

Appendix A to the Council Minutes – 26 October 2022

Item 6 – Questions from Public

The Mayor informed the Chamber that no questions had been received.

QUESTIONS TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

1. From Councillor Worrall to Councillor M Coxshall

In your recent interview with BBC Essex you stated that to deal with the level of debt our council is facing nothing is off the table, including all of our assets. Can you expand on what you meant by this?

Mayor

Councillor Coxshall please respond to the question.

Councillor Coxshall

The council is considering a range of options to manage the impact of financial losses. Asset sales are ongoing discussions with the commissioners, and it is expected to be a wider capital flexibility available to us as part of these options. These discussions remain at an early stage, and I promise further detail will be shared with members as soon as possible, as soon as I know them. What is needed is to close the gap and reduce the costs to make sure that all us residents are covered to the maximum.

Mayor

Councillor Worrall do you wish to pose a supplementary question.

Councillor Worrall

Absolutely, thank you Mister Mayor. I'm sure you and the cabinet member for housing would both accept that our 10,000 council homes are one of the most valuable assets that we have here in Thurrock. They bring an income of about £50 million a year to the HRA, many other portfolios benefit from the income from the HRA for example Seabrooke Rise with the new lighting coming out of the HRA. So, you know lots of people do benefit from that. Can you give us your assurances and comfort to the 10,000 tenants living in our homes that their homes are not and will not be on the table as part of the assets sales to reduce the catastrophic debts this council has now found itself in.

Mayor

Councillor Coxshall please respond to the question.

Councillor Coxshall

I cannot at this stage and that's the honest, not at this stage until everything is on the table, the commissioners are assessing everything, we have to look through everything and we will go through that process.

Mayor

Councillor Worrall do you wish to pose a second supplementary question.

Councillor Worrall

Thank you. I don't know what to say. You know I really don't know what to say. In all of the times of being a councillor here would I ever imagine that I even have to ask that question. You know they are probably most treasured thing that we have here in Thurrock, and I thought it was Chinese whispers that I was hearing, I really really did. So really how will we know, I mean is there going to a fire sales list that we get rid of this before this you know how far down the list really are those 10,000 houses and how will you ensure your openness and transparency which you promised and I know that you are probably as sad as we are but we are where we are, you know like I just wish the cabinet members had just asked a few more questions about where our money was going because this is why we have we got here is because nobody went deep enough and I'm so angry and so are 10,000 residents out there going to be angry that they could end up with a housing association running our houses, I could cry for those residents I really could. So how are you going to keep engaged and make sure that you dig us out of this mess that you lot have got us in to and you save our homes of our residents.

Mayor

Councillor Coxshall please respond to the question

Councillor Coxshall

Yes, like I said I could have answered that with a mealy-mouthed answer, I am not going to be, I am going to be open and transparent on this and I can't promise to take those 10,000 houses, that's more than 10,000, 10,000 homes, had more people in that I realise that could be 20 25,000 people's lives there. I take that responsibility every day and think about that. I do think that what we have got to go is go through every item in what this council does and owns and then discount them as we go through. I can promise you there will be no fire sales, there will no fire sales, there is no interest in that at all, there is no value to that at all. What this is is a concerted effort to go through what this council does line by line and make sure where the value is and what we can do and to minimise that is the number one priority.

2. From Councillor J Kent to Councillor M Coxshall

Will the Leader of the Council give an update on the work of the Improvement and Recovery Board?

Mayor

Leader of the council.

Councillor Coxshall

The work is ongoing to be ready for the first meeting of the 1 November, as you know councillor, the ECC/Thurrock Finance Board has already met twice and will feed into the Improvement and Recovery Board and at my request yourself and myself both sit on both boards.

Mayor

Councillor Kent do you wish to pose a supplementary question.

Councillor J Kent

Mister Mayor, picking up on the financial recovery board can the leader of the council give an update on the potential impact of the financial catastrophe on next year's budget.

Mayor

Leader of the council.

Councillor Coxshall

Not at this time.

Mayor

Councillor J Kent do you wish to pose a second supplementary question.

Councillor J Kent

Ok in the interests of openness and transparency that were hearing so much about does the leader of the council believe that the council can avoid issuing a section 114 notice in effect declaring bankruptcy.

Mayor

Leader of the council.

Councillor Coxshall

That's not my decision.

3. From Councillor J Kent to Councillor M Coxshall

Will the Leader of the Council give an update on the ongoing review of council assets?

Mayor

Leader of the council.

Councillor Coxshall

Yes, that is an ongoing concern, that is our decision, we can actually go through that line by line as instructed last week with the commissioners, the new director of place met the commissioners and were going through it, were producing it, already gone to cabinet, is a question later on but we are producing our asset list before we got to this stage. We're going through to make sure there is full list of assets and will come to cabinet as soon as we can to have a look and any decisions will be made as we see fit. Some items should never be sold, some items can be sold and some items, with conversations in here to be sold but that was always going to be, there an asset sales value right the way through as you see in my papers through the 3 Rs process.

Mayor

Councillor J Kent do you wish to pose a supplementary question.

Councillor J Kent

Mister Mayor, the leader of the council said that was always going to be what clearly was not always going to be a large-scale transfer of our housing stock to another community provider to a housing association or something else. In the interests of those residents who are likely to suffer as a result of that can the leader of the council give us a rough timetable for the decision making on that and tell us when he expects to be consulting tenants.

Mayor

Leader of the council.

Councillor Coxshall

I hope to have some sort of decision in front of me and yourself very shortly before it goes to the secretary of state and then before that we should be put the before anything like this should be coming to full council. What I can do on disposal process at the moment over the last year we've generated £12 million in the last 18 months from the sale of 18 properties, 43 approved for sale and negotiations are underway at this time and there would be more coming.

Mayor

Councillor J Kent do you wish to pose a second supplementary question.

Councillor J Kent

So Mister Mayor were not sure what the timetable is, I just remind the leader of the council that I'm not the decision maker, cabinet is the decision maker, but will he take this opportunity to apologise to those tenants that he was talking about earlier for the worry and concern that he will be causing them.

Mayor

Leader of the council.

Councillor Coxshall

I am as worried and as concerned as them.

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO CABINET MEMBERS, COMMITTEE CHAIRS AND MEMBERS APPOINTED TO REPRESENT THE COUNCIL ON A JOINT COMMITTEE

1. From Councillor J Kent to Councillor Abbas

When does the Portfolio Holder expect the future of the Thameside to be resolved?

Mayor

Councillor Abbas would you like to respond to the question.

Councillor Abbas

Thank you, Mister Mayor, and thank you Councillor Kent for your question, this is not under my portfolio, Councillor Coxshall is responsible for his bit if this councillor wants to ask me this question, so I am happy to answer. The paper will go overview and scrutiny committee in December and to full Cabinet in January 2023.

Mayor

Councillor J Kent do you wish to pose a supplementary question.

Councillor J Kent

Mister Mayor it is quite clear when you read the list of portfolio responsibilities it actually says that Thameside under Councillor Abbas. I think we all know that there are two interested parties in taking over the responsibility of the Thameside, we know that one is the Thurrock International celebration of

culture, an organised based here in Thurrock, made up of voluntary bodies and local arts. Can the Portfolio Holder confirm that the second interested body is the Waltham International College?

Mayor

Councillor Abbas would you like to respond to the question.

Councillor Abbas

Like I said I am not responsible for this process which is going through there are two bidders and officers are going through the process. Thank you.

Mayor

Councillor J Kent do you wish to pose a second supplementary question.

Councillor J Kent

So we notice again Mister Mayor that openness and transparency seems to have again disappeared so I will ask again can the portfolio holder confirm that the second interested party is the Waltham International College and if he can't answer that perhaps he can answer this, when did Councillor Abbas stand down as a governor of the Waltham International College.

Mayor

Councillor Abbas would you like to respond.

Councillor Abbas

Yes, they are the bidders. Thank you.

2. From Councillor J Kent to Councillor Abbas

There is much concern in Thurrock's Voluntary Sector at the Portfolio Holder's proposal to cut funding to the sector by 10%, next year. Will he have a rethink and maintain funding to our voluntary sector at, at least, the same level as this year?

Mayor

Councillor Abbas please respond to the question.

Councillor Abbas

Thank you, Mister Mayor, and thank you councillor for your question. All services are being asked to review budgets to consider efficiency savings, including the budget that supports voluntary sector grants. Thurrock Council fully values the contribution of the voluntary sector to supporting communities

in our borough. At this stage, I have not made any decision to cut funding as we remain committed to explore all options to support the voluntary sector. Thank you.

Mayor

Councillor J Kent, do you wish to pose a second supplementary question.

Councillor J Kent

Mister Mayor, the council wrote to voluntary sector leaders on the 5 September 2022 setting out your intention to cut budgets by 10%, I think everybody's glad to hear that is still under review. Can I ask when the portfolio holder intends to meet with representatives of the voluntary sector to discuss his proposal for a 10% cut.

Mayor

Councillor Abbas would you like to respond.

Councillor Abbas

I think I am probably the first portfolio holder who has opened this office for all these community groups, so they are more than welcome to come and speak to us before making any decision we will consult all organisations involved.

Mayor

Councillor J Kent do you wish to pose a second supplementary question.

Councillor J Kent

Mister Mayor the voluntary sector in Thurrock does a tremendous job and, in many ways, can be part of the solution to get us out of the situation that we find ourselves in. Does the portfolio holder understand just how much damage to that sector and how many damage it will do to this authority if he continues with his proposal for a 10% cut to grants next year?

Mayor

Councillor Abbas please respond to the question.

Councillor Abbas

Thank you, Mister Mayor, and thank you councillor for your supplementary. As I can said we haven't made any decisions to cut funding at this stage and I'm taking every opportunity to help and support different community groups, faith and voluntary sector organisations and will not make any decision without consulting them. Thank you.

3. From Councillor Worrall to Councillor Spillman

What impact has the Council's financial crisis had on the Housing Revenue Account and Housing General Fund budgets?

Mayor

Councillor Spillman please respond to the question.

Councillor Spillman

Well major projects now have to be signed off obviously over certain value but in terms of the budget I mean as the shadow portfolio holder knows that after taken considerable steps to reduce our general fund expenditure, so that's a positive but in terms of the HRA while we fall under the investigation that's going on we are not funded through the investments as she knows, that were funded through our own rents and we basically pay as you go, that's the nature of the HRA, we spend what we earn but yes its an extra layer of bureaucracy but there has been no significant impact on my day to day. I have much bigger concerns at the moment which I am sure she would share if she was in my position, when she was in my position, she experienced something similar. That would be the level of, that we have a rent cap more than likely which is going to be way below inflation, which is going to be significant, I mean that's not finalised yet, but we've looked at the window and its going to be a significant cut to the budget which is very disappointing and also the borrowing costs are of concern as well. Obviously, interest rates going up are of real concern because they make some projects problematic but not but beyond delivery entirely, but they just mean that a lot of projects would now have to go back to the drawing board and look at how much they cost and look at how we can deliver as perhaps an envelope rather than as individual projects. Hope that's a good answer for you.

Mayor

Councillor Worrall do you wish to pose a supplementary question.

Councillor Worrall

Thank you, Mister Mayor. I kind of feel like I've had the wind taken out of my sails tonight you know with the response I had from Councillor Coxshall so I suppose I would like to use my first question to you is how do you feel hearing that and that your very possibly going to the last housing portfolio holder of our council homes. Did you ever expect the day that you know we didn't have our amazing council homes you know and all of the work, £50 million a year how could we have missed that and our residents, you know, how do you feel that this is where its gone, you were part of that cabinet Luke, I know, you know, that you must be sitting there thinking if only I'd asked a few more questions. I just wonder how you, you know, feel about what a mess there is now that we could possibly lose our council homes would probably be my first question to you.

Mayor

Councillor Spillman please respond.

Councillor Spillman

Councillor Coxshall has shown great candor to say that everything is on the table but I would clarify that to say that whilst everything is on the table there are no active discussions selling HRA he was just being absolutely honest with you that is something that is potentially possible but there are a lot of potential possibilities, but I have had no discussions with officers regarding selling council properties. I've had no discussions with commissioners about selling council properties its just Councillor Coxshall wants to be absolutely honest at all times that, you know, that decision is a potential future but I would like to reassure that this is not a future that is in discussion at the moment and it is not anything that I have had discussions with whatsoever but again I just think its important that we wait until January to see exactly where we are but the other thing about moving to a registered social landlord is that that would be a process that could take more than half a decade. Its not something, like, it not a short-term solution to our situation, it's not something that's going to fix it because it would take so many years for us to realise that that it won't deal with the immediate concern, we've got so I would clarify that everything is on the table because we are in a very serious situation but there are no active discussions about this, whatsoever. So I would be careful about unduly worrying residents, say that everything is on the table but I have not had a single discussion with my director or commissioner regarding the sale of HRA assets other than perhaps land we're not using but I've not had any discussions regarding the sale of council homes but we have to be realistic and I think that, you know, Councillor Kent, I know its not in his nature, to be unkind but I think Councillor Kent was slightly unkind when he suggested we are not being open I think the leader of the council has been remarkably open since he took the role about what faces us and I think that is another example of it. Its about being honest that everything is on the table but that doesn't mean that we're selling all the council homes tomorrow its just not a discussion being had.

Mayor

Councillor Worrall do you wish to pose a second supplementary question.

Councillor Worrall

Yes please of course, what brought it here was that I listened to BBC Essex and Councillor Coxshall was clear it was all assets including our houses were on the table, so that's why I brought this question here, you know it's a very legitimate question for me to be asking, here in this chamber here tonight. So, I don't feel like you should be saying that I'm making something that isn't there Luke because we shouldn't really be having this conversation and you know that. So alright then, ok I'll move away from the sale of the council houses. So

it is estimated that about 9,000 of our families here in Thurrock are living in fuel poverty, many struggling to pay their rents, their council tax, can't turn their heating on you know, private landlords will be ramping up their rents so you know we are likely to see homeless applications go up, changes to welfare reform, you know phasing out the traditional benefits. Our partners are worried, that council officers are worried about that transition and what it does to incomes and you know and every year we're talked about the discretionary housing budgets you know so I think we are going to need this this winter and you will probably agree that we are going to need this more than ever this winter you know everything is higher but this fund has been slashed by 30% this year. So how do you mitigate the impact and the hardship that this huge reduction is going to have on our residents.

Mayor

Councillor Spillman please respond.

Councillor Spillman

As my day job, as part of my day job is to go out and identify people that are in need of housing support funds (Councillor Worrall – that's not here) so no, I'm just saying that I do fully understand what is going on. We have a good welfare team; you've been housing, providing a lot of support to residents that includes income maximisation that include helping people with budgets, dealing with debts and stuff like that, there's a lot of support coming from government as well. With gas, electricity and those sort of things I think that we need to make sure as councillors that we make, that we make sure that our residents are aware that they can claim these grants because a lot of people don't know about it, most of the people I visit don't know about it and when you tell them about it, it's a godsend to them, to put it mildly. So, I think the main thing is encouraging uptake and there are traditional underspends on that budget as well so it's all about encouraging uptake, encouraging using the money that we have got through the housing support fund through the government, and I think really if the crisis continues, we won't be beyond the realms of the possibilities of seeing more government funding. But in terms of, another concern that she raised about general stress on homelessness, I think that one of the things that we did do is that we built, because of the threat of increased homelessness we built a huge amount of extra capacity within our homelessness services so we do have, you know, there is a current spike at the moment about 40% in temporary accommodation but a lot of that is probably the bottle neck that comes through the courts opening up again so I'm personally hopeful that trend decreases and then even if we see an uptrend in problems caused by private right to buy markets and private lets, I am confident that because of the extra capacity we've built that we will be able to manage any extra homelessness demand and I think that is one of the things that the councillor should be most proud about in recent years, what we have done over the previous years regarding homelessness, yes it's my baby yes, and yes the main thing is, too reiterate is make sure you are aware of everything that your tenants can claim and make sure they are aware of it and if you have any problems with applications getting through the system then

please contact me as I know these benefits inside out and I will do everything I can to smooth that process.

4. From Councillor Shinnick to Councillor M Coxshall

Can you please inform me if any measures are being taken to make sure the past mayors names can be highlighted on the stone plaques in the Council Chamber, so we are able to read their names?

Mayor

Councillor Coxshall please respond on the question.

Councillor Coxshall

The stone plaques have been relocated from the old chamber and we're looking to what we can do to improve them.

Mayor

Councillor Shinnick do you wish to ask a supplementary question.

Councillor Shinnick

Thank you. Another question is in regard to the stone plaques can you inform me when the freedom of the borough names are going to be put up in the chamber.

Mayor

Councillor Coxshall

Councillor Coxshall

As soon as possible.

Mayor

Councillor Shinnick do you wish to ask a second supplementary question.

Councillor Shinnick

No thank you.

5. From Councillor Byrne to Councillor M Coxshall

Can the Portfolio Holder update the Chamber on the current state of play with Stanford Station please?

Mayor

Councillor Coxshall please respond to the question.

Councillor Coxshall

In September 2021, Thurrock Borough Council issued tenders to contractors for the detailed design and construction of Stanford le Hope Station. In March 2022 contract was awarded based on a tender within the budget and within compliant. Concerns arose over the liabilities and issues in terms of the scope, definition, approval and risks of inflation. Allocation of risk and the national procurement led to time delay during and following the pandemic. Issues prevented the fixed price contract being signed but a letter of Intent was issued to mitigate the delays to enable activity to occur to resolve the issues.

Mayor

Councillor Byrne do you wish to pose a supplementary question.

Councillor Byrne

It didn't start in 2021, did it, December 2017 we had a trumpet blowing press release, station plans debated on the 18 February 2018, the owners offered £18k for the land opposite, June 2019 work halted on this new station. Three years ago, this month a temporary ticket office opened. November 2019 the council admits it needs more land for the botched development plan. We've paid £3.5 million for a site that was offered £800,000 three years before. 2020 we were told we would resume on the car park on the station. November 2022 still no station. Five years on, surely the residents and commuters deserve another apology from you on behalf of the ex-leader, this catalogue of errors allowed to happen under this watch. It's been five years this month.

Mayor

Councillor Coxshall please respond to the question.

Councillor Coxshall

Yes.

Mayor

Councillor Byrne do you wish to pose a second supplementary question.

Councillor Byrne

So, you failed to deliver on the station, the brewery site, the A13, little things like the Wharf Road underpass, a simply little task like grass and moss covered drain hole taken me and Councillor Ralph six emails, daily photos from residents and three attempts to repair it. Why do we constantly fail to

deliver on projects we start, its not the first time I have asked this question why are we so shockingly poor at project management.

Mayor

Councillor Coxshall please respond to the question.

Councillor Coxshall

I can't answer why we are so shocking all I can say is we are shockingly poor at project management, we continually are, what I can say is we have a new assistant director in regeneration, who we brought back just in the last couple of weeks is the new director of place to bring that back under one roof, one directorate to make sure we actually move forward and we have a new assistant director who is actually determined to keep budget management on time and the phase the station breaks into two phases and in decisions on what we do with that can't continue, that is why I'm hoping we can get to a resolution on phase 1 and we have got to get a resolution on phase 2 for the later part of next year.

6. From Councillor Watson to Councillor Maney

Can the Portfolio Holder for Transport please tell me what Thurrock Council is doing to mitigate the ongoing issues around West Thurrock Academy for parking in Flint Street, Schoolfield and London Road during drop off and pick up times?

Mayor

Councillor Maney would you like to respond please.

Councillor Maney

Thank you, Mister Mayor, thank you Councillor Watson for your question and pleased that you have clarified the school you were talking about. Mister Mayor the starting point for me whenever I'm answering a question on school parking and traffic congestion around schools are starting point, I think is always we have to remind ourselves this isn't the council's fault that these problems occur issuing behaviour and with the best will in the world the council can implement parking restrictions we can enforce them to the best of our ability. We can look at school travel plans but unless parents change their habits, you know I feel we are always going to be talking about his problem. So, I think it's important to remember that there's only so much the council can do. This is a common problem around schools not just across Thurrock but is a national problem, that doesn't mean its ok and it doesn't mean there aren't things we can do, I'm happy to talk about West Thurrock Academy. So, if we take the roads that you've referred to, London Road and Flint Street first of all the problem that the council has at present is there are very few on street parking restrictions. There is a very good reason for that, if we were to implement them, they would apply to resident equally and as you'll know

those properties have precious little off-street parking as we can look, we will look, at whether this needs to implement a parking scheme but it has to be borne in mind that will affect residents. Schoolfield Road does have as you know no parking any time restrictions at various junctions, we do patrol them and as ever we will enforce an issue penalty charge notices where there are violations. At present the council is engaging with the school, it has been a hard task I have to say but the council has now managed to establish some communications we are working on a school travel plan and I very much that some of the issues that you have highlighted can be addressed in that. The first thing I think is worth mentioning is that when the school was given planning consent there was obligation for there to be two parking facilities, one is a pickup and drop off zone for parents. I understand that is currently been closed by the school and I've asked officers to look into potentially enforcement proceedings not only in respect of this school but other schools across the borough who have taken similar measures in respect of their obligations. Thank you, Mister Mayor.

Mayor

Councillor Watson do you wish to pose a supplementary question.

Councillor Watson

Thank you, Mister Mayor, thank your Councillor Maney for the positive news. Specifically, why I have chosen that school anyway is the level of arguments that are currently taking place from that school. To the point that the actual school itself is trying to mitigate some of those arguments and its coming into quite a confrontational and quite violent in some forms or another. Especially down Flint Street where the residents can't even get out of their doors or go in at all. Is there anything that you can do or is there any form of enforcement to try and help some of what is currently happening on a day in, day out basis. Thank you.

Mayor

Councillor Maney would you like to respond please.

Councillor Maney

Thank you, Mister Mayor. I am all too aware of that kind of conflict, my own ward is greatly affected by these kinds of problems, and I know the kind of friction that it causes, I know it can lead to real confrontation and it goes back to what I say that more parents driving their children to school need to be more considerate. I said in my answer that in Flint Street there are very few on-street parking restrictions so in terms of enforcement that the council has are very limited options so in answer to your question it probably isn't much more we can do because we have to have something to enforce. As I said I'm happy to review the situation, we constantly look at parking situations around schools and if it is found a case is made that we should look at implementing more parking restrictions we can, but I do need to reiterate that would apply to

residents also and it hasn't been popular in some locations. So, if your asking can we review the restrictions or lack of restrictions and come up with a scheme I'm happy to take that away and speak to officers and engage a view on it, but it won't be an easy process. Thank you, Mister Mayor.

Mayor

Councillor Watson do you wish to pose a second supplementary question.

Councillor Watson

No thank you.

7. From Councillor Watson to Councillor M Coxshall

We have a cross party shared ambition for the regeneration plans for Purfleet on Thames. Can the Portfolio Holder for Growth tell me what is the likely impact to those plans in light of the financial crisis?

Mayor

Leader of the council.

Councillor Coxshall

The regeneration of Purfleet on Thames remains an absolute priority. The global economy uncertainty and our financial challenges will not make this easy to deliver but I am working with the new director of place and looking at how we can bring this forward with speed. I will share the financial position and the delivery options as they become clearer in the coming weeks and months and be assured the local councillors will be the first to know.

Mayor

Councillor Watson do you wish to pose a supplementary question.

Councillor Watson

Thank you. The development corporation if you remember rightly was brought land and they brought a substantial amount of land that is now in Purfleet on Thames to carry out the regeneration for Purfleet on Thames. There is an agreement in place that those parcels of land will be released to that development as they are currently in the ownership of the council. Will that development agreement be honoured and will those parcel of land be released as the scheme carries forward?

Mayor

Councillor Coxshall

Councillor Coxshall

At this time there is no intention to stop the regeneration in Purfleet on Thames so in the financial position of what is happening in Purfleet on Thames regardless of our financial position but what happens in Purfleet on Thames. We have to make sure in this global economic crisis to make sure that we deliver a regeneration of Purfleet on Thames.

Mayor

Councillor Watson do you have a second supplementary question.

Councillor Watson

No thank you.

8. From Councillor Muldowney to Councillor M Coxshall

Councillor Muldowney resubmitted her question to November Council.