

Thurrock Borough Council

Governance Recovery Board

Minutes – Monday 7 August 2023

Attendees

Dr Dave Smith – Managing Director Commissioner and Chief Executive (Chair)

Cllr Deb Arnold – Deputy Leader

Cllr John Kent – Opposition Group Leader

Cllr Lynn Worrall – Opposition Group Deputy Leader

Patrick McDermott – Chief of Staff to the Commissioners

Asmat Hussain – Director of Legal and Governance

Paul Turner – Director of Legal, Essex County Council

Phil Cruddace – Strategy and Partner Engagement Manager, Essex County Council

Andy Owen – Corporate Risk and Insurance Manager

Gary Clifford – Chief Internal Auditor

Apologies

Chris Stevenson – Senior Project Manager

1. Welcome and Introductions

- 1.1. Dr Dave Smith welcomed Board members to the meeting.

2. Minutes and actions of the previous meeting

- 2.1. The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed and the actions discussed.

3. Member Development Strategy

- 3.1. Asmat Hussain presented the paper which is a first draft to be clear on what the council wants to get from learning and development. This paper will progress as required to the Member panel and Standards and Audit Committee.
- 3.2. Cllr Worrall raised the need for this strategy to be supported by a robust member handbook on how they carry out their role and conduct themselves.
- 3.3. Cllr Arnold reflected that this is a positive piece of work to capture new members. She was clear that there is a need to ensure that longer-serving Councillors also receive appropriate learning and development.
- 3.4. Cllr Kent reflected that this is not the first time the council had produced a document of this type. There is a need for granularity about where there are gaps in development for members and this needs to be cross-referenced with the issues raised in the BVI report. There is also still a need for an aspirational aim for the strategy. He also raised the need to refresh the member portal.
- 3.5. Paul Turner raised the role of members in owning the strategy and their own learning needs.
- 3.6. Summing up the discussion, Dave Smith and Asmat Hussain said the strategy would be updated to reflect the discussion, with ambition and appropriate resourcing plans.

Action: Member Development Strategy to be further iterated based on the Board discussion and the question of resourcing member development to go to Senior Leadership Team (SLT).

Action: Member portal access and resources to be reviewed.

4. Meeting report improvement project

- 4.1. Asmat Hussain updated that LG Training and Development Academy have been selected to provide mandatory training on report writing uniformly across the council.
- 4.2. Cllr Arnold reflected the need for the training to meet to the needs of the audience and Paul Turner reflected on the use of Teams to improve version control.

5. Constitution review

- 5.1. Asmat Hussain provided a verbal update on the review. CIPFA have now reported on the financial regulations and the first meeting of the Member Working Group is upcoming.

6. Project deep dive: risk and opportunity management (ROM) project

- 6.1. Andy Owen presented the detail of the ROM project.
- 6.2. Cllr Worrall asked for detail on the levels of current and historic capacity.
- 6.3. Paul Turner reflected the importance of involving members in the definition of risk appetite.
- 6.4. Patrick McDermott raised the importance of the culture change required to shift the organisation to one that records and explores risk more rigorously.
- 6.5. Cllr Kent welcomed the content of the deep dive but wanted to understand more of the culture change required beyond changes in processes.
- 6.6. In summarising the discussion, Dave Smith highlighted that the focus must be on risk and the clear evaluation and mitigation of those risks. There is a real need to ensure that limited resources are focused on this approach.

Action: ROM workstream to be refreshed in light of Board comments with a focus on risk, evaluation and mitigation.

7. Project deep dive: audit project

- 7.1. Gary Clifford presented the detail of the Audit project.
- 7.2. Cllr Worrall raised the issue of capacity and the need for work to undertaken to benchmark with the position of other unitary authorities.
- 7.3. Paul Turner raised the level of assurance there is the response to the self-assessment questionnaires and there was a discussion about capability and capacity.
- 7.4. Cllr Arnold said that 88% of responses being amber or red was not reasonable and that the project required more focus on engagement with members, benchmarking and peer review of the audit provision.
- 7.5. Cllr Worrall raised the need for training to be appropriate for the audience and in person.
- 7.6. Cllr Kent reflected that this is an honest deep dive that highlighted the lack of independence for internal audit. Cllr Kent raised the case for decoupling Standards and Audit in the committee structure and a discussion of the proposal followed.
- 7.7. Dave Smith said that the discussion had exposed that the programme is not pursuing the right approach and has a focus on members that is unhelpful. There are questions of pace and resources that need to be addressed and the relevance of the audit programme needs to be considered as part of the programme.

Action: Audit workstream to be refreshed in light of comments from the Board with a focus on increased engagement, appropriate levels of training, clear benchmarks and self-assessment.

Action: Paper to be developed for GRB giving options and rationale for the separation of Standards and Audit at committee level.

8. Member / Officer Relationships

- 8.1. Members asked Asmat Hussain for her reflections on the position of member officer relationships. She reflected that relationships are good, with further work to do on changing the long-term culture.

9. Programme performance

- 9.1. Asmat Hussain updated on the programme performance.
- 9.2. In the discussion on the improving governance theme it was agreed it would be discussed at the next meeting.
- 9.3. There was discussion progress on the work around the council's role as the accountable body for the Thames Freeport.

Action: Improving governance workstream to be added to next agenda with CfGS attendance, as well as LGA support for the constitution.

10. Any other business

- 10.1. Cllr Kent raised the planning committee, access to the building and complaints procedure. The Board agreed to take actions on these points.

Action: Asmat Hussain to bring a paper on Planning Committee concerns to the next meeting.

Action: Asmat Hussain to review accessibility of the complaints procedure.