

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 30 July 2024 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Ben Maney (Chair), John Fox (Vice-Chair), Qaisar Abbas, Michael Fletcher, Aaron Green, James Halden, Clifford Holloway, Roy Jones, Cathy Kent, Martin Kerin and Ryan Polston

Apologies:

In attendance:

Daniel Fenwick, Executive Director Corporate Services/Monitoring Officer
Louise Neilan, Assistant Director for Communications and Engagement
Claire Dixon, Scrutiny Officer
Lucy Tricker, Scrutiny Officer
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.

27. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

28. Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

29. Minutes

The Chair noted that three sets of minutes from the last municipal year needed to be approved. The Chair confirmed he was present at two of the meetings.

Councillor Kerin stated that he was Chair of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee last year and was present at all three meetings and confirmed the accuracy of the minutes.

The Committee agreed to approve the minutes of the meetings held on 28 November 2023, 7 December 2023 and 14 February 2024 as a correct record.

30. Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee Responsibilities

The Scrutiny Officer Claire Dixon introduced item 5 and 6 together and explained that they were included in the agenda for information purposes only. The Scrutiny Officer noted that there is one amendment and that is that there will be two substitutes per political group. This amendment will be included in the refreshed chapter of the constitution.

The Chair added that the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) had written the new version of the Overview and Scrutiny chapter in the constitution and although it has been tailored to Thurrock, terms were used interchangeably.

31. Thurrock Scrutiny Protocol

This item was discussed together with item 5.

32. Developing Thurrock Council's Communication and Engagement Strategy 2024-25 Presentation

The Assistant Director for Communications and Engagement provided a PowerPoint Presentation to the Committee.

At 19.09 the Executive Director of Corporate Services and Monitoring Officer joined the meeting.

The following key points were highlighted by Members: -

- Members queried the statistic that 92% of residents use the internet and requested further information as to whether they had access to IT and if they were using the internet on a smart phone or in the library. Members queried if it was known where the 8% not using the internet were. The Assistant Director for Communications and Engagement responded that they need to look at the data and complete more comprehensive research this year.
- Members queried how many vulnerable residents use the front of house of the Council. Members also queried if there were any plans to complete an updated survey with non-digital options. The Assistant Director for Communications and Engagement responded that more work will be completed this year.
- Members raised that the outcome of the survey could be circular in that residents may not feel that they have any other alternative than to use the internet. Members queried if there are any measures to see if the Council is being successful in engaging with its residents in this way. The Assistant Director for Communications and Engagement stated that there should be clear objectives for certain campaigns eg to reach a certain group. Then it is possible to measure outcomes by looking at how many people have engaged with the campaign and this may be identified by how many have clicked on an item on social media.
- Members queried how the Council can ensure it is reaching out to all ethnic communities. The Assistant Director for Communications and

Engagement stated that they do need to understand those Communities and where they receive information from.

- Members also queried how to reach and properly engage with the transient population of Thurrock who may come here to work and reside in a HMO. The Assistant Director for Communications and Engagement agreed this is something that needs to be explored, they do try to engage with people through everyday interactions but this community may not pay Council Tax for example.
- Members suggested using best practice from other Local Authorities. The Assistant Director for Communications and Engagement agreed and stated that the Local Government Association is also helpful at providing useful case studies.
- Members queried if the Council's current IT system was robust enough and if it needed updating. The Executive Director of Corporate Services and Monitoring Officer confirmed that they are looking to modernise the IT and cyber security arrangements.
- Members queried how the Council is doing with press engagement. The Assistant Director for Communications and Engagement responded that residents are more likely to use the national news rather than local news. Getting into the national news is therefore critical however Thurrock has been getting into the national news for the wrong reasons recently. In terms of local news outlets there is Nub News and the Thurrock Gazette. BBC Essex engage with the Council and Heart FM interviewed the Leader regarding the Corporate Plan.
- Members queried whether there are other ways to engage with the press on more good news stories. The Assistant Director for Communications and Engagement responded that enforcements are popular and anything unusual. If there are any local news stories the Communications team want to know about it.
- Members highlighted that communications from the Council can come across as uncaring and have the wrong tone and this gives the impression that the Council doesn't care about its residents. The Assistant Director for Communications and Engagement agreed and stated that communications should be in more basic language and the team will be working with colleagues to understand this. The Chair added that communications need to be clear about who they are coming from and there should be consistency in all communications that go out from the Council so that residents automatically know it is from the Council.
- Members queried how you fix the lack of trust from residents. The Assistant Director for Communications and Engagement stated that there is lots of room for improvement. If residents do not trust the Council, they will not listen to the council. For example, if residents do not like the Waste Strategy, they will fly-tip and this will cost the Council to clear it up.
- Members raised if sponsorship had been considered to bring in funds. The Assistant Director for Communications and Engagement confirmed that they are looking at this.

- Members stated locally there are forums and they have struggled to communicate with the Council and get officers to provide presentations to the forums. The Assistant Director for Communications and Engagement agreed the Leader and Chief Executive would like there to be more engagement with community forums.
- Members requested a resident engagement forum at the Civic Offices is arranged and advertised in advance.
- Members queried when they will have something more tangible to look at with regard to Communications. The Assistant Director for Communications and Engagement confirmed that she will be writing the strategy with other council colleagues and something will be brought back in the Autumn.
- Members queried what the Council has been doing wrong. The Assistant Director for Communications and Engagement clarified that a lot of day-to-day communications require a different approach. Visibility is important and residents being able to engaged with the Council. Customer services, the contact centre and other day-to-day communications need to be in basic language. Half of residents are signed up to the Council's Newsletter. There needs to be more focus on engagement and more visibility in the Community forums.

ACTION 1 - Members requested data on the numbers and demographics of those residents who could not access IT services.

ACTION 2 - Members requested data on the numbers of residents who contact the Council through the reception front desk at the Civic Offices.

33. Workforce and Culture Task and Finish Group: Verbal Discussion

The Executive Director of Corporate Services and Monitoring Officer introduced the item to the Committee. He explained that there is a Change programme in the Council and culture change is a crucial issue to be addressed. Changes will need to be shaped around what residents want.

The Executive Director of Corporate Services and Monitoring Officer stated that there will be a re-vamp of a suite of policies and procedures on employee management. There will be new performance management arrangements to monitor the performance of staff. It will be open to members to confirm what they think should be looked at first and officers can be asked to obtain further data and information.

The following key points were highlighted by members: -

- Members queried that there is no appropriate forum for low level complaints which over time boil over such as locking the front door of the Civic Centre or the format of meeting minutes. The Executive Director of Corporate Services and Monitoring Officer suggested group whip meetings could be used to resolve some of these types of issues.

- Members queried if there is regular contact with staff representatives about changes in the Council. The Executive Director of Corporate Services and Monitoring Officer confirmed there is. Where restructuring is taking place a formal consultation process will take place. There is likely to be small restructures over a long period of time and this timeline will be shared with the Trade Unions to ensure they have enough resources in place. The Assistant Director of HR and OD has regular meetings with the Trade Unions. There are efforts being made to engage with staff, there has recently been a staff survey and there are regular staff briefings. The Assistant Director for Communications and Engagement stated that Council staff are the face of the Council and therefore there is a need to keep them engaged. The Executive Director of Corporate Services and Monitoring Officer commented that front line staff have to face the lack of trust from residents and he noted that 67% of staff were a local resident.
- The Chair stated the relationships between Members and Officers have improved and it helps that the Council now has more competent senior officers. The Chair raised that there is still work to be done to build these relationships and to make sure they are cemented and embedded.
- The committee agreed that a decision on whether to set up a Task and Finish Group on workforce was not needed at the present moment, but a future discussion on the issue could take place once the project was further forward.

34. Work Programme

The meeting discussed when the People Strategy and Communications strategy are due to come back to the Committee. It was confirmed by the Scrutiny officers that this was likely to be in October.

Member requested updates on the implementation progress of the Corporate Plan.

Members queried whether Performance Management reports will be brought to the Committee and if they could see the KPI dashboard from across the board and not just the recovery plan. The Scrutiny Officer Lucy Tricker confirmed that these reports used to come before committee previously but were just to note and therefore scrutiny could not add much value. The Scrutiny Officer suggested this may be better coming to members in a different way such as a briefing to members.

Members requested that something is brought back to Committee on members enquiries and in particular how responses can be improved in terms of their tone and timeframes.

The Outside Bodies Review was added to the work programme

The meeting finished at 8.49 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**