

Thurrock Borough Council

Governance Recovery Board

Minutes – 2pm, Monday 11 September 2023

Attendees

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

Cllr Deb Arnold (DA) – Deputy Leader

Cllr John Kent (JK) – Opposition Group Leader

Cllr Lynn Worrall (LW) – Opposition Group Deputy Leader

Helen Mitchell (HM) – Senior Governance Consultant, Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS)

Asmat Hussain (AH) – Director of Legal and Governance

Keilah Gallardo (KG) – Business Support Officer, Chief Executive (minutes)

Luke Tyson (LT) – Chief Intervention Officer

Matt Boulter (MB) – Head of Democratic Scrutiny and Member Services

Patrick McDermott (PM) – Chief of Staff to the Commissioners

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

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

Apologies

Chris Stevenson (CS) – Senior Project Manager

1. Welcome and Introductions

2. Minutes and actions of the previous meeting

- 2.1. LW enquired whether actions from the previous meeting had been completed, specifically the complaint process and Planning concerns.
- 2.2. AH confirmed that Planning was on the agenda for this meeting and the newly accessible complaints process will be made live in web form.

3. CfGS report on overview and scrutiny

- 3.1. HM introduced CfGS report, thanking PT for comments that have informed the report. HM highlighted key points of the report, some of which include:
 - Member involvement in strategic points of policymaking
 - recommendation on the role of the of Statutory Recruitment Officer
 - enhancement of capacity and resources
 - advocating transparency across the organisation highlighting the roles of members in the Council constitution
- 3.2. PT made comments regarding the number of committees proposed, keeping in mind whether there would be a reasonable balance of workload versus the number of members. PT also suggested that while the current structure of meetings every two months is working successfully, greater importance to keeping communication open between meetings should be given.
- 3.3. JK and LW commented on the structure of Overview and Scrutiny and how certain committees should be positioned. Questions regarding how culture might shift arose.
- 3.4. HM confirmed that certain committees need to sit together because of the overlap in service areas. Regarding shifting culture, HM suggested that further training and information sharing may benefit officer involvement in scrutiny.
- 3.5. DS confirmed discussion on current issues with reporting in terms of timing and sequencing. DS suggested there is scope for a considerations paper or, protocol to capture the implementation.

Action: Overview and Scrutiny proposal to be ready for review at the next GRB, 23 October 2023.

4. Project deep dive: improving governance

- 4.1. MB presented Project Deep Dive, mentioning that the major project would be the understanding of the constitutional view and the approach to train members and officers, as well as progressed financial rules.
- 4.2. MB addressed the 2023/24 training schedule, mentioning that feedback from these sessions were positive but insisted that these should not be a 'tick box' exercise. Implementing items like a Member Training passport could ensure a consistent knowledge base. External providers have previously given training however, in future there would ideally be a self-sustaining training system.

- 4.3. MB gave an overview of the restructure of the Governance teams which would include revision of resources. Posts for Scrutiny Officers and Senior Manager for Member Services are currently under formal consultation. These posts would ideally bridge communication between meetings.
- 4.4. DA raised concerns regarding the turn-around time and urgency for actions. MB confirmed that concerns about actions have been raised, and further clarified that resistance has been cultural rather than political, which could be alleviated by further training.
- 4.5. DA sought out further clarification on the general recruitment process and what barriers may be present. MB confirmed that the biggest challenge is resourcing and explained that the internal process and marketing can, on average, take two months.
- 4.6. PT commented that members should be brought into the development of Member Development. AH confirmed that a Member Learning and Development panel is in the process of being created.

5. Planning Advisory Service

- 5.1. MB confirmed that a review of Planning Services is intended to begin at the end of October, conducted by the Planning Advisory Service (PAS). This wouldn't be considered an inquiry rather a review of, for example, how the Council benchmarking against other authorities. MB confirmed feedback will be sought out in coming weeks.
- 5.2. LW sought confirmation regarding the peer review and whether there might be a Cabinet decision and timeline.
- 5.3. MB confirmed an upcoming review of s106 and confirmed there is a timeline for the review and reporting to Members.
- 5.4. DS commented that there be an ask of Cabinet to require the review to come back as this will be incorporated as part of the improvement journey.
- 5.5. PM commented that Commissioners have the responsibility pertaining to overall upholding of the best value duty, which includes this governance.

6. Local Government Association (LGA) grant expenditure

- 6.1. AH presented the paper and confirmed funding must be spent by March 2024. All attendees were supportive of further funding from the LGA.

Action: CS to discuss further grant funding with the LGA.

7. Programme performance (to note)

- 7.1. AH presented the report and confirmed the programme is making good progress.
- 7.2. LW raised point regarding internal audit. LW would like to see reassurance on risk managing risk assessments, including the use of risk registers on reports so that members can visualise risks.
- 7.3. DA raised concern as the report contained outdated information. LT agreed that looking ahead there should be a conversation on how this can be supported and restructured.

8. Member / Officer Relationships

- 8.1. DS stated that the overall impression is that relationships are at a generally good level. More positive relationships are formed when members and officers are highly engaged with the experience. DS confirmed that work can be done on better bridging the gap.
- 8.2. DA suggested that back benchers have a harder time communicating and being involved.
- 8.3. DS confirmed communication is weakest in areas that are generally the poorest performing parts of the Council. DS agreed that it should be a standing item to update members on things such as appointments via the member briefing.

9. Any other business

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

Appendix I – Full Meeting Actions

Action: Overview and Scrutiny proposal to be ready for review at the next GRB, 23 October 2023.

Action: CS to discuss further grant funding with the LGA.