

Thurrock Council

Governance Recovery Board

Minutes – 2pm, Monday 15 April 2024

Attendees

Dave Smith (DS) – Managing Director Commissioner / Chief Executive (Chair)
Cllr Deborah Arnold (DA) – Deputy Leader
Cllr John Kent (JK) – Opposition Group Leader
Alex Powell (AP) – Assistant Chief Executive
Daniel Fenwick (DF) – Executive Director of Corporate Services
Luke Tyson (LT) – Chief Intervention Officer
Crissy Hall (CH) – Incoming Chief of Staff to the Commissioners
Keilah Gallardo (KG) – Business Support Officer, Chief Executive (Minutes)

Guests

Matt Boulter (MB) – Head of Democratic Scrutiny and Member Services
Lucy Tricker (LTr) – Overview and Scrutiny Officer
Jayne Middleton-Albooye (JM) – Assistant Director, Legal and Governance

Apologies

Cllr Andrew Jefferies (AJ) – Leader of the Council
Cllr Lynn Worrall (LW) – Opposition Group Deputy Leader
Patrick McDermott (PM) – Outgoing Chief of Staff to the Commissioners
Chris Stephenson (CS) – Senior Project Manager
Paul Turner (PT) – Director of Legal, Essex County Council

1. Welcome and Introductions

1.1. Crissy Hall was welcomed to her first GRB meeting.

2. Matters Arising

2.1. Minutes of the last meeting were agreed.

2.2. Regarding the additional to note paper, JK noted that the challenge was forward planning and aligning the number of meetings with the volume of papers e.g. three planning meetings had been cancelled through lack of business. DA raised concerns around data accuracy. LT was to review these.

2.3. DS noted that the data being reported on in the paper did not indicate what was relevant. The preparation and informal discussions that lead up to a decision are as critical as the time spent reading reports; reports can be much more concise because Members have already been informed of the issues being discussed or vary in length due to the quality of the report. JK appreciated that different committees might be different.

2.4. There was a discussion on the quality and content of reports. DF noted there should be greater agreement between members about what information should be available to them as decision makers and that there should be a discussion taken to Cabinet.

2.5. DS felt that the issue was about having the right things in place to allow for proper forward planning. The final reports should be the culmination of a set of actions, so a significant rework of roles, responsibilities, and ownership issues is required to change how the organisation approaches these.

2.6. JK stressed the importance of addressing the history of poor decision-making due to poor reporting and meeting management.

3. Governance & Controls IRP Progress Reporting

3.1. On risk, draft strategies were being reviewed, with the aim to implement them across decision-making processes. DF noted that with the new head of internal audit starting 1 May, the focus will be on core risk management. DF shared that in terms of capacity, this is a significant step forward.

3.2. DS noted his support, reflecting that the hardest part of this process is getting the organisation engaged and for risk registers to flow properly from operational into strategic risks.

3.3. DF shared his view that accountability should lie with the directorates, mentioning his Liverpool experience. DF noted that risk assessment should be stronger, and the view shared by DC and DF is that embedding risk management in decision-making, such as in Cabinet reports, and having services develop their own risk registers, would create a foundation and cultural shift.

- 3.4. DA noted that risk management has been identified as an issue in previous GRB meetings so although the resourcing issues are understood, it is disappointing that further progress had not been made. DA felt there had not been enough accountability to enforce staff compliance with the Chief Executive's directives.
- 3.5. AP felt a new approach, involving the new Assistant Directors dealing with operational risks while SLT handles strategic risks, could help address the cultural issues and inconsistent views on risk.
- 3.6. There was a discussion on embedding this quickly; DF noted that DC's approach enforces that effective risk management is not a choice but a part of decision-making.
- 3.7. DS suggested bringing an action plan to a future GRB meeting to retain oversight on progress.

4. Transparency and Accountability Report

- 4.1. JM presented a report on the workstream's progress. JM sought confirmation on the direction of the workstream, laying out the Terms of Reference (ToR) and an action plan. JM advised the working group has met twice and looked at policies and procedures to prioritise. The main focus was to make transparency and accountability default practices.
- 4.2. JM stated that in the next three months, they will draft a Local Code of Governance, a framework for good governance, and an Annual Governance Statement to review past actions and future needs. The scheme of delegation is currently unclear, and officers' declarations of interest are not in place. The Board's feedback is sought on these focus areas.
- 4.3. DS expressed support for improving governance and accelerating the pace of this activity through the ongoing Governance Review.
- 4.4. DA questioned the target audience for transparency. DF clarified that the aim is to make it clear for residents, with documentation and FOI disclosures being examples of efficient work practices.
- 4.5. There was a brief discussion on FOI disclosures. DS stated that clarity is needed in corporate decision-making regarding disclosure policies.
- 4.6. AP suggested involving someone from Comms in the working group to improve the council's public image and accessibility.

Action: JM to link in new AD for Comms regarding the Terms of Reference /Transparency & Accountability workstream working group.

5. Approach to O&S Work Programme

- 5.1. LTr highlighted two themes from the report on the work programme. Firstly, SLT's comments indicate that there is a need for a more strategic focus over operational

issues, following an example from LTr that scrutiny should look at net-zero biodiversity rather than grass-cutting. Future work will involve directors to ensure key priorities for 2024/25 are reviewed. LTr confirmed that collaboration with members will continue.

- 5.2. LTr shared that another theme raised was upcoming training for officers with an external trainer, and ongoing member training. The CfGS coaching session for Overview and Scrutiny chairs will review goals and experiences, with time for feedback and review. This is an ongoing process, with adjustments possible based on what works or doesn't work for scrutiny next year. It is also about ensuring buy-in from members and officers for effective scrutiny in 2024/25 and beyond.
- 5.3. DA agreed that training will be crucial with JK stressing the importance of the new scrutiny setup working quickly, with key priorities identified by officers. LTr shared that there were ongoing efforts with task and finish groups and discussions about achieving tangible outcomes.
- 5.4. MB noted that the budget process was seen as an improvement by members, highlighting member engagement.
- 5.5. DF noted that workplan setting was key and suggested approaching groups to identify priorities, which would help bond the committee. DF felt engaging chairs of scrutiny to communicate with each other would be beneficial.
- 5.6. DS emphasised the importance of moving quickly by focusing initially on some core themes and to avoid overwhelming the new scrutiny structure with too much too early. Clarifying and explaining the purpose of scrutiny to the wider organisation was crucial in enabling the council to fulfil its role better.
- 5.7. DS shared that members should be provided with perspectives from other local partners or agencies to challenge existing ways of thinking.

6. AOB

- 6.1. There being no other business, the meeting closed.

APPENDIX I: Full Meeting Actions

- Action: JM to link in new AD for Comms regarding the Terms of Reference/ Transparency & Accountability workstream working group.**