

# **Thurrock Council**

## **Improvement & Recovery Board**

**Minutes, 11am – Monday 16 December 2024**

### **Attendees:**

Gavin Jones (GJ) – Lead Commissioner (Chair)

Dr Dave Smith (DS) – Managing Director Commissioner/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

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

Robert Persey (RP) - Interim Executive Director Adults and Health

Luke Tyson (LT) – Chief Intervention Officer

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

Amber Robinson (AR) – Executive Assistant, Chief Executive (Minutes)

### **Apologies:**

Nicole Wood (NW) – Finance Commissioner

Cllr Andrew Jefferies (AJ) – Opposition Group Leader

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

Claire Demmel (CD) – Interim Executive Director of Place

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

## **1. Welcome and Introductions**

1.1. GJ welcomed board members to the meeting.

## **2. Matters Arising**

2.1. Minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.

## **3. Lead Commissioner Update**

3.1. GJ informed the Board that the fourth report from Commissioners has now been submitted to MHCLG and it is expected that the letter will be published with the ministerial response in January. It was noted that the MDC's contract expires in March 2025. Both Commissioners and the Council need to come to a decision on this but it is Commissioners' view that this arrangement continues.

3.2. AP gave a brief outline on the English Devolution White Paper. It was noted the paper sets out a new framework whereby the Strategic authority will receive additional powers. The Government will be writing to all upper tier authorities who may benefit from being involved in the priority list. Within the paper, it makes a reference to postponing elections where needed.

- **Action: CH to circulate a link to the English Devolution White Paper to board members.**

## **4. Leader Update**

4.1. JK noted he would like to write to MHCLG in response to the Commissioners' letter and Ministerial response. With regards to the MDC model, it would be a huge vote of confidence should MHCLG remove this model and allow Thurrock to recruit a Chief Executive, but JK noted that this would not benefit the Council at this moment in time.

4.2. JK is considering whether a Full Council meeting should be called to discuss Devolution and LGR. It was noted that Devolution and LGR could distract the Council from their improvement journey and will be a big test for Thurrock.

## **5. Managing Director Commissioner Update**

5.1. DS reflected that it is pleasing to see the steps the Council is taking to operationalise the operating model by consolidating customer services, business intelligence, performance and policy and communications and engagement activity. This work demonstrates that the Council is serious about a new way of working and that it is serious about making the necessary savings. Secondly, they are building capability and capacity across the organisation to act in a more thoughtful and intelligent way.

5.2. Commissioners remain concerned around members' behaviour. While the majority of members have engaged well and are resolving issues and learning from mistakes, there are a handful of members that are taking up a

disproportionate amount of officers' time and resource due to their behaviour. DS will discuss this further with commissioners.

## **6. Improvement and Recovery Plan Report**

- 6.1. LT introduced this item, noting that the report shows the range of improvements which are starting to become more embedded, but also highlights the areas that need further attention, for example the need for a risk strategy. The IRP report has been to Cabinet and will move on to Full Council in January.
- 6.2. AP noted there has been significant progress. The Q2 performance report has been to Cabinet and will move onto O&S in January. Ahead of next year, agreement is needed on targets and to ensure resources are correctly allocated against priority areas. A new proforma is being developed for service planning, and which will be linked back to the activity in the Corporate Plan. AP also mentioned the aim of the new Communications and Engagement Strategy, that the Council needs to ensure it is communicating as one council.
- 6.3. DC noted that improvement on assurance and audit has been flagged as amber in the IRP report but that there is some further work being done on improving the audit function. There has been effective working with legal on the Annual Governance Statement which is due to be published shortly. DC provided an update on external audit, noting that the accounts are prepared but are unlikely to be signed off. DC noted the recruitment challenges in her area, audit is under-resourced and recruitment is ongoing. Improvements on risk management is also mainly reported as amber in the report, with one section marked as red. They are making good progress on improving risk management, and a training session was provided to members, with another to be arranged. DC informed that the VfM outcome has a mixture of ambers and greens and that they are getting better with reporting.
- 6.4. DF noted that the overview assessment is that governance is working, and this is represented by it being reported as mostly green with some ambers. Both standards and audit committee are functioning at a high standard. There is still a long way to go on Overview and Scrutiny arrangements, but they have now had their first call-in and two Chairs have now reported back to Cabinet. It is moving in the right direction but there is more work to do regarding the work programme. DF noted that the vast majority of Members comply with the standards of behaviour that you would expect to see in a well-functioning council, but there are exceptions.

## **7. Comms and Engagement Update**

- 7.1. LN noted that comms now have in place a steady flow of activity such as a weekly newsletter for staff and for residents and a monthly newsletter to Members, all of which are working well. Comms would like to put out more good news stories and are going to work with teams across the organisation to identify examples. JK gave an example of a potential good news story highlighting all the work council officers had been involved in to support residents in response to the recent storms.

7.2. LN also updated the board on recent and upcoming engagement events. The first public question time took place last month, which was attended by the majority of SLT and Cabinet. The event went well with were 60 people in attendance. The team have committed to run more sessions and committed to publish the answers to the questions raised in the last session. There was a similar event run for staff last week. LN also provided an update on upcoming engagement events taking place in the new year.

## **8. AOB**

8.1. AP informed the Board that Thames Freeport governance is nearly complete. There is an accountability meeting being held now which is finalising details.

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

## **Annex I: Full list of meeting actions**

- **Action: CH to circulate a link to the English Devolution White Paper to board members.**