

Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on 22 January 2025 at 7.00 pm

The deadline for call-ins is Monday 3 February 2025

Present: Councillors John Kent (Chair), Vikki Hartstean, Victoria Holloway, Mark Hooper, Valerie Morris-Cook, Sara Muldowney and Lee Watson

Apologies: Councillors Lynn Worrall (Vice-Chair)

In attendance:
Dawn Calvert, Chief Financial Officer S151
John Chance, Chief Accountant
Claire Demmel, Executive Director Place
Daniel Fenwick, Executive Director Corporate Services/Monitoring Officer
Cristina Hall, Chief of Staff to the Commissioners – Thurrock Council
Sima Khiroya, Assistant Director of Finance and Procurement
Sheila Murphy, Executive Director Children's Services
Robert Persey, Interim Executive Director- Adults and Health
Dr Dave Smith, Chief Executive and Managing Director Commissioner
Rhiannon Whiteley, 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.

110. Minutes

The minutes of the cabinet meeting held on 7 January 2025 were approved as a correct record.

111. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

112. Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

113. Statements by the Leader

The Leader commented that there has been a lot of interest in the Government's White Paper on Devolution, local Government reorganisation and what this means for Thurrock. It is inevitable that there will be some nervousness about the changes coming and staff and residents have lots of questions. The Leader stated that he wanted to be clear that it is a once in a lifetime opportunity for our small borough to become part of something stronger, more ambitious and more impactful for our residents. The Leader highlighted that they will lobby for Thurrock relentlessly whilst at the same time recognising that whatever is agreed will need to work for the 1.8 million that live across the county of Essex for years to come. The Leader stressed that it is important to grab this opportunity as the Government has been clear that it will happen and Thurrock can be in the driving seat as part of the priority programme or wait for it to happen. The Leader stated that he will ensure everyone has a voice and is listened to. The Leader explained that larger councils will have more bargaining power, greater economies of scale and will be able to ensure that the fantastic opportunities here are realised in a way that really benefits the people that live here. Years of cuts have eroded the council's ability to provide the frontline services residents deserve, more can be done by working with others. The Leader concluded that he hopes to hear from the Government soon and looks forward to working with cabinet, staff and communities to create an exciting future for Thurrock.

114. Briefings on Policy, Budget and Other Issues

There were no briefings on policy, budget and other issues.

115. Petitions submitted by Members of the Public

No petitions were submitted by members of the public.

116. Questions from Non-Executive Members

There were no questions from non-executive members.

117. Matters Referred to the Cabinet for Consideration by an Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The leader confirmed that the following briefing notes had been received from Overview and Scrutiny committees which have been circulated to cabinet and published online

1. The Enforcement Policy Briefing Note which will be dealt with when cabinet considers item 14
2. The Fees and Charges Briefing Note which will be considered when cabinet considers item 18
3. A Briefing Note has been received on the Draft Revenue Budget and will be considered at the next cabinet meeting on 12th February

118. Delegated Decisions taken since the last meeting

The Leader confirmed that a list of delegated decisions since the last cabinet meeting was in the agenda and has been published online.

119. Shared Lives Scheme

Councillor Hooper introduced the report and explained that the report is asking cabinet to go out to tender for the Shared Lives contract where families and individuals share their home with a person with disabilities. Councillor Hooper commented that he was a shared lives carer 30 years ago. Supported living costs are around £952 per week and shared lives care is around £460 per week. It is therefore a real saving which also allows individuals of low to medium need the benefits of living with a family. It is hoped the provider will be proactive in recruiting more shared lives carers. The provider will recruit, train and support shared lives carers and find the best possible placements and support them.

Councillor Muldowney stated that she was delighted to support the re-tender and the expansion of the scheme. It is cost effective and enhances the quality of life of residents. Councillor Muldowney queried if there were any risks with the scheme.

Councillor Hooper responded that the length of the contract was considered important so it provides stable support to placements but targets will be monitored at the same time. There is an expectation that there will be growth and if the provider doesn't meet targets there is the possibility to bring the contract to an end.

Councillor Holloway stated that it was an important report and ensures residents can live fulfilling lives.

The Leader commented that it is a wonderful scheme and an example of the human side of Local Authorities and the work they do in Thurrock. The Leader stated that he was pleased they will be trying to provide more of these opportunities.

RESOLVED:

2.1 Cabinet Supported the decision that the Council go out to tender for the Shared Lives contract. The proposed start date of this contract would be October 1st, 2025, until March 31st, 2031, with an option to extend for two years in one-year increments. If growth targets are met total during the life of the 7.5-year term the total contract value will rise to £3,920,250.

2.2 Cabinet approved the delegation to award the contract to the Executive Director of Adults and Health in consultation with the Lead Portfolio Holder.

*Reason for the decision: as outlined in the report.
This decision was subject to call-in.*

120. Thurrock Plan for Culture

Councillor V Morris-Cook introduced the report and highlighted that the report is an easy read and thanked officers for taking this one board. Councillor Morris-Cook explained that the Thurrock Plan for Culture is a forward looking initiative designed to harness the power of culture to create significant positive impacts for the community. The plan aims to activate spaces with creative and cultural activities, celebrate Thurrock's unique heritage and support local creative talent.

The key themes are:

1. Cultural Connections
2. Cultural Capacity
3. Cultural Capital

The role of Thurrock Council will be to act as an enabler and facilitator, coordinating creative and cultural opportunities and working partners to realise the plan.

There is an action plan with short, medium and long-term actions to achieve a sustainable culturally ambitious future for Thurrock, leveraging existing resources and fostering strong cooperation among partners. Councillor Morris-Cook noted that previously there had been criticism that Thurrock has not accessed a number of grants which it could have done compared to the rest of the country.

Councillor Hartstean noted that the curriculum for Arts has been decimated and she was pleased to see the focus on children and young people.

Councillor Holloway commented that this does impact residents and communities and she wants culture to remain a high priority.

Councillor Morris-Cook responded that culture can make a significant difference to peoples mental health. Every child has something that they are exceptionally good at and we need to look at how we can grow and develop this in Thurrock.

The Leader welcomed the report and stated that the council has been without a cultural strategy for too long. The Leader stated that he hoped it would make it easier for Arts groups to draw funding down more quickly. The Leader noted the one third of residents do not engage with culture at all and added that he looked forward to making a positive decision on the Thameside Theatre very soon.

Councillor Morris-Cook thanked officers for their patience and stated that they are starting to see bids opening up. They are doing a lot of work with Coalhouse Fort and hopefully can start unlocking some different funding.

RESOLVED:

2.1 Cabinet approved the Thurrock Plan for Culture

2.2 Cabinet approved the Action Plan as the first phase of further collaboration with Thurrock's cultural stakeholders.

*Reason for the decision: as outlined in the report.
This decision is subject to call-in.*

121. Restructure of Community Protection & Enforcement Services

Councillor V Holloway introduced the report and explained that the proposal introduces a new way of working across the borough within the service areas of Community protection and Enforcement. Councillor V Holloway commented that she knows community safety is high on residents priorities. The proposal sees different areas from across the Council being brought together whilst creating a holistic solution-based approach to issues that are being faced by the community and our teams. This will also add resilience to what are sometimes very small teams in times of need. The proposal is a shift in working ethos and will allow the teams to work more collaboratively and under a single strategic direction.

Councillor Muldowney welcomed the report and commented that it is a really good way to achieve cost savings.

Councillor L Watson stated that she liked the place-based approach and has been reassured that there will not be any more charging on the HRA.

Councillor V Holloway thanked members for the comments and officers for their hard work.

RESOLVED:

-

2.1 Cabinet agreed the changes being proposed and approve the future development of this area in a phased approach.

*Reason for the decision: as outlined in the report.
This decision is subject to call-in.*

122. Adoption of Thurrock Council Enforcement Policy

Councillor V Holloway introduced the report and explained that the policy sets out the process required for authorised officers to act promptly, consistently and effectively in response to allegations of unlawful activities committed against the council. The policy emphasises that all authorised officers with

enforcement duties, functions and responsibilities should act with professionalism, fairness, transparency and consistency.

The policy allows for specific service areas, such as Counter Fraud, Planning Enforcement and Parking Enforcement to have specific policies for their own areas but be guided by the 'overarching policy'. This is a standard practice across local authorities due to the very diverse nature of enforcement activity that takes place. This has been shared with other leads within Enforcement through the internal Enforcement Board, with unilateral agreement of its content. All policies will be reviewed upon adoption of this policy to ensure current service area policies adhere to this.

Councillor Watson welcomed the policy and stated that she often received questions from residents about what the council can and cannot do around enforcement issues. Councillor Watson also noted that the policy was very easy to read.

Councillor Muldowney also welcomed the policy and stated that it provided a consistent, fair and transparent approach to enforcement.

RESOLVED:

2.1 Cabinet approved to adopt the Thurrock Council Enforcement Policy

*Reason for the decision: as outlined in the report.
This decision is subject to call-in.*

123. Local Council Tax Support Scheme

Councillor Muldowney introduced the report and explained that the council did look at moving to a banded scheme but after extensive benchmarking and modelling they decided to stick with the current scheme. The banded scheme may have impacted some of the most vulnerable residents.

RESOLVED:

-

- 2.1 Cabinet noted the analysis and review of the current Local Council Tax Support (LCTS) Scheme for Working age people.**
- 2.2 Cabinet recommended to Council the approval of the current Local Council Tax support scheme for working age people for 2025/26 which has been in place since 2017/18 with no changes:**
 - **to ensure work pays, the first £25 per week of earned income is disregarded when calculating levels of council tax support;**
 - **the maximum capital limit is to be set at £6,000. This means anyone who has savings over £6,000 may not receive support with their council tax;**

- for working age claimants, the maximum support allowed is set at 75% of their full council tax bill;
- to assist those with families, the Child Benefit and Child Maintenance received is not included as income in the calculation of council tax support;
- the maximum period a claim can be backdated under the scheme is one calendar month. To qualify for this, the claimant will need to provide good reason for not claiming earlier;
- there is a full disregard of military compensation payments, including War Disablement Pensions, War Widow's Pension and Armed Forces Compensation Scheme payments;
- Disability Living Allowance and Personal Independence Payments are fully disregarded;
- the number of dependants assessed in the calculation of claimants' needs is a maximum of two;
- the maximum period of an award when temporarily absent outside the United Kingdom is four weeks.

*Reason for the decision: as outlined in the report.
This decision is subject to call-in.*

124. Council Tax Discounts and Premium

Councillor Muldowney introduced the report and explained that the council determined in February 2024 to charge council tax premiums on empty properties over 1 year from the 1st April 2024 and properties classed as second homes from 1st April 2025 (It was necessary to give a years notice).

There were no questions or comments from members.

RESOLVED:

- 2.1 Cabinet noted the additional income generated from the 'Long term Empty and Unfurnished' premium year to date in 2024/2025 as detailed in 4.12.**
- 2.2 Cabinet noted the statutory exceptions/exemptions that have now been finalised in regulations and will apply to both premiums from April 2025.**
- 2.3 Cabinet noted the work that has been undertaken in 2024/25 to validate properties that will be potentially subject to the 'Second Homes' premium from 1st April 2025.**
- 2.4 Cabinet recommended to Council that the council continues to charge the 'Long term Empty' council tax premium in line with the existing determination on:**

- **Properties empty after 12 Months and up to 5 years = 100% Premium**
- **Properties empty between 5 and 10 years = 200% Premium**
- **Properties empty over 10 years = 300% Premium**

2.5 Cabinet recommended to Council that as per the existing determination, the Council proceeds to implement the ‘Second homes’ premium from 1st April 2025.

125. Dedicated School Grants 2025-2026

Councillor Muldowney introduced the report and explained that the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) is a ring-fenced specific grant allocated to the Local Authority by the Government to support a range of education related services. On 18 December 2024 the Department for Education announced the schools funding settlement for 2025/26. Thurrock’s funding formulae will continue as it has since 2021. Thurrock is fully compliant with the national funding formula.

Councillor Hartstean commented that she is pleased to see the DSG come to cabinet and the increased funding especially in the high need pupils block however it wont touch the sides.

Councillor J Kent echoed Councillor Hartstean’s comments and stated this is a help but only a sticking plaster and a long term resolution is needed.

RESOLVED:

2.1 Cabinet agreed that Thurrock’s 2025/26 Schools funding formula to be implemented as stated in 1.3 above. This being consistent with previous Cabinets decisions made since 2020/21.

*Reason for the decision: as outlined in the report.
This decision is subject to call-in.*

126. Fees and Charges Policy and Schedule 2025-26

Councillor Muldowney introduced the report and explained that some fees are set externally such as planning and control fees but there are some discretionary charges that the council set such as car parking charges. This year the council has taken a different approach for discretionary fees applying a backstop rate. All fees and charges will be raised by this rate with some exceptions. All fees are benchmarked with other Local Authorities.

Councillor Muldowney stated that she was at the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee and thanked the committee for their input, she highlighted that they supported the move to the backstop rate. Councillor Muldowney noted that there were concerns raised about the increase burial fees and

following discussions with officers they have confirmed that following benchmarking the fees still come in lower than neighbouring authorities fees.

The Chief Operations Lead (Place Directorate) stated that 10 neighbouring authorities fees were looked at and were £2451 for 2024, with inflation the fees will rise to around £2500.

Councillor Muldowney also raised that Councillor Sisterson had concerns regarding fees for events held on council land. Councillor Muldowney reassured Cabinet that if the community event is not for profit, then there will not be a fee. For community groups where they will make some money there will be a 50% reduction on fees.

Councillor J Kent clarified that for picnic in the park there would be no fee but for a car boot sale there would be a fee. Councillor J Kent requested that officers are to write to the members of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor L Watson requested that this is made clearer to community groups, forums and small local charities as it is not clear.

RESOLVED:

2.1 Cabinet agreed the proposed discretionary fees and charges to be levied by the Council with effect from 1 April 2025, as detailed in Appendix 1.

2.2 Cabinet noted the statutory fees and charges to be levied by the Council with effect from 1 April 2025 as detailed in Appendix 1.

2.3 Cabinet agreed the Thurrock Council Fees and Charges Policy 2025 as attached at Appendix 3.

2.4 Cabinet agreed that any changes required during the 2025/26 year are delegated to the Chief Finance Officer (s151) in conjunction with the Lead Member Resources and the relevant Portfolio Holder.

Reason for the decision: as outlined in the report.

This decision is subject to call-in

127. National Investigation Service (NATIS) Contract Extension

The Leader reminded Cabinet that the report has an exempt appendix and if members wanted to discuss the contents of the exempt appendix the meeting would have to go into a closed session.

Councillor Muldowney introduced the report and explained that the contract extension secures a vital partnership with the Department of Business and Trade for another 3 years with the option to extend for another 18 months. NATIS plays a critical role in combatting fraud and protecting public funds. Councillor Muldowney thanked officers for the steps taken to stabilise the service and mitigate risks. NATIS is now under the governance of the Local Authority system. There have been various further reports into NATIS which have been favourable and NATIS continues to deliver very good outcomes.

Councillor J Kent commented that the NATIS services is unrecognisable to what it was 2 to 3 years ago and commended officers for the work that has gone into it.

RESOLVED:

- 2.1 Cabinet agreed the Council submits a tender to the Department of Business & Trade on or before 31 January 2025 for a contract for the provision of fraud investigation services by the Council through its traded service, the National Investigation Service (NATIS) for three years from 1 April 2025 and up to three extensions of six months, subject to agreement of the terms and conditions of the contract.**
- 2.2 Cabinet agreed to delegate authority to the Executive Director, Corporate Services (or his nominees) to agree the submitted tender and to then negotiate the terms and conditions of contract in consultation with the Cabinet member for resources.**

*Reason for the decision: as outlined in the report.
This decision is subject to call-in*

The meeting finished at 7.55 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