

Thurrock Council

Improvement and Recovery Board

Minutes – 2pm, Monday 15 July 2024

Attendees

Gavin Jones (GJ) – Lead Commissioner (Chair)

Nicole Wood (NW) – Finance Commissioner

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

Alex Powell (AP) – Assistant Chief Executive

Cllr John Kent (JK) – Leader of the Council

Cllr Lynn Worrall (LW) – Deputy Leader of the Council

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

Louise Neilan (LN) – Assistant Director of Communications and Engagement

Ian Wake (IW) – Executive Director of Adult and Health

Daniel Fenwick (DF) – Executive Director of Corporate Services and Monitoring Officer

Luke Tyson (LT) – Chief Intervention Officer

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

Kerry Thomas (KT) – Chief of Staff to the Chief Executive

Apologies

Cllr Andrew Jefferies (AJ) – Opposition Group Leader

Sheila Murphy (SM) – Executive Director of Children's Services

Claire Demmel (CD) – Interim Executive Director of Place

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

1. Welcome and Introductions

2. Matters Arising

2.1. Minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.

2.2. It was noted that the governance arrangements for these Boards were changing to better align with the Council's new reporting processes and in line with the action raised in the previous meeting. There were no further comments on the actions.

3. Update following General Election

3.1. There was a discussion on the outcome of the General Election, covering the priorities of the new Labour Government and their messaging on local government so far. This included the Government's focus on economic growth and a recognition of the need for long-term funding settlements.

3.2. There was a brief discussion on grants and an ask for clarity on how much the Council receives in grants.

Action: DC to confirm figures on grants at the next IRB.

3.3. Board members discussed the Government's commitment to widen and deepen devolution. JK expressed his commitment to devolution across Greater Essex and welcomed more details on the Government's plans in this area.

3.4. There was also an update on the changes to the Ministerial team within the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, with the Board reflecting that early engagement with Ministers on the intervention would be beneficial.

3.5. JK suggested that the Leaders of local authorities in intervention should be working more closely together, to share their experiences with new Ministers and advocate as a group.

4. Managing Director Commissioner Update

4.1. DS noted that Thurrock is well situated to play a key part in, and benefit from, the new Government's focus on economic growth. A priority for the Council will be looking at how they can maximise opportunities for growth locally by working with their neighbouring authorities and partners, and exploring how the devolution offer would further support this.

4.2. DS reflected that the Council needs to keep building the organisational capacity to become a more outward facing organisation and to play a system leadership role locally, through the new operating model.

4.3. DS provided an update on the new Cabinet, reflecting how they have a clear understanding of the challenges the Council faces in intervention, and have

realistic ambitions for the Council's future within this context. The Council are already looking ahead to next year's Budget, balancing long term planning with more immediate decisions. A real focus for them is communications with their residents.

- 4.4. The new Oversight and Scrutiny Committees were also demonstrating positive improvements and had been constructively led so far.
- 4.5. GJ noted that a whole Council recovery was key to its success, so sustainable structures and systems had to be in place to ensure recovery could withstand any political or leadership changes.

5. Update on Change

- 5.1. AP provided an overview of the new governance structures for the Change programme, which are already proving to be effective and helping to break down silos between services and departments. The aim of these new arrangements is to enable more strategic discussions on issues, notably preparations for the next budget and on savings targets, and to build a collective accountability for decisions.
- 5.2. NW asked about senior officers' level of confidence on the Council's capability and capacity to deliver the difficult decisions on savings that were required. AP noted that work was being done to support new colleagues and to generate a change in approach across services, but that it was key to make it sustainable. The staff survey results will also provide a clear evidence base for opportunities and challenges.
- 5.3. AP also noted the progress on the development of the Corporate Plan, due to be discussed at Cabinet and Full Council in July.

6. Update on Governance

- 6.1. DF outlined the purpose of the Governance Review, which is nearly complete and due to be discussed at the next Governance Recovery Board. The review provides actions on strengthening the core components of decision making as well as steps to support the necessary cultural change to embed accountability throughout the organisation ahead of the whole council elections in May 2025.
- 6.2. As well as the Constitution Review, Democratic Services have reviewed the Council's corporate forward plan, and will ensure Members have opportunities to input into the plans for the year ahead. The separation of Standards and Audit Committees had resulted in positive meetings so far and the new Oversight and Scrutiny Committee meetings were also proving successful.
- 6.3. There was a discussion about the work being done on elections ahead of May, to prepare for the implementation of the Boundary Review.

7. Update on Financial Position

- 7.1. DC shared the latest financial position with Board members, outlining the work that has taken place to improve budget monitoring and setting out the position for P2 in June. Activity is taking place to track in-year spend and identify mitigations. A Q1 report will be shared with Cabinet in September.
- 7.2. DC reflected that the work to identify savings is on track and teams are engaging well. The spending controls have also been strengthened and the panels have been refreshed to ensure the S151 Officer has oversight of the whole process. Engagement is continuing with Government officials on the MTFS model and discussions around long term support. DC gave the Board an overview of the latest model.
- 7.3. DC confirmed that the updates to the MTFS model hadn't substantially impacted the level of support the Council required through EFS, in response to a question from LW, but that engagement with MHCLG continued.
- 7.4. JK highlighted the unsustainable position that the Council's finances were in, emphasising that it was key to raise this point and explore new creative solutions for addressing this with new MHCLG Ministers.

Action: Arrange discussion at a future FRB meeting to discuss the previous engagement with Ministers on long term support options to achieve financial sustainability.

8. Update on Communications and Engagement

- 8.1. LN outlined how the teams had been using the pre-election period to lay the foundations for upcoming activity and make some small changes across their channels to improve their outputs. Major activity includes preparing for the upcoming residents survey, a series of big lunches, budget engagement with residents and some pilots on community work.
- 8.2. On communications, the Council have changed the tone of the e-newsletter, bringing a more positive emphasis to the content by promoting community work and celebrating volunteers and residents. Work has been done to create a housing magazine with all their key messages to residents. They are also working on a brand refresh for the council and the borough. A comms and engagement plan will go Cabinet in the early autumn and the team are doing early engagement with Members on the content.
- 8.3. LN also highlighted the focus on internal comms, aligning with the new corporate plan and celebrating staff through the upcoming staff awards.

9. Future Recovery Board meetings

- 9.1. Following the action raised at the previous meeting, it was agreed that the IRB will continue to exist, however the frequency will be reduced. A note will be shared with members outlining the new arrangements, which will be rolled out over the summer. The Terms of Reference will be updated accordingly.

10.AOB

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

Appendix I: Full Meeting Actions

- **Action: DC to confirm figures on grants at the next IRB.**
- **Action: Arrange discussion at a future FRB meeting to discuss the previous engagement with Ministers on long term support options to achieve financial sustainability.**