

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 14 January 2025 at 7.00 pm

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

Apologies: Councillors Aaron Green and Clifford Holloway

In attendance:
Sarah Brown, Head of Strategy, Policy and Performance
Dawn Calvert, Chief Financial Officer S151
Ryan Farmer, Housing Strategy Manager
Liz Haynes, Assistant Director HR & Organisational Development
Sima Khuroya, Assistant Director of Finance and Procurement
Michele Lucas, Assistant Director Education and Children's Commissioning
Patrick McDermott, Assistant Director Strategy, Policy, Performance and Partnerships
Elise McQueen, Head of Looked After Children
Robert Persey, Interim Executive Director- Adults and Health
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.

1. Minutes

The minutes of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 20 November 2024 were approved as a correct record.

2. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

3. Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

Councillor R Jones commented that there was a big agenda and the papers arrived at too short notice to give members enough time to absorb the material. Councillor R Jones recommended that there should be just two

items especially as the meeting is now limited to two and a half hours duration.

Councillor B Maney stated that his agenda arrived Thursday and agreed he had also not had enough time to read the information in as much depth as he would have liked. He commented that the committee needed to discuss this further outside of the meeting.

4. Communications and Engagement Strategy / Cabinet Discussion and Recommendations Briefing Note

The Overview and Scrutiny officer presented items 5,6,7 and 8 together and explained that they are briefing notes for the committee's information. The briefing notes provide the Committee with feedback from Cabinet discussions and decisions following pre-decision scrutiny and the outcome of a call-in request.

5. Rejected call-in request for Thurrock Council's Communications and Engagement Strategy 2024-25 - Briefing Note

6. Budget Scrutiny Briefing Note

7. Performance Management Assurance Framework Briefing Note

8. Budget Scrutiny Grangewaters Business Case

The Assistant Director for Education and Skills presented the item and explained that the document sets out the exciting and ambitious programme for Grangewaters. Grangewaters is a beautiful site which offers a range of outdoor activities for children and young people. However, it does not have its own website or its own booking system. With some investment over the next year officers are looking to bring in an online booking system, a website and for someone to come in and additional marketing.

- Members welcomed the report.
- Members queried whether the North Stifford entrance could be used rather than Buckles Lane.
- Members considered if pausing investment until devolution is clearer is possible. Members queried if conversations could take place now with existing upper-tier authorities in the county to cement Grangewaters as a Looked After Children (LAC) resource and to keep it off any new authorities disposal list. The Assistant Director for Education and Skills responded and noted that:
 - Investment now would improve the site for local communities and make a difference to maximise its use and resource capacity. It is important to get the first phase right.
 - Marketing to residents will be the first stage, with the intention to extend to outside the borough i.e. businesses and schools.

- Members queried the timeline. The Assistant Director for Education and Skills confirmed that the service is confident that once investment is approved, the scheme will progress quickly. Web domains have been purchased and a demonstration of the new booking system will be given to staff.
- Members queried if Grangewaters is currently on the list for asset disposal. Councillor Muldowney confirmed that it is and it would need to go through Finance Recovery Board and Commissioners to be removed.
- Members asked if a discount for residents will be considered ie. An annual pass
- Members agreed that a café would attract people to Grangewaters

RESOLVED:

The Committee reviewed and commented on the Grangewaters Business Case.

9. Corporate Plan Performance Management Assurance Framework

The Head of Strategy, Policy and Performance introduced the report and the following points were highlighted:

- PMAF is a good starting point for accountability and transparency on the Council's performance.
- Officers consider stretching performance as part of wider conversations across the organisation.
- Commissioner comments highlighted the need to focus on those metrics not on target.
- The data will continue to develop and be refined, with officers working on reducing gaps in target and tolerance.

Members highlighted the following points:

Members queried the route to green from amber and red and the reasons why a target may be red. Members stated that it should be included in the report if there is a reason why a target cannot improve.

Members queried what is best practice. The Head of Strategy, Policy and Performance stated that they had considered the LGA's guidance on performance management and also completed benchmarking research looking at how other Local Authorities report their performance.

Members queried how 94% of milestones are green and 1% are red when Thurrock is a failing council. Members queried if targets have been set too low. The Assistant Director for Strategy, Policy Performance and Partnership confirmed that metrics were about performance, in comparison milestones were about finishing tasks in a timely manner. Timelines are set by colleagues in the council in a timeframe they can achieve tasks with the resources they

have. The Assistant Director for Strategy, Policy Performance and Partnership stated that he wouldn't expect to see as much green as more time passes and the propensity for unplanned events inevitably shift previously anticipated timeframes. Amber means progress is not at the speed anticipated at the start of the year, it does not mean progress has not been made.

Members queried how it has been concluded that a 30 % recycling target is good and rated green. The Head of Place Performance, Support and Intelligence confirmed that officers had based the target on previous years performance as opposed to the councils' ambitions for recycling. Members expressed concern that a target has been set at this rate when benchmarking suggested the council is performing poorly with regard to recycling rates.

The Chair suggested that individual Overview and Scrutiny Committees should be looking into the individual targets in the service areas their Committees cover.

RESOLVED:

The Committee noted the quarterly performance update report and progress made up to the end of the second quarter of 2024/25 in delivering the Year 1 priority milestones and metrics of the Corporate Plan. The Committee considered recommending any areas of concern within the remits of the Place and People Overview and Scrutiny Committees to the chairs of those respective committees.

10. Revenue Capital Budget Monitoring Report Q2 2024-25

The Assistant Director for Financial Management and Procurement provided a PowerPoint presentation to the Committee. The presentation slides can be found on the following link:

<https://democracy.thurrock.gov.uk/documents/b20845/Revenue%20Budget%20Monitoring%20Report%20Q2%20Powerpoint%20Presentation%2014th-Jan-2025%2019.00%20Corporate%20Overview.pdf?T=9>

The following key points were highlighted by Members:

- Members welcomed the move in the right direction between Q1 and Q2.
 - It was noted some of the savings in red will be added onto 25/26 savings, however services are still expected to deliver this.
 - Mitigations have been included within the report.
- The S151 Officer stated that she was confident that unachievable savings will not grow and there is sufficient focus on those at risk. Engagement between directors and Finance continue to deep dive on the savings to ensure these are made.
- The S151 Officer confirmed that expenditure on those with non-recourse to public funds is within statutory duty parameters and is maintained within current budgets.

- Members noted the Grays and Tilbury Town Funds were referenced to ensure these are utilised. Members were updated that the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviewed these in detail last week.

RESOLVED:

The Committee:

- 2.1 **Noted the council's Service position and forecast overspend position as at quarter 2 of £2.722m, representing a reduction of £0.348m on the position presented at quarter 1.**
- 2.2 **Noted the council's overall position and forecast overspend position at quarter 2 of £1.896m, representing a reduction of £0.209m on the position presented at quarter 1.**
- 2.3 **Noted the approval of the transfer of £1.381m reserves to a MTFs Delivery Reserve and £1.5m to an Adult Social Care & Children's Social Care Demographic Risk Reserve (as per section 14 of Appendix 1 and 4.7 below) approved at Cabinet 11th December 2024.**
- 2.4 **Noted the progress made on delivery against the savings target for 2024/25 and the remaining red (unachievable) rated savings.**
- 2.5 **Further to an in-depth review and re-profiling of the General fund capital projects, the Committee noted and commented on the capital programme, and the anticipated General Fund Capital Programme slippage of £30.627m and £10.157m HRA Capital Programme slippage projected in the report.**
- 2.6 **Noted the approval of the addition of the DEFRA grant funding in the capital programme (as per section 16 of Appendix 1 and 4.12 below) approved at Cabinet 11th December 2024.**

11. Draft Revenue Budget 2025/26 and Draft Medium Term Financial Strategy 2025/26 to 2028/29

The S151 Officer introduced the report to the Committee and explained that the final budget will go to Cabinet in February 2025.

Members highlighted the following key points:

- As Thurrock will be subject to local government reform, Members welcomed an approach to look at areas of the organisation that are the strongest i.e. Adult Social Care. The Director for Adults and Health stated that the council's services will continue regardless of what happens with local government reform and there is already a lot of joint working with

neighbouring councils. The S151 Officer confirmed the best thing finance can do is to continue to achieve the financial targets under the MTFS until any local government reform changes are made.

- Members noted that the Council Tax increase will be 4.99% and queried if benchmarking had been completed. The S151 Officer stated that Thurrock is still lower than other councils.
- Thurrock will receive compensation for employer National Insurance (NI) increases but not for supplier NI. The S151 Officer confirmed that there is a new recovery grant that may cover this although it is difficult at this stage to calculate.
- Members noted that the MTFS is based on a 99% collection rate, members queried if this will be achieved. The S151 officer confirmed that it is actually based on the collection rate received which is 98.8%.

RESOLVED:

The Committee noted and commented on the Draft Revenue Budget 2025-26 and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2025-26 to 2028 – 2029, before submission to Cabinet on the 12th February 2025.

12. Fees and Charges 2025-26

The S151 Officer introduced the report and highlighted the following key points:

- The report is for pre-decision scrutiny and will be presented at Cabinet on 15th January.
- The previous way of dealing with fees and charges took up a lot of resources
- Increases are based on CPI percentages - services reviewed charges that needed to deviate from this i.e. as part of benchmarking and becoming uncompetitive. However, some are statutory rates.
- Included within the Cabinet recommendations is for any in-year changes to be delegated to the S151 officer, in conjunction with the Finance PFH and if used this will be reported in quarterly reports to cabinet

Members raised the following key points:

- The new approach to calculating fees and charges was welcomed by the Committee as it previously took officers considerable time and resource to set fees and charges. These are more focused and more benchmarking is being undertaken.
- Commissioners are happy with the backstop principles but requested data relating to debt.
- Members raised that previously Thurrock was not charging for services that a lot of other councils were charging for. The S151

officer confirmed that Directorates have reviewed activities and are charging for services as much as possible.

- Members raised concerns regarding the proposed burial cost increase, the right of burial for traditional graves and for Muslim graves will be increased by £325 (14.94%). During times of difficulties, communities often fund raise to cover costs. The S151 officer confirmed that the increase is based on benchmarking and Thurrock is not an outlier. The Cabinet member for Resources agreed to discuss this with officers to see if there was anything they could do. Members suggested spreading the increase more gradually and increasing it slightly each year.

RESOLVED:

The Committee noted and commented on the Fees and Charges 2025-26 ahead of its presentation to Cabinet on the 22nd January 2025.

13. Work Programme

- The Quarter 3 2024/25 Financial Position item for February has been deferred at the request of the S151 Officer – there are no other items for this meeting.
- No further items suggested by the Committee.
- Noted that as the Grangewaters business case is part of budget proposals, progress will be monitored via quarterly finance reports.

The meeting finished at 9.25 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**