

# Thurrock Borough Council

## Governance Recovery Board

**Minutes – 2pm, Tuesday 10 October 2023**

**Room 4, 4th floor, Civic Offices.**

### **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

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

Asmat Hussain (AH) – Director of Legal and Governance

Chris Stevenson (CS) – Senior Project Manager

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

### **Apologies**

Cllr Andrew Jefferies (AJ) – Leader of the Council

Cllr Lynn Worrall (LW) – Opposition Group Deputy Leader

## **1. Welcome and Introductions**

## **2. Matters Arising**

2.1. Minutes and action log from previous meeting agreed.

**Action: PAS review to be ready for next GRB, November 13th**

## **3. Revised CfGS Report on Overview and Scrutiny**

- 3.1. HM introduced an updated version of the CfGS report. The report recommends endorsing preparations for the implementation of the new scrutiny structure subject to Commissioner and Council approval; surfacing concerns that could prevent such changes being implemented at Council on 31 January 2024, continuing to encourage Member involvement in the development of their scrutiny function and agreeing to amend the Scrutiny Meeting cycle from bi-monthly to c. every 6 weeks.
- 3.2. HM noted that there is a recommendation missing from the paper – that is to endorse a go live date of 1st February 2024.
- 3.3. HM mentioned that Member involvement was initially lower than expected, however, there was a recent increase with twenty-four Members showing interest. Fifteen members have put their names down for drop-in sessions. HM noted further Member involvement is expected, including attending protocol sessions.
- 3.4. HM noted the use of scrutiny values when embedding positive ways of work in the Council. One piece of feedback received previously was the frequency of meetings. HM mentioned originally, there was the suggestion of meeting every other month. HM noted that Matt has done a stress test which has proved it to not be possible.
- 3.5. AH noted the amount of time that is being drawn on from members, raising concerns of burn out. AH proposed a review of communication for the Cllr call for action.
- 3.6. PT inquired about how task groups will be set up to with HM confirmed there were still key lines of inquiry that were to be followed.
- 3.7. DA raised concerns about capacity, asking what the agenda size would be. DA also asked when a potential training program would come into play to be better informed about task and finish groups run. HM noted that in respect to a training program, there is working being done for two programming sessions. These will be to better understand how committee time can be utilised to process this and understand what Members want to see. HM confirmed the goal of the sessions is to provide assurance of chairs to assure achievable governance arrangements going forward. HM noted there will be coaching sessions for chairs and vice chairs available if needed.
- 3.8. AH reminded the Board that there has been a move to Member passports, whereas each committee member should ensure passports are completed. CfGS coaching and workshops are welcomed, however, AH noted there should be more bespoke training.
- 3.9. AH noted that for the resource issue, positions have done out to advert with interest in scrutiny. The intention is to appoint two positions that will assist the scrutiny team. DA asked what the timeline for hiring officers would be, to which AH confirmed an

approximate January start. DA noted that without a January start it seems unlikely a February start date would go ahead because of capacity.

- 3.10. JK noted that chairs should take a neutral stance but should have a role in the process. JK also noted there has not been a conclusion on size of committees, as there is a reduction from thirty-six to eighteen, it may benefit from larger committees.
- 3.11. HM noted that concerns regarding the February go live date were best directed to AH and confirmed that the size of committees is a decision for the Council to make.
- 3.12. DS shared some concerns regarding the February go live date, noting that contracting staff whilst in a process of change was concerns. DS further noted the expectation for more Member engagement. HM confirmed there have been two emails from members expressing interest, noting that further engagement from Members would be useful to provide assurance. JK agreed with this, noting that there is a responsibility to go back to members and encourage further input and engagement.
- 3.13. JK asked about the possibility of going live in Shadow Cabinet form and what an agenda for this might look like. AH noted that this would be very resource intensive. AH clarified the go live date was scheduled in before announcements were made regarding elections. It was discussed and agreed among Board members to move the go live until after the elections. HM noted this would allow for further member engagement.
- 3.14. DS noted the agreement between Board members on the number of committees, scrutiny officers and member engagement.
- 3.15. The Board requested that the paper be updated to reflect their view that the go live date should be for the start of the new civic year in 2024 and that the task and finish groups should be ended from the start of 2024.

**Action: AH to provide updated proposal regarding O&S for next GRB, 13 November, reflecting these steers.**

**Action: AH to provide new go live date for CfGS report**

#### **4. Theme performance report**

- 4.1. AH noted that the members constitutional working group did not take place last month. AH confirmed there were report items such as Minute Refresh that will be brought forward to the following GRB. AH provided updates on political advisors, noting there has been appointment for the conservative group. The position for labour is currently out for advert.
- 4.2. CS raised a concern with the pace of support from LGA. AH noted that there had been communication from Thurrock to confirm the current position with LGA, to which there has not been a response yet. DS noted that he and PM would arrange a meeting with the LGA.
- 4.3. AH shared audit work is being led by AH and Gary Staples, Mazars is on board as well. AH noted Mazars has been invited to the next GRB meeting to provide assurance on the work being completed. AH noted that there has been slower progress due to the financial restructuring. DS asked when this would move along, AH clarified that she would pick this up and have conversations with relevant colleagues.

- 4.4. DA noted she would like member training regarding risk awareness / management. CS confirmed they were looking to secure spots in February / March for a leadership essentials course.
- 4.5. AH provided an update on the Governance Review Project. AH confirmed there have been conversations with Lee Henley and PT. There is a view to redesign and rescope the work programme with regards to information governance review. This report will be brought to November GRB.
- 4.6. On Thurrock Regeneration Ltd (TRL), governance and approval process as looking at doing the final resolution on this.
- 4.7. Thames Freeport is being looked at for rescoping the programme. AH they have looked at this project book and are looking to have Council sign off on this business case.

**Action: PM to contact LGA regarding pace of support.**

**Action: AH to speak with relevant colleagues regarding Mazar audit work and provide an update to GRB regarding timeline.**

**Action: Provision of training for risk awareness and risk management for members.**

## **5. Refresh of minute taking approach at Thurrock**

- 5.1. AH presented report, highlighting concerns of how previous minutes have been taken, and the view to update the house style. AH noted concerns at a previous Council meeting regarding how minutes were going forward. PT clarified concerns were regarding content such as debate language and decision making rather than the length of minutes.
- 5.2. JK noted this has been a longstanding issue, explaining some members feel that minutes should reflect main points and decisions made, while others would like a full narrative of a meeting. JK pointed out that meetings are recorded, therefore a word for word record in minutes wouldn't be necessary. DA noted the current minute taking approach proves to be difficult when looking for actions, DA requested a separate page for logging actions.
- 5.3. DS confirmed that if brevity is the way forward, individual names of members should not be included in the body of the minutes, only in cases of movements and seconds, and decision making by members. JK suggested that when distributing minutes, a link to view the recording be included as well. The board has agreed a brief approach highlighting actions and decisions be the focus of minute taking. AH to provide a briefing to members on this decision.

**Action: Briefing to members regarding minute taking approach.**

## **6. Governance Progress and Resources Report**

- 6.1. AH noted various work regarding this has been led on by MB, with a particular focus on implications to service areas. The report includes a track in progress as was requested in a previous GRB meeting. AH noted that attached to the report is version control which would ideally be adopted in future reporting. AH noted there has also been consideration on how MS Teams might be maximised for version tracking.

- 6.2. DA raised that the report felt operational, noting this would be a point of change to promote transparency. DA also raised there should be a clear outline of procedure and process, and a report's journey in regards to which officers have sight of it.
- 6.3. AH noted that ownership for reports should come from report authors and leadership such as the accountable assistant director. SLT members should then act as gatekeepers for reports, noting if they do not meet criteria it would get pulled.
- 6.4. DS raised that in addition to training, there should be a standard, including quality measures that make up good reports. In future reports this would be used as a benchmark. AH and CS to take this away and bring a quality standard forward to SLT; CS noted that there is a report writing guide that is dated.

**Action: AH and CS to bring a quality standard for reports to SLT.**

## **7. Member/Officer Relationships**

- 7.1. DS noted that the most pressing issue seems to over how tasks and requests are prioritised. DS noted the challenge here being there should be a focus on day-to-day issues without being diverted from long term projects.
- 7.2. JK noted a point of concern regarding this is the seemed lack of communication, JK cited an officer recently leaving their post without any members being notified and a change of room use in CO3.
- 7.3. DS noted that these issues will continue to be considered and addressed appropriately.

## **8. Any other business**

- 8.1. AH noted the announcement of elections. PM noted the Local Government Boundary Commission have been in touch and senior officers responsible will be identified. PM confirmed an initial meeting with them is due to be scheduled and will bring forward a summary to GRB and IRB.
- 8.2. There being no other business, the meeting closed.

**Action: Briefing to GRB members regarding summary of LG Boundary Commission meeting.**

## **Appendix I – Full Meeting Actions**

**Action: PAS review to be ready for next GRB, November 13th**

**Action: AH to provide updated proposal regarding O&S for next GRB, 13 November, reflecting these steers.**

**Action: AH to provide new go live date for CfGS report**

**Action: PM to contact LGA regarding pace of support.**

**Action: AH to speak with relevant colleagues regarding Mazar audit work and provide an update to GRB regarding timeline.**

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**Action: Briefing to members regarding minute taking approach.**

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