

# Thurrock Borough Council

## Governance Recovery Board

**Minutes – 2pm, Monday 15 January 2024**

**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

Cllr Lynn Worrall (LW) – Opposition Group Deputy Leader

Asmat Hussain (AH) – Director of Legal and Governance

Luke Tyson (LT) – Chief Intervention Officer

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

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

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

### **Guests**

Mark Bradbury (MBr)

Matt Boulter (MB)

Mark Chalkley (MC)

### **Apologies**

Cllr Andrew Jefferies (AJ) – Leader

Chris Stevenson (CS) – Senior Project Manager

## 1. Welcome and Introductions

## 2. Matters Arising

- 2.1. JK requested an update regarding a previous mention of deterioration of member/officer relationships. PM confirmed as this issue was more widely raised at IRB, Gavin Jones will provide an update to IRB later in the month.
- 2.2. Minutes of the previous meeting were agreed; there were no further comments from the action log.

## 3. CIPFA Proposal Constitution Review

- 3.1. MB provided an update on the Constitution Review, noting that there have been conversations with members regarding several aspects of the constitution. MB did note that some delay in delivering this project was due to competing priorities. MB reflected that the working relationship with CIPFA has been a positive one.. AH also noted that the proposed constitutional review is heavily reliant on the continuous engagement of members and officers.
- 3.2. DA expressed no objections to CIPFA however, raised concerns regarding the delivery timeline. LW and JK agreed, noting the 60-day turn around seemed like too little time.
- 3.3. AH shared with the Board that the current timeline has been moving at pace but noted challenges with arranging dates in diaries. AH also confirmed that there has been in-depth engagement and consultation for not only finance, but contract rules. PT added that the proposal of a longer turn-around was sensible but highlighted the importance of engagement.
- 3.4. DS asked the Board whether they felt that Member Working groups were made up of key individuals. JK felt there were but highlighted what felt like an unreasonable timeline.
- 3.5. MB confirmed that the municipal calendar for 2024/25 will have regular meetings programmed in for a clearer forward look. MB confirmed the current pace of the programme aligns with the request for CIPFA to produce a draft for members to review. DA noted that the pace this being carried out seems too fast and unrealistic. PM noted that the timings may not be as reasonable, confirming that a conversation can take place with CIPFA.
- 3.6. LW suggested breaking off into 'subgroups' to get through the Constitution Group at a faster pace, and work with CIPFA in parts. MB agreed, suggesting CIPFA could be flexible and allow for this.
- 3.7. DS reflected the best way to move forward would be to work with CIPFA on a more reasonable timescale while being flexible in their approach. DS asked the Board if, subject to comments, they were happy to support the proposal. The Board unanimously agreed.

**Action: MB to have a conversation with CIPFA colleagues to discuss timeframes and ways of working.**

**Action: AH to review the possibility of Member-to-Member workshops from councils in similar positions.**

## 4. PAS Report Review

- 4.1. MBr reviewed the report with the Board, noting that the final report was received in December. MBr confirmed that the report was published online following an announcement at Cabinet. MBr noted that the report included 11 recommendations with a majority for the planning service. MBr confirmed that the goal was to develop an implementation strategy to deliver these recommendations. These would go through a governance process, with some including financial implications.
- 4.2. DS noted that the recommendations did not come as a surprise but was pleased to have the issues made clear. DS felt that managing the message to the planning team was crucial, and asked whether any work was being done to prioritise this. MB confirmed that this was shared with the team, and noted the views expressed by the planning service contributed to the report itself.
- 4.3. JK noted that recommendation nine speaks on the need to improve culture as well as member and officer relationships. JK felt that the point implied there was no progress in this area a year into the intervention. JK also inquired on a point implying planning applications were approved against officer advice.
- 4.4. MBr acknowledged the point, noting that it reviews a longer period. MBr noted regarding planning applications, there is a reference to behaviours that may need further review.
- 4.5. AH asked what the next steps were for this report after it has been seen at GRB. MBr noted that the intention is for it to go to SLT, then to Cabinet. Once there is a draft plan and SLT have seen it, it will progress. MBr confirmed they would like to get this to Cabinet and Council before the pre-election period.

## 5. LGA Audit Training Proposal

- 5.1. MC updated the board on the LGA audit training proposal. LGA have agreed to provide training over two sessions, with a further third session to include wider members and SLT. MC expressed that arranging a date has been challenging, noting a reluctance from Members to accept dates the LGA have put forward. MC noted it was fundamental to have members in one room.
- 5.2. AH confirmed this training was appropriate for Thurrock, noting it works on audit, not standards themselves. AH encouraged members of the Board to encourage colleagues to find dates.
- 5.3. JK noted the point made and confirmed they would encourage colleagues to attend. JK asked if it was possible to have Essex County Councillors provide their recommendations.
- 5.4. LW asked whether it was possible to do one longer session. MC reflected, noting if timing is an issue for members, there may be a point in pausing training until after elections.

**Action: AH and MC to discuss delaying LGA audit training.**

## **6. Electoral Review Update**

- 6.1. AH provided an overview of the Electoral Review Report, noting it was agreed with the member working group. AH confirmed there was correspondence last week with the Commission to advise that a subsequent Conservative submission had been submitted. AH highlighted that the hope was for final comments to come back tomorrow from the Local Boundary Commission to progress to the next step. Following this, the ward-breakdown would be the next step in the process.
- 6.2. JK expressed the fact that it had been 20 years since there was a review like this, and wondered what support would be provided to members to do this in a meaningful way. DS felt the Council was responsible for providing this support. PM noted that the Department have experience working with Councils in intervention who are also working through these reviews. PM suggested that it might be beneficial to collaborate with relevant Councils. DA asked that this be presented in workshop form.

**Action: AH to review the possibility of Member-to-Member workshops from councils in similar positions.**

## **7. Governance and Controls Performance Reporting**

- 7.1. AH provided updates on performance reporting, noting that the overall project was showing an amber status. AH highlighted that the programme was on target with most milestones but noted the risks around the governance projects. AH explained one main risk being around the 'Risk and Opportunity' management project. AH confirmed the interim structure for Risk: Colin Ratcliffe as Acting Risk Manager. AH noted there has also been contact with Steven Mair to seek assurance on how risk will be managed. AH also confirmed that the previous risk of Democratic Services being short staff as been resolved, with full staffing completed.
- 7.2. JK reflected on the point of recruitment, noting that recruitment had historically been difficult. JK inquired about what changed in the process to make this possible.
- 7.3. MB noted that when resourcing initially began, the department was under a restructure project with an already notable deficit. MB explained roles were previously being recruited as an agency contract. MB confirmed that posts were now being recruited permanently and with more time and advertising, generating the appropriate interest.
- 7.4. DA requested for a conversation with LT to discuss visual formatting.

## **8. Member/Officer relationships**

- 8.1. DS provided an update on member and officer relationships, noting that where strains in relationships occur are usually a reflection of management in the services.
- 8.2. DS explained he was reviewing the recruitment for Executive Director of Place, considering how to introduce more management within the service. DS noted this will be further discussed with colleagues.

## **9. Any other business**

- 9.1. There was a question raised regarding GSC and its attendance. DS would follow this upon outside of the meeting.

9.2. There being no other business, the meeting closed.

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

**Action: MB to have a conversation with CIPFA colleagues to discuss timeframes and ways of working.**

**Action: AH to review the possibility of Member-to-Member workshops from councils in similar positions.**

**Action: AH and MC to discuss delaying LGA audit training.**