

Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on 7 January 2025 at 7.00 pm

The deadline for call-ins is Monday 20 January 2025 at 5.00pm

Present: Councillors John Kent (Chair), Lynn Worrall (Vice-Chair), Vikki Hartstean, Victoria Holloway, Mark Hooper, Sara Muldowney and Lee Watson

Apologies: Councillor Valerie Morris-Cook

In attendance:

Dawn Calvert, Chief Financial Officer S151
Cristina Hall, Chief of Staff to the Commissioners – Thurrock Council
Patrick McDermott, Assistant Director Strategy, Policy, Performance and Partnerships
Helen Nicol, Assistant Director Legal and Governance
Alex Powell, Assistant Chief Executive
Dr Dave Smith, Chief Executive and Managing Director
Commissioner
Stephen Taylor, Head of Freeport
Kerry Thomas, Chief of Staff
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.

100. Minutes

The minutes of the Cabinet meeting held on 11 December 2024 were approved as a correct record.

101. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

102. Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

103. Statements by the Leader

There were no statements made by the Leader.

104. Briefings on Policy, Budget and Other Issues

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

105. Petitions submitted by Members of the Public

No petitions were submitted by members of the public.

106. Questions from Non-Executive Members

There were no questions from Non-Executive Members.

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

No matters were referred to cabinet for consideration by an Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

108. Devolution and Local Elections 2025

The Leader invited the Non-Executive Member Councillor G Coxshall to update Cabinet on the outcome of the General Services Committee meeting earlier that evening.

Councillor G Coxshall explained that the General Services Committee had voted in favour of the proposed recommendations. Councillor G Coxshall added that Councillor Worrall had proposed that a Working Group is set up if Thurrock is accepted for the priority programme and an additional recommendation at paragraph 1.4 has been added.

The Leader stated that he welcomed Devolution and explained that there were two issues Devolution and Local Government reform. Devolution would mean the creation of a combined Authority under the direction of a Mayor. The UK Government is over-centralised, and Devolution would move powers from central Government to local areas. Essex is a major trading and international gateway, it has two international airports and has huge potential. If economic output increased to the same as the South East the size of our economy could increase by 17%.

The second issue is Local Government reorganisation. The council has been struggling to balance the books and deal with the size of its debt. Thurrock has found it difficult to deliver a basic level of services without Government assistance. There is an opportunity in Local Government reorganisation to provide a good level of public services. There are more questions than answers currently but it will be impossible to deliver if the council stops for the pre-election period. The costs of an election can also not be justified if electing people for just 1 year.

Councillor L Watson stated that Devolution is a really good opportunity. The elections should be postponed so that the council can make sure that they get the best deal for the people of Thurrock.

Councillor Muldowney commented that it was right to cancel the elections due to the expense if Thurrock Council is not going to exist in a few years.

Councillor Muldowney also stated that she was pleased to see cross party agreement on this. Local Government reorganisation would see 15 Councils reduce to 3 or 4. It is a huge task and proposals will need to be on the table by autumn of this year. Creating larger unitary councils will make it easier for authorities to be financially viable. It is tough with a small council tax base to deliver good services and there is an opportunity to be more strategic and get all councils in Essex back on to a firm financial footing.

Councillor Hooper stated that Devolution is a great thing. It provides an opportunity to grow in Thurrock and for areas in transport and education to have a growth strategy with the whole of Essex. Councillor Hooper stated that he hoped there would be consultations carried out in the community and he hopes the Working Group will ensure this is done. Councillor Hooper added that he was elected in 2023 and has served for 2 years if there was another election he would not have served the 4 years he was elected for.

Councillor L Watson highlighted that communication was key on this issue.

Councillor J Kent agreed with this and stated that he wanted staff involved from start to finish and to get communications right so the community can be involved in shaping the future.

Councillor Hartstean stated that she fully supported the recommendation. The cost of an election would be around £300,000 and she would worry that there would be slippage in the timeline if proposals need to be on the table by autumn.

Councillor Worrall explained that there is no certainty that Thurrock will be accepted in the first round for Devolution. We have 7 months to talk to other councils and to put a proposal forward. There is a need to get on with the job and to not let residents down.

Councillor M Hooper commented that if Thurrock is in the first tranche it could be in a better position to negotiate a better deal. It is hoped that the Government will help Thurrock with its debt as other councils will not want to take it on.

Councillor J Kent agreed that Devolution could be imposed by legislation at a later date in any event. The Government will not want to start a new Local Authority with a large amount of debt.

Councillor V Holloway supported the recommendation and stated that there has already been years and years of devolution and over 50% of the population have a Directed Mayor. Thurrock cannot be distracted by elections.

1. Recommendations

For the reasons set out in this report, the Cabinet agreed:

- 1.1 To commit to the Governments Priority Programme for Devolution, enabling the Council to focus on working with neighbouring authorities to develop the devolved strategic authority alongside local government reorganisation
- 1.2 To agree that as a consequence of participation in the Government Devolution Priority Programme the Leader and Chief Executive approve a letter to the Secretary of State asking to postpone local elections to be held on 1 May 2025
- 1.3 That there is agreement between the Council and one or more partner authorities to submit a joint letter to the Secretary of State
- 1.4 To set up a cross party working group to help advise Cabinet on devolution and local government reform if the Council's application to the Secretary of State is approved.

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

The meeting finished at 7.25 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