

Thurrock Council

Governance Recovery Board

Minutes – 11am, Tuesday 28 January 2025

Attendees:

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

Cllr John Kent (JK) - Leader of the Council

Cllr Lynn Worrall (LW) - Deputy Leader

Cllr Andrew Jefferies (AJ) – Opposition Leader

Cllr George Coxshall (GC) – Opposition Deputy Leader

Daniel Fenwick (DF) – Executive Director of Corporate Services

Helen Nicol (HN) – Assistant Director Legal and Governance

Dawn Calvert (DC) – Chief Financial Officer and Section 151 Officer

Luke Tyson (LT) – Chief Intervention Officer

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

Amber Robinson (AR) – Executive Assistant (Minutes)

Guests:

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

Apologies:

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

Alex Powell (AP) – Assistant Chief Executive

1. Welcome and Introductions

1.1. DS welcomed board members to the meeting.

2. Minutes/Actions of the Previous Meeting

2.1. The Minutes from the previous meeting were agreed and no actions raised.

3. Update from Managing Director Commissioner

3.1. DS updated the board on devolution and local government reorganisation (LGR). It was noted that following the invitation for councils in Greater Essex to submit proposals as part of LGR, a new unitary council may exist in 2-3 years. However, decisions will still need to be made for Thurrock Council's ambitions in the meantime whilst work also continues on dealing with the immediate issues that impact on decision making, leadership and the finances and resources of the Council.

3.2. JK noted that until any new unitary exists, Thurrock needs to continue to focus on delivering services to residents to a high standard. Because of Thurrock's improvement journey since the intervention began, the Council will have a strong understanding of what makes a strong well-functioning council and can use this insight to shape the ethos and culture of any new authority. JK noted the important of linking performance and accountability in any new organisation.

3.3. DS noted concerns that a small minority of Members seem to be leading the Council into a position that demonstrates similar behaviours to those outlined within the BVI report. These issues need to be addressed because they can be corrosive for both the culture and reputation of the wider organisation. A special IRB meeting is being convened to discuss the issue of member conduct. All board Members welcomed this further discussion and agreed that the leadership should demonstrate a council-wide signal and commitment to promoting the right behaviours and not tolerating poor behaviours.

- **Action: Extraordinary IRB meeting to be arranged on member conduct.**

3.4. DS advised he will be taking action to support the welfare of officers and will discuss this with individuals outside of this meeting.

- **Action: DS to take action to support the welfare of officers and report back to members separately.**

3.5. DS also reflected on the improvements made in Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) over the past year, noting that this is an appropriate time to review and formally consider the arrangements.

4. Member Development Strategy

4.1. MB introduced this item, noting that this report will be going to Standards Committee next month. The report is comprised of three aspects, it:

- i) presents a refresh of the wider strategy, including, for example, the continued use of member profiles and the introduction of feedback processes for Committees and Chairs,
- ii) proposes a training schedule, including some training to be delivered by an external provider. This includes Member learning pathways, where every member will be given a pathway with assigned training to provide clarity on which sessions Members should attend based on their role.
- iii) outlines the plans for a Member induction day (or Member development day, depending on decisions in relation to the upcoming local elections).

4.2. This strategy was supported by board members. AJ suggested that given the previous discussion, standards and the code of behaviour should also be incorporated into the training programme. LW proposed that a member contract be signed before the training takes place. Members felt the report was comprehensive and wanted to encourage good turnout at the training day.

4.3. DS asked if the Council had considered asking senior Members to lead parts of the member training day, for example, the Leader opening the event or a senior member reflecting on their experiences.

- **Action: MB to consider further ways to promote the member development day to encourage good attendance e.g. asking senior members to lead sessions or bringing in external speakers.**

4.4. HN advised she is planning on taking a paper to Standards Committee for Members' feedback on conduct, following the publication of the English Devolution White Paper. There is a section regarding strengthening conduct and standards which is currently out for consultation, members had also separately received a link to provide feedback on this.

5. Discussion on Constitution Review

5.1. DF presented this item. In light of the earlier discussion on Devolution and LGR, DF noted that they now need to consider how far their review of the Constitution will go, however, all the changes made to date had been required. There are some areas identified within the Ministerial Directions that still need to be reviewed, including the scheme of delegations and the Finance Procedure rules.

5.2. DF reflected that as part of the Constitution Review, they can consider the roles and purpose of Full Council and Cabinet. Democratic Services are reflecting on reducing the number of Full Council meetings to have more strategic thematic debates and using the remaining time for external engagement events. A paper will be going to General Services Committee on these proposals in February for

debate by Members. There was also a brief discussion on the use of the motions system.

5.3. DF noted that the most significant change for the Council's governance would be a shift in culture towards a new positive, civil constructive culture of governance.

5.4. JK reflected that there was more work to do to make the O&S arrangements really effective, noting that the role and purpose needs to be more deeply understood across the council. JK suggested Committees could do deep dives on particular areas and present their findings to Cabinet. GC suggested Portfolio Holders attend O&S meetings, as he found it beneficial when he was in Cabinet.

5.5. Board members agreed that there needs to be a greater understanding of the role and purpose of Council, Cabinet and O&S committees, including how and where decisions are made and challenged. Both AJ and GC highlighted that the Council needs to ensure the right balance between meetings, to ensure backbenchers still feel engaged. There was discussion on holding thematic council meetings, for example on Devolution and LGR or a "State of Thurrock" meeting which sets out the future plans for the Council.

6. AOB

6.1. JK asked for an update on securing mentors for Cabinet. LT confirmed all Member mentors have been matched and that mentors have been asked to contact Cabinet members.

Appendix I: Full Meeting Actions

- **Action: Extraordinary IRB meeting to be arranged on member conduct.**
- **Action: DS to take action to support the welfare of officers and report back to members separately.**
- **Action: MB to reflect on feedback for additional training sessions and to consider further ways to promote the member development day to encourage good attendance e.g. asking senior members to lead sessions or bringing in external speakers.**