

**Thurrock Council**  
**Improvement & Recovery Board**  
**Minutes – 2pm, Monday 21 July 2025**

**Attendees:**

Gavin Jones (GJ) – Lead Commissioner (Chair)

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

Denise Murray (DM) – Finance Commissioner

Cllr Lynn Worrall (LW) – Leader of the Council

Cllr Lee Watson (LWa) – Deputy Leader of the Council

Cllr Valerie Morris-Cook (VMC) – Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources

Alex Powell (AP) – Assistant Chief Executive

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

Dawn Calvert (DC) – Chief Finance Officer and S151

Patrick McDermott (PM) – Assistant Director for Strategy and Policy

Claire Demmel (CD) – Executive Director of Place

Kerry Thomas (KT) – Chief of Staff

Luke Tyson (LT) – Corporate Policy and Improvement Manager

Amber Robinson (AR) – Executive Assistant, Chief Executive

Jason Harris (JH) – Deputising for the Chief of Staff to the Commissioners

**Apologies:**

Cllr George Coxshall (GC) – Opposition Group Leader

Cllr Jacqui Maney (JM) - Opposition Group Deputy Leader

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

## **1. Welcome and Introductions**

1.1. GJ welcomed board members to the meeting.

## **2. Minutes/ Actions of the previous meeting**

2.1. Minutes of the last meeting were agreed.

## **3. Lead Commissioner discussion**

3.1. GJ discussed Commissioners' fifth report, noting that this was a positive letter to write, reflecting on progress made over the past year. Improvements were highlighted in both financial management and governance. However, the key caveat remains how these improvements can be sustained.

3.2. On finance, the Council must set a balanced budget. This will be a significant challenge for Thurrock as it moves into Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), given its current debt position and the proportion of debt support from government. GJ stressed the importance of successfully implementing the transformation plan, which has been slower than expected and is closely linked to achieving financial savings. Commissioners will monitor this closely.

3.3. GJ also referenced that Minister McMahon's letter suggested that a review of the current arrangements should take place by summer 2026.

3.4. There was a discussion on the reaction to the report which was considered a fair assessment. There has been minimal resident feedback and press coverage. DS advised that an all-staff briefing is scheduled where this will be discussed and noted that staff will want to understand next year's plans and upcoming milestones.

3.5. LWa acknowledged the council's current position and emphasized that further progress is needed to exit intervention. She expressed concern that officers may view this as "business as usual," which it is not, and stressed that improvement activity must not be forgotten. GJ added that this perspective may also be shared more widely for members outside of Cabinet.

## **4. Leader update**

4.1. LW provided an update on the new Cabinet, noting that some new members have joined. Regular meetings are taking place, training has been arranged, and LW emphasized the need to assign mentors to new members promptly.

4.2. The first SLT/Cabinet away day is scheduled for August to review council priorities. LW highlighted the need to focus on transformation, as Thurrock does not have sufficient assets to sell its way out of financial challenges. The asset disposal programme is slightly behind schedule and needs attention to ensure the council is well-positioned for LGR in the next two years.

4.3. SLT/Cabinet will meet in late July to discuss the savings for 2026/27, which is expected to be a significant discussion. Communications training is being arranged for Cabinet, and LW noted that additional risk training is also required for Cabinet.

4.4. LW noted that devolution and LGR are the current urgent priorities. The LGR business case will be shared with the working group first and presented to Corporate Overview & Scrutiny (O&S) in August.

4.5. LW stressed the importance of addressing member behaviour, particularly among the minority. LW and GC will work over the summer to develop principles that all 49 members agree to, both inside and outside the chamber. The aim is to print these principles on the front of all agendas and have the Mayor read them at Full Council meetings. GJ confirmed that members in Slough have implemented a similar approach and offered to connect LW with them. DF added that, if members wish, these principles could be formalised in the constitution.

- **ACTION: GJ to introduce LW to the Labour Group Leader in Slough to discuss member behaviour.**

4.6. VMC expressed concern about the wider region's understanding of Thurrock's debt situation. GJ noted that this has been raised, and government is aware of the risk.

4.7. DM advised that political priorities need to be reflected within the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). The MTFS should integrate all priorities and clearly identify what is or is not affordable over the medium and long term.

## **5. Managing Director Commissioner update**

5.1. DS highlighted that since May there has been clear evidence of progress and a step-change under the new Leader and Cabinet. The Cabinet have actively engaged with external stakeholders at local, regional, and national levels, with the Leader attending wider events e.g. the APPG event, which provided valuable opportunities to connect with others in local government. DS noted that strong political leadership is being demonstrated on LGR. DS emphasized the importance of bringing SLT and Cabinet together, a step that has been long overdue. He confirmed that their upcoming session will not be a one-off event.

5.2. DS observed that Assistant Directors (ADs) and Heads of Service are now actively engaged in discussions about the roadmap, guided by SLT.

5.3. VMC shared that she experienced the most significant portfolio change and has received strong support from senior officers. She noted that the main issue with reports is their late submission rather than their content. The forward plan was described as particularly extensive.

5.4. DS remarked on a recent report that prompted questions within Cabinet, a positive sign of scrutiny. Instead of delegating the decision to an officer, Cabinet requested that the outcome return to them for consideration. DF supported this approach, noting that it reflects good governance practice.

## **6. Update on Transformation: Development of the roadmap**

- 6.1. AP acknowledged that, despite significant activity across the council, a clear roadmap for the next three years has not yet been developed. The council has engaged an external partner to provide support—specifically to assist senior officers rather than undertake the work themselves. They will help develop the roadmap, support officers in creating a cross-cutting business case to unlock genuine transformation, and guide officers in evaluating and approving business cases. They have met with SLT and ADs, reviewed extensive work completed over the past 6–12 months, and held workshops with ADs to generate ideas.
- 6.2. A two-day workshop was held last week with ADs, involving sessions to explore key elements of transformation. Following this, ADs have formed working groups and will provide feedback to both SLT and the external partner on their proposals. AP confirmed that the first draft of the roadmap will be available by the end of the month and presented to SLT in August. The main challenge will be ensuring that the ideas included are sufficiently ambitious to deliver genuine transformation.
- 6.3. LW asked when Cabinet would be able to review the roadmap. AP advised that this would take place alongside Cabinet’s work on priorities and will be discussed jointly in September. GJ reflected that member governance must be factored in.
- 6.4. VMC questioned how confident the council is in achieving tangible outcomes, noting that this has been under discussion since the start of intervention. AP explained the distinction between activity and delivering the objectives of the operating model. Many identified savings depend on transforming the council, but the challenge lies in sustaining this over the next 4–5 years. The resistance to change seen 6–12 months ago has now shifted.

## **7. Corporate Plan refresh**

- 7.1. PM explained that the new corporate plan was developed last year which is now due for a refresh. The updated plan will incorporate feedback, simplify its structure, and embed the remaining aspects of the Improvement and Recovery Plan to ensure continuous improvement.
- 7.2. As the current plan was written before Devolution and LGR, the refresh must align with the transformation roadmap and reflect the new administration’s priorities. DM emphasized that the plan should include a clear delivery framework for priorities, acknowledging that not all priorities can be achieved immediately.
- 7.3. DM highlighted the need for the plan to reflect the council’s tenants and include housing strategy as a core element. PM confirmed that work across housing will be integrated to ensure a single, unified version.
- 7.4. PM confirmed that milestones and metrics will continue to be used to track progress. Next steps include ongoing engagement and maintaining an open, transparent approach as the report progresses to Corporate O&S.
- 7.5. DM asked about resident engagement on the corporate plan. PM noted that responses from the residents’ survey will feed into the plan. VMC suggested using community events such as the “Big Lunches” to further engage residents.

## **8. Devolution and LGR update**

- 8.1. On Devolution, AP explained that Thurrock has signed up to the priority programme for establishing a combined mayor for Greater Essex. Thurrock submitted a joint bid with Essex County Council and Southend-on-Sea City Council. A written ministerial statement confirmed last week that the bid meets statutory tests, and the government is minded to proceed with a combined mayoral authority from May 2026.
- 8.2. DM stressed the urgency of preparing resources and ensuring readiness to deliver. If Thurrock is fully prepared with its transformation plan and local plan, it will be in a strong position. AP agreed, also noting the importance of establishing an evidence base across Greater Essex and identifying priorities and projects for Day 1.
- 8.3. Regarding LGR, AP provided an overview and outlined the businesses cases being produced to date. Business Case A explores a five-area model, while Business Case B is examining alternative options for a two- or three-area model. The view internally is that a four-area model should also be explored.
- 8.4. In reviewing options for a four-area model, several configurations were considered, but one clear option has emerged as the preferred approach and will be discussed at Corporate O&S in August. Thurrock has been working with an external partner, who are providing support and engaging with Members on this process. AP noted there was also another four-area model being developed.
- 8.5. AP confirmed that the final submission date is 26 September with one overall submission with multiple business cases attached. DM asked whether sufficient engagement has been built in to ensure a “single version of the truth.” AP confirmed that a shared data pool is in place, accessible to all parties.
- 8.6. There was a discussion about confidence to deliver the transformation roadmap alongside Devolution and LGR simultaneously. AP noted that he has brought in additional officers to support delivery.

## **9. AOB**

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

## **APPENDIX I: Full Meeting Actions**

- **GJ to introduce LW to the Leader of Slough to discuss member behaviour.**