kent said that the Council had an ambitious agenda and were not well equipped to deliver this. He asked if the service was confident in keeping Members to the budget set out. Sean Clark replied that the Council were increasing the staff numbers in the regeneration and social care teams only and if there were other overspends, it would impact the budget. He said that the Council's capital programme had the smallest level of new projects due to its capacity and the common message through reviews would be about prioritisation and capacity. The Chair invited Councillor Coxshall to speak. Councillor Coxshall said that Cabinet had looked over the budget to ensure the survivability of the Council and that projects could be delivered within budget.

Councillor Halden highlighted the need again to lobby for funding as without this, it caused difficulties within the budget particularly for healthcare. Councillor Kent agreed that lobbying was needed and the Council was underfunded in the health services. He said that he understood the need for frontline services but extra capacity in lobbying for other areas were needed so that research and intelligence gathering could be undertaken. Councillor Coxshall agreed and said that there was opportunity in capacity but as to how it could be done would cost money.

Councillor Kent stated that he was disappointed with the increase in council tax and asked that Cabinet reflected on the current climate particularly as there were a number of cost increases in the country. He did not agree with the recommendations. Councillor Okunade stated that she was also not in agreement with the recommendations.

Councillor Carter and Halden pointed out that the increase in the council tax was below inflation and that Thurrock was one of the lowest LAs with low council tax. The increase was also ring fenced back to Children's Social Care services which was needed due to the issues there caused by the pandemic.

UNRESOLVED:

1.1 That the Committee comments on the proposed council tax level with mind to the comments in the report; and

1.2 That the committee comments on the draft budget as set out within this report to inform final budget proposals to Cabinet on 9 February 2022.

29. Capital Strategy 2022-23

The report was presented by Sean Clark.

There were no comments or questions from the Committee.

RESOLVED:

That the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee comment on the 2022/23 Capital Strategy for consideration by Cabinet at their meeting on 9 February 2022.

30. Draft Capital Project Programme

The report was presented by Jonathan Wilson.

Referring to the digital projects, Councillor Okunade asked how these would benefit residents. Jonathan Wilson explained that the Digital Board was responsible for the digital projects and looked at developing digital efficiencies. This helped to improve services that the Council used and enabled them to continue to deliver to residents.

Councillor Kent felt that the capital programme was disappointing for a number of reasons. However, he was pleased to see that the Orchard Footbridge Renewal was in the programme as it was long overdue for renewal. He said that he was disappointed with the comment under the Fleet Vehicle Replacement programme that the service could not find renewable energy as a way to power the fleets. He pointed out that other local authorities were able to do this. He said that he would have liked to see the service look into other fleets and pilot these.

Adding onto this, the Chair asked whether the fleets were owned or leased. She said that the use of fuel for these fleets were disappointing as it used diesel. She pointed out that the Council was trying to go 'green' and that the service needed to think 'outside the box'. Jonathan Wilson said that the fleets were owned and that he would feed Members' comments back to the service to see if they could explore other options. Sean Clark added that Director's Board had challenged the fleet vehicles as well and would feed Members comments back to Director's Board as well.

RESOLVED:

That the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee commented on the specific proposals set out within this report.

31. Work Programme

The following reports were added to the next meeting:

- Thameside Theatre Update
- Capacity under Local Government Reforms

The meeting finished at 8.40 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**