

# Thurrock Council

## Governance Recovery Board

Minutes – 2pm, Monday 17 March

### Attendees:

Dave Smith (DS) – Manager Director Commissioner / Chief Executive (Chair)

Cllr John Kent (JK) - Leader

Cllr Lynn Worrall (LW)- Deputy Leader

Cllr George Coxshall (GC) – Opposition Deputy Leader

Alex Powell (AP) – Assistant Chief Executive

Daniel Fenwick (DF) – Executive Director of Corporate Services

Helen Nicol (HN) – Assistant Director Legal and Governance

Luke Tyson (LT) – Corporate Policy and Improvement Manager

Crissy Hall (CH) – Chief of Staff to the Commissioners

Amber Robinson (AR) – Executive Assistant (Minutes)

### Guests:

Gavin Jones (GJ) – Lead Commissioner

Matthew Boulter (MB) - Head of Democratic Scrutiny and Member Services

Satinder Jas (SJ) - Head of Financial Assurance Internal Audit Risk and Insurance

### Apologies:

Cllr Andrew Jefferies (AJ) – Opposition Group Leader

Paul Turner (PT) – Director of Legal, Essex County Council

## **1. Welcome and Introductions**

1.1. DS welcomed board members to the meeting.

## **2. Matters Arising**

2.1. Minutes of the last meeting were agreed.

## **3. Update from Managing Director Commissioner**

- 3.1. DS discussed the governance elements of the Commissioners' 4<sup>th</sup> report. Within the report, Commissioners outlined the progress made on governance over the year and identified areas where progress still needs to be made, or where the pace of change is not at the speed required. There was still a lot to do on the Consitution Review, but DS reflected that from discussions over the last 12 months, it was an important step for the Council to reflect on the purpose of meetings and the relationships between committees in the decision-making process e.g. between Cabinet and Full Council and when Overview & Scrutiny (O&S) is used.
- 3.2. DS noted that the two most concerning governance issues included in the 4<sup>th</sup> report were: 1) the slow and interrupted start to risk management and 2) the ongoing issues around the Council's role as an Accountable Body e.g. some unresolved issues with the Freeport and with the Towns Fund Boards. It was acknowledged that both issues have moved on significantly since the report was submitted.
- 3.3. Both JK and GC agreed with the content of the report but were concerned with the delay between when the report was submitted and the response, as the position has moved on since November. LW noted that she will discuss the points raised in the Commissioners' report at the O&S meeting in March. DS noted that the next letter will be prepared in April and submitted in early May, with the intention to receive a response ahead of summer recess.

## **4. Preparedness for the new municipal year and Member Development Day**

- 4.1. MB noted that the Municipal calendar is well advanced and has been considered by senior Members of political groups. The proposed training calendar has gone to the Standards Committee and other informal groups and training sessions are being arranged. Work continues on preparing for the Member Development Day in May and comms have gone out to members. There was a discussion on the most suitable day for this session. The content of the day is progressing well and there will be a guest speaker provided by the LGA and a session on devolution.
- 4.2. The board discussed the training programme and the upcoming development day. There were discussions on the date and concerns about attendance, so DS suggested holding another session later in the year if another was required to ensure a range of members attended. DF highlighted the need to ensure value for money if external speakers were booked.

4.3. The board discussed the review of outside bodies and discussed the Council's membership of specific organisations. MB noted that he will write to all outside bodies notifying them in cases where the Council will not be assigning a representative and give them time to respond. This will be fed back to members via the usual channels and will be built into the report for Annual Council.

## **5. Corporate Risk Register**

5.1. SJ introduced the report, it was noted that this is a new risk register and there will be changes throughout the year. This has been to SLT and will be going to Cabinet in May. LW asked why risk management was red on the corporate scorecard, SJ confirmed that the Council is red in terms of risk awareness. There was also a conversation about including Devolution and LGR on the risk register.

5.2. SJ outlined the next steps which include getting directorate risk registers established across the council and the risk management system going live at the end of March. There was a challenge around whether O&S committees or Audit Committee will do deep dives on particular risks. SJ and HN agreed to work together to resolve this and ensure Cabinet had assurance that deep dives were being done regularly and embedded into business as usual work.

## **6. Governance review stocktake**

6.1. DF provided an update on the work outlined within the Governance Review. While there had been signs of progress, notably improvements in the structures and a more rigorous approach to forward planning, it was too early to say whether these had been sufficiently embedded. The change to a new system for reports had also improved the consistency and quality of reports and ensured that risk implications had now been added into all Cabinet reports. The Council was still focusing on strengthening senior ownership of reports and improving transparency through, for example, reducing the number of urgent reports which should have been on the forward plan and ensuring relevant members are sufficiently engaged in advance.

6.2. The new O&S model has now been in place for a full cycle, and there has been increasing O&S input into Cabinet decisions as reports go through O&S Committees. The Constitution Review is still progressing, although slower than was planned. The review is considering the purpose and interaction between Cabinet and Full Council in decision-making. Work on development and training is ongoing and the issue of organisational culture remains a persistent challenge to be resolved.

6.3. Members considered this summary an honest reflection of the Council's position and highlighted that there needs to be ownership of the cultural change required across the organisation to embed the changes and avoid behaviours slipping back to those outlined in the BVI report. There was a discussion around ensuring officers understand the roles and responsibilities of elected members in decision-making and ensure they are consulted accordingly. A point was also raised around training members to understand how to effectively read and scrutinise council reports. JK asked for increased transparency around delegated decision reports, HN noted the upcoming improvements being made in this area.

## **7. Follow up on IRB discussion on Member behaviour**

7.1. There was a follow up discussion on the IRB discussion on member behaviour. Political leaders provided an update following a meeting held last week and acknowledged they were taking this seriously and that further work was needed. They agreed that poor behaviour was unacceptable, with more extreme behaviours becoming corrosive, emboldening others and stifling the Council's improvement activity. Members agreed to tackle any issues of behaviour within their own groups.

7.2. There were a number of suggestions discussed in the meeting to promote the right behaviours to all members e.g. conduct in meetings could be added to upcoming training sessions or the member development day. It was agreed that a follow up discussion would take place in a few months on progress.

## **8. AOB**

8.1. There being no AOB the meeting closed.

## **Appendix I: All meeting actions**

*There were no actions from this meeting.*