

# Thurrock Council

## Governance Recovery Board

Minutes – 2pm, Tuesday 11 November 2025

### Attendees:

Dave Smith (DS) – Managing Director Commissioner / Chief Executive (Chair)  
Denise Murray (DM) – Finance Commissioner  
Cllr Lynn Worrall (LW) - Leader of the Council  
Cllr Lee Watson (LWa) – Deputy Leader  
Cllr Lynda Heath (LH) - Cabinet Member for Public Protection, Constitutional and Civic Affairs  
Cllr Barry Johnson (BJ) – Opposition Group Deputy Leader  
Dawn Calvert (DC)– Chief Finance Office / S151  
Daniel Fenwick (DF) – Executive Director of Corporate Services  
Lyra-Mai Mayari (LMM) – Head of Legal  
Matthew Boulter (MB) - Head of Democratic and Scrutiny Services  
Stephen Taylor (ST) – Head of Freeports  
Kerry Thomas (KT)– Chief of Staff  
Luke Tyson (LT) – Corporate Policy and Improvement Manager  
Crissy Hall (CH) – Chief of Staff to the Commissioners  
Amber Robinson (AR) – Executive Assistant (Minutes)

### Apologies:

Gavin Jones (GJ) – Lead Commissioner  
Cllr George Coxshall (GC) - Opposition Group Leader  
Alex Powell (AP) – Assistant Chief Executive  
Claire Demmel (CD) – Executive Director of Place  
Helen Nicol (HN) – Assistant Director Legal and Governance

## **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 outlined Commissioners' latest views on the Council's governance. Progress to improve the Council's governance has continued, particularly in the development of Cabinet reports, and the new commitment to provide Cabinet Members with an executive summary of upcoming decisions.

3.2. Work to update the Constitution continues. In these discussions, there remains ongoing debate regarding the balance of responsibilities between Cabinet and other council meetings, including Full Council. There is more work to do to get more members to attend and raise questions at Cabinet meetings. DS also highlighted significant improvements in the approach to audit and the operation of the Audit Committee. These changes are welcomed and represent a healthy development for the Council.

3.3. Progress continues in Overview and Scrutiny (O&S), with Chairs leading and developing this work supported by officers. Challenges remain due to the scale of agendas and there is ongoing discussion about the topics O&S should prioritise as the process matures. Planning remains a contentious issue; however, members on the Planning Committee are increasingly understanding their responsibilities and engaging with training.

3.4. LW agreed with DS's comments, noting the progress made and reflecting on how far the Council has come. Gaps between political parties have been bridged, with parties working collaboratively, although LWa reflected that there are parts of the organisation where there is more to be done. BJ agreed that the Council is maturing, noting that improvements are evident.

## **4. Board's reflections on the decision-making process**

4.1. DS asked the board for their reflections on the decision-making process, following previous feedback from members on particular issues e.g. quality and timeliness of cabinet reports. Board members were positive about the new template and online system, noting that these had improved the quality of reports. Questions were asked about further support that could be provided to members to train them in reading reports effectively and requesting additional evidence where needed.

4.2. Commissioners emphasised the need for greater transparency in reporting, with more evidence included in final reports and options fully explored and explained. Reports should, where possible, clearly demonstrate the impact of decisions on residents and service users, including consultation feedback where applicable, and use clear, accessible language to ensure residents can understand the decisions being made.

4.3. LW noted that early engagement with Portfolio Holders on reports was improving, enabling members to have clearer visibility of upcoming reports and work with officers on a "no surprises" principle. LWa added that Cabinet Members need earlier sight of

reports to provide input sooner, particularly when reports span multiple portfolios. Officers reflected that the quality of decisions improves when more time is spent engaging and discussing policy before drafting the final report. It was agreed that portfolio holders should set out their desired outcomes rather than specific actions, allowing options in reports to reflect a range of considerations aligned with Best Value.

- 4.4. The board acknowledged that timeliness of receiving reports remains a major challenge. This limits members' ability to engage with officers before meetings. While members recognised the difficulties on timing, they welcomed more time to review reports and praised the introduction of the one-page summary briefings.
- 4.5. On O&S, members questioned whether the right reports are currently being considered. Chairs were encouraged to be more selective given the limited number of meetings, and Cabinet Members should be willing to send reports through scrutiny. Items should be more strategic and thematic, focusing on council-wide issues rather than ward-specific challenges. LWa praised the effectiveness of Task and Finish groups and noted that processes such as call-ins are being used successfully. Members expressed appreciation for the work of O&S officers in supporting the committees.
- 4.6. The board also reflected positively on the Audit Committee, noting that the variety of reports demonstrates transparency and a willingness to accept challenge, even when reports do not reflect positively on the Council.

## **5. Update on Freeport Accountable Body Governance**

- 5.1. ST introduced the item and outlined the three legal agreements that have been reached to discharge Thurrock's duties. All agreements have now been signed. The grant funding agreement was the final one to complete and covers the current financial year. Work is underway to produce an agreement for next year.
- 5.2. The board was updated on recent staffing developments at the Freeport as well as operational changes to the team structures and processes internally. This includes the team working more closely with internal finance colleagues. The team is also working on strengthening relationships with other authorities involved in freeports, exploring opportunities for mutual support and identifying priority areas for Thames Freeport.
- 5.3. Continued pressure remains around business rates and the counterfactual funding received by the Council. Challenges include the cost of the accountable body role and the level of contingency held for risk, with the Freeport seeking to use some of the funds currently held.
- 5.4. DM asked whether a strategic plan is in place outlining the approach to inward investment, ST explained that there is an annual business case supported by a three-year policy approach, which has been approved by the Freeport governing board. There is also an annual business planning process, and agreements ensure this is shared with Thurrock as the Accountable Body as well as through the Freeport governance process. DS added that a review of the board is currently underway.

## **6. Update on Constitution Review**

- 6.1. DF introduced the item and provided an update on the current state of progress, noting that work is on track. At December's Constitution Working Group (CWG) meeting, they

will review papers relating to Cabinet procedures, Council procedures, and their respective functions, with a view to presenting these for sign-off at January's Full Council meeting.

6.2. DF outlined that the next steps are to finalise the Financial Procedure Rules and review the Scheme of Delegation. DF noted the aim is to make the scheme simple, with clear levels of delegation for officers at different tiers of authority, and it will also include technical delegations (e.g. planning, legal, property). Aligning all these procedures will take time. Lawyers are working on this and DF will bring forward the Scheme of Delegation to SLT and Members in early 2026 and to Full Council in March. A future priority is developing a social media protocol which will go through the Standards Committee.

6.3. When asked about the timelines for completion, DF advised that the Constitution will be in place by next May, with the plan to seek Full Council approval in March. Members requested a paper outlining the timelines for the remaining activity and asked if the timeline could be expedited, emphasising the importance of having a constitution finalised and embedded before LGR. DS acknowledged that a more ambitious timeline may require additional resources.

- **ACTION:** DF to draw up a timeline for the remaining aspects of the constitution review and share with CWG and GRB
- **ACTION:** SLT to consider the need to speed up the timeline for the constitution review and the related impact on resources
- **ACTION:** DF to discuss constitutional review process with Leader to see if steps can be removed to speed up the process

## 7. Update on Annual Governance Statement

7.1. DF introduced the item, noting that this work is ahead of schedule and confirmed that they will be following the new CIPFA guidance. The current Annual Governance Statement (AGS) was presented to Audit Committee in August and will return in early 2026. DS requested that the AGS and the accompanying plan comes back to GRB following its review by the Audit Committee.

- **ACTION:** AGS to come back to GRB after it has gone to Audit Committee

## 8. Discussion on Member training and development

8.1. MB outlined that a paper on member training will be presented to the Standards Committee in February, and will include the Member Development Strategy, training schedule, and statistics and feedback from training in 2025.

8.2. On Members' training, the team proposes maintaining the core training sessions and continuing external training. They are also considering introducing bitesize, topic-focused training sessions on particular topics such as the Procurement Act, which the Board supported. DM proposed committee-specific training (e.g. Audit Committee) and using a skills audit to identify needs. Board members wanted to see opportunities for external or online training to be promoted more openly to members, MB agreed to review this.

8.3. MB opened a discussion with GRB members on how to use the remaining budget for training. Members reflected on the likely training requirements for the next municipal year and expressed disappointment at low attendance rates, supporting the use of

whips and political assistants to encourage attendance and improve turnout. There was support for using external providers again if sufficient budget could be identified. LW also requested more risk training, which MB agreed to include in next year's schedule.

8.4. The team plans to hold an induction/training day for members as they did last year, again involving both commissioners and external providers. DM asked how the process could start earlier to support those interested as standing as candidates, MB agreed to explore this further. Board members supported the idea of mandatory training for all 49 members on key areas such as committee skills, finance, and risk, although MB noted that previous attempts to make training mandatory were not supported by members.

- **ACTION:** MB to have follow up conversations about Member Development and bring this topic back to GRB.

## **9. Forward look of agenda items / AOB**

9.1. CH noted that she will circulate a link to the consultation response regarding the standards consultation. This will also be presented to Standards Committee next week.

9.2. There being no further AOB, the meeting closed.

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

- **Action: DF to draw up a timeline for the remaining aspects of the constitution review and share with CWG and GRB**
- **Action: SLT to be consider desire to speed up the timeline for the constitution review and that may require additional resource**
- **Action: DF to discuss constitutional review process with Leader to see if steps can be removed to speed up the process**
- **Action: AGS to come back to GRB after it has gone to Audit Committee**
- **Action: MB to have follow up conversations about Member Development and bring this topic back to GRB**