

Thurrock Council

Improvement & Recovery Board

Minutes – 2pm, Monday 7 October 2024

Attendees:

Dr Dave Smith (DS) – Managing Director Commissioner/ Chief Executive (Chair)
Nicole Wood (NW) – Finance Commissioner
Alex Powell (AP)– Assistant Chief Executive
Cllr John Kent (JK) – Leader of the Council
Cllr Sara Muldowney (SM) – Cabinet Member for Resources
Cllr Andrew Jefferies (AJ) – Opposition Group Leader
Dawn Calvert (DC) – Interim Chief Financial Officer and Section 151 Officer
Daniel Fenwick (DF) – Executive Director of Corporate Services and Monitoring Officer
Rob Persey (RP) - Interim Executive Director of Adults and Health
Claire Demmel (CD) – Interim Executive Director of Place
Louise Neilan (LN) – Assistant Director of Communications and Engagement
Patrick McDermott (PM) - Assistant Director Strategy, Policy, Performance & Partnerships
Luke Tyson (LT) – Chief Intervention Officer
Kerry Thomas (KT) – Chief of Staff to the Chief Executive
Crissy Hall (CH) – Chief of Staff to the Commissioners (Minutes)

Apologies:

Gavin Jones (GJ) – Lead Commissioner
Cllr Lynn Worrall (LW) – Deputy Leader of the Council
Cllr George Coxshall (GC) – Opposition Deputy Leader
Sheila Murphy (SM) – Executive Director of Children’s Services

1. Welcome and Introductions

2. Matters Arising

2.1. Minutes of the previous meeting were agreed. DC provided an update on the action related to grants, outlining the ongoing discussions with MHCLG on this.

3. Terms of Reference

3.1. The revised Terms of Reference were reviewed and agreed.

4. Commissioner update

4.1. DS provided an update on behalf of the Commissioner team, reflecting on the Council's ongoing challenges. Top priorities included improving member/officer relationships and concerns around the unacceptable behaviour of a small number of members. There is a risk that some of these behaviours could be heightened in the run up to the elections in May.

4.2. There was a brief discussion on Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) committees. Further work is being done to support Members with the new arrangements and the committees' programme of work, but committee members need to demonstrate the right behaviours and culture to help embed the arrangements. JK reflected that senior officers also need to be present at O&S committees to help demonstrate the right cultures, DS agreed to follow up with SLT on this.

- **Action: DS to raise officer attendance at O&S meetings with SLT.**

4.3. DS also covered the ongoing programme of ward visits, part of the Council's work to be more outward facing and provide opportunities for Members to engage with residents and communities. There was feedback from JK and AJ that the purpose of the visits was not made clear to all Members at the outset, with JK reflecting that while the ward visits are a positive step forward for the Council, there are both strategic and administrative improvements that can be made to refine the programme. AJ reflected that there are already community forums in place in some areas and wanted to consider how these can be engaged as part of this programme on a cross-party basis.

- **Action: DS to discuss ward visits with Cabinet /SLT.**

4.4. DS noted that it is a priority for Commissioners that they see evidence of strong collective leadership across all parties and more positive cross-party working between Members.

4.5. JK shared his reflections, building on the points raised in DS's update and reflecting that the council need to use the tools and levers they have available to challenge unacceptable behaviour. He is priority is getting support through mentors and ensuring team building sessions are arranged to help support members in their new roles. He also highlighted the need for further training and

development for members, including training on the role of an elected member for those new to being a councillor.

4.6. AJ reflected that building officer/member relations is a longer-term cultural project and that group leaders, commissioners and senior officers can work together to play a role to publicly challenge behaviour that they won't tolerate. AJ also reflected that leaders can also encourage members to take up more LGA training. DF noted that we had started to see examples of members challenging inappropriate behaviour and that training was key alongside clear standards.

4.7. DS thanked the board for their constructive feedback and agreed to provide an update on this at a future meeting.

- **Action: Update on member/officer relations to come back to a future board meeting**

5. Leader update

5.1. JK also provided a short update on devolution, covering the ongoing discussions with neighbouring councils and upcoming meetings with MHCLG.

6. Update on modernisation

6.1. AP opened the update, reflecting on how the publication of the corporate plan has given officers and Members a sense of focus and direction. Work continues on identifying savings and on designing the new operating model. A delivery plan will be developed and they are working on getting the right capacity and capability in place to drive forward the changes.

6.2. PM provided an update on the work to develop the Performance Management and Assurance Framework (PMAF). The team are working to identify both milestones and metrics for the first year of the corporate plan, which will continue to be developed over time. The PMAF will be going through O&S and Cabinet over the next few months and they are working on building in opportunities for O&S to review and interrogate the data collected.

6.3. PM noted that the next step will be working on how the council uses and acts up the data collected through the PMAF. An end of year report will be developed in the spring. PM noted that there will be a learning curve for some teams to get used to reporting in this way but that there is a wider cultural challenge for the council in supporting teams to feel safe and empowered to use this system to report issues as well as successes.

6.4. JK reflected that it was vital that members buy into this new performance management system, and that the council should continue to challenge itself on why it was collecting these milestones and metrics to ensure they were only collecting data that would provide the council with useful insights.

6.5. RP asked how metrics that services are already collecting for stakeholders are being built into this. PM reflected that directorate management teams have fed

into this process to ensure they are selecting the most appropriate metrics for each service. AJ reflected when the data is shared with Members, it needs to be shared along the action plans that services have in place to reach the targets when they are not being met.

6.6. LN provided an update on the new engagement and communications strategy which had just been agreed by SLT and was going to O&S and Cabinet in the autumn. Key areas of focus within the strategy are demonstrating that the council is listening to residents, ensuring communications are clear, using plain English and avoiding jargon. The strategy covers the three main campaigns for the council; A fresh start for Thurrock, Thurrock cares and Communities in action. LN also touched on the council's upcoming engagement with faith leaders and residents. JK praised the team for all their work on producing the strategy and the recent launch of the Thurrock cares campaign.

6.7. DS asked how it supports Members in their communications with residents, LN noted she had been engaging with Members to provide them with resources to help them understand and support these campaigns. She will also be covering this at a regular Members' briefing.

6.8. LT provided an update on IRP reporting, noting that intensive work has taken place to identify success criteria in relation to each of the outcomes within the IRP. Work has been done to ensure that this aligns with the recently published statutory guidance on best value and LT has been collecting baseline data through returns from officers. Reporting on the IRP will take place alongside the reporting on the PMAF over the coming months.

6.9. DS asked when the next IRP update will go to Council and how members would be updated on this work as it had been delayed since the elections. LT reflected that this will be going to Cabinet in December and that they are still considering Member engagement as part of this process.

7. Update on finance

7.1. DC gave the update, noting that recent recruitment has been successful and that there is now a Chief Accountant in place. Several vacancies remain across the finance team, so the team are looking to recruit quickly to reduce a reliance on agency staff.

7.2. Work continues on identifying savings for 25/26. DC is confident that the Council will reach its target but there is still more to do.

7.3. DC also highlighted that the Council continues to work on its statement of accounts and engage with auditors ahead of the new backstop date of 13 December 2024. Regular updates are going to Audit Committee to report on progress. The Council aims to meet all its deadlines but expect it will be several years until they have full assurance on the accounts. Annual Governance Statements (AGS) are being drafted alongside the Statement of Accounts. DC outlined the Council's approach to drafting the AGS for the years 20/21, 21/22 and 22/23.

7.4. DC outlined her plans to do line by line reviews of the budget and provided an update on the ongoing finance training for both Members and officers. SM thanked DC and the wider team for the successful training. NW welcomed the recent recruitment, strengthening capacity in the finance team and asked DC to follow up with the new auditors to arrange an introductory meeting.

- **Action: DC to follow up with new auditors to arrange an introductory meeting.**

8. Update on governance

8.1. DF provided an overview of the governance improvement activity, noting that they are making good progress but risks remain. The two main priorities are building the right framework to improve governance structures and decision making and embedding it into the practice and culture, as well as the ongoing review of the Constitution.

8.2. As part of the Constitution review, they are reviewing the Finance and Contract procedure rules, the Code of Conduct, the Scheme of Delegation to officers and will be putting forward proposals soon on Cabinet and Council meetings. This is part of the Council's commitment to transparency and to improve decision making.

8.3. DF also covered the council's phased introduction of the new online system to help improve the quality of reports and to build a corporate forward look for upcoming decisions. The new O&S arrangements are in place, and the work plan is currently being developed, with support from officers to drive forward that improvement.

8.4. Member officer relations continue to be the main challenge, with a small number of members taking up a disproportionate amount of officer time, but new meetings have been introduced to facilitate cross party conversations and training and guidance is key to building a sense of shared accountability across members.

8.5. There was a brief discussion around gaps in communication between Members and officers on key decisions, particularly in cases where there are delays between the decision and implementation.

9. AOB

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

APPENDIX I: Full Meeting Actions

- **Action: DS to raise officer attendance at meetings with SLT.**
- **Action: DS to discuss ward visits with Cabinet /SLT**
- **Action: Update on member/officer relations to come back to a future board meeting**
- **Action: DC to follow up with new auditors to arrange an introductory meeting.**