

Thurrock Borough Council

Improvement and Recovery Board

Minutes – Monday 26 June 2023

Attendees

Gavin Jones – Essex County Council Commissioner (Chair)

Nicole Wood – Essex County Council Commissioner

Dr Dave Smith – Managing Director Commissioner and Chief Executive

Cllr Andrew Jefferies – Leader, Thurrock Council

Cllr Deb Arnold – Deputy Leader, Thurrock Council

Cllr Graham Snell – Cabinet Member for Resources, Thurrock Council

Cllr John Kent – Opposition Group Leader, Thurrock Council

Cllr Lynn Worrall - Opposition Group Deputy Leader, Thurrock Council

Steven Mair – Acting Chief Finance Officer

Jonathan Wilson – Acting Section 151 Officer

Mark Bradbury – Director of Place

Karen Wheeler – Director of Strategy, Engagement and Growth

Jackie Hinchliffe – Director of HR, OD and Transformation

Asmat Hussain – Interim Director of Legal and Governance

Ian Wake – Executive Director of Adults, Health and Housing

Alix Macfarlane – Intervention Communications Lead

Claire Demmel – Interim Director of Public Realm

Debbie Knopp – Director Transformation, Delivery and Support, Essex County Council

Luke Tyson – Delivery and Strategy Manager

Vince Waddams – Assurance Manager

Kerry Thomas – Chief of Staff to the Chief Executive

Apologies

Cllr Kevin Bentley – Leader, Essex County Council

Patrick McDermott – Chief of Staff to the Commissioners

Gary Staples – Transformation Manager

1. Welcome and Introductions

- 1.1. Gavin Jones welcomed Board members to the meeting and introductions were made.

2. Minutes/Actions of the previous meeting

- 2.1. The Minutes of the previous meeting and actions were agreed.
- 2.2. Luke Tyson updated on the open actions.

3. Managing Director Commissioner Update

- 3.1. Dave Smith provided an update regarding the Direction on the structure of the organisation. After some early discussion with Leader and the Leader of the Opposition, a proposal for a new senior structure will be taken to General Services Committee (GSC) in early July seeking agreement for a period of statutory consultation. Following this, proposals will come back to GSC in September. Thanks to senior officers and the support from Essex County Council and Thurrock Council Human Resources (HR).
- 3.2. Dave Smith also confirmed the establishment of Governance Recovery Board, which has met for the first time, agreed Terms of Reference, discussed the emerging work programme.
- 3.3. Reflecting on the publication of the Best Value Inspection (BVI) report, Dave Smith also shared that he has held an all staff meeting and took the opportunity to listen and respond to questions from colleagues. The Leader joined and introduced the discussion. This engagement will be ongoing.

4. Best Value Inspection (BVI) Report Publication

- 4.1. Gavin Jones introduced the discussion. Reflecting that the Report has been out for 10 days. Commissioners are interested in feedback around what learning is to be drawn from it and relevant to the recovery planning.
- 4.2. Cllr Jefferies reflected that it is a jaw-dropping report and that what would have been useful for Councillors is to be told what the process was. It's the view of some Members that this would be an 'inquiry' to give answers. Any council subject to a BVI needs a better understanding of what it is and what it isn't.
- 4.3. Cllr Jefferies also noted that the Inspection team did not invite all senior Cabinet members and senior opposition members and that they should have been invited. He said that there is no point in trying to re-write the report. Nearly all of the recommendations are in place. The Council foresaw what was coming and put this in place. Looking ahead to Full Council – lots of Members are still digesting the report.
- 4.4. Gavin Jones and Cllr Jefferies discussed the need to draw meaningful conclusions and learnings from the report and the need to see a change in the culture where Members want to see a real shift.
- 4.5. Cllr Kent noted there was nothing, except one specific, that was a surprise in the report. It was good to see a body of evidence behind the report. He was keen to understand how we use the report to pick up the pace on improvement as his group don't yet see sufficient change since September 2022.

- 4.6. Cllr Arnold said that she agreed with the previous contributions and noted the importance of training for Members and that this work needs an increased status reflecting the governance issues in the BVI.
- 4.7. Cllr Worrall said the report made for more difficult reading for the second time. The report leaves as many questions now and doesn't give us all the answers. She also noted the importance of training and accountability.
- 4.8. Asmat Hussain reflected that there is more to do on Member training. Standards and Audit Committee will consider and input into the programme and we are working with Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS), East of England Local Government Association (EELGA) to develop proposals. This is not just about Members but also Officers and we need to consider our plans in relation to the BVI report.
- 4.9. Ian Wake reflected that the report makes for grim reading. His personal view is that it is largely fair and accurate and encapsulates the system failure of governance. In any organisation it shouldn't be the case that one or two people can bring it down. Leadership and Culture and Governance are the two key challenges. Across the organisation, many staff felt angry, disturbed and unsettled. We need to be mindful of that. Staff reflected that the report focused on what went wrong and not enough about what good practice there is.
- 4.10. Gavin Jones reflected that Members should feel confident to say we don't know enough to carry out our function and we should support this. It is also important to share the good things that are happening. While Commissioners understand that residents are keen to understand who is to blame, energy should be put into positively moving forward.
- 4.11. Cllr Jefferies noted that "What more could councillors have done?" is a question which continued to be asked and the recovery plan should reflect that.
- 4.12. Dave Smith said that he is often asked by Members "how do we hold officers to account". This is the defining feature of a Member-led organisation, Members hold a vision, purpose and direction of the place and then defining a Council's role in providing for that to happen. This becomes the benchmark by which to hold officers to account and puts Members in the lead. Doing so will also drive pace and a motivation in the destination. On staff, particularly those who are residents, they are really hurt and really let down. Ultimately the only way of addressing level of feeling is by having a compelling vision for Thurrock and then organised in a way to deliver it and when it is not being done this is exposed and addressed.
- 4.13. Cllr Worrall said that all out elections are critical to the change in this organisation, as there would be training for all 49 members for 4 years rather than the turnover through electing in thirds.
- 4.14. Cllr Kent said that we need a specific project around training - for the here and now and what a 4 year training programme looks like. Thurrock should set a target of having the best trained Members in the years ahead. A compelling vision has to be part of the training, to provide Members with the support needed to tease out the vision.
- 4.15. Gavin Jones thanked everyone for their contributions and reflected that there was a good understanding of the impact of the BVI. The discussion has provided lots of valuable information for the thematic work.

5. Improvement and Recovery Plan (IRP)

Theme updates

- 5.1. Steven Mair provided an update on Financial Sustainability. The project is amber overall. Toucan is now out to the market with a final decision in November. Work ongoing on structure review. The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) review will pick up at the end of the month. Fees and Charges phase one complete and being taken through decision making. Lots of technical aspects are ongoing - auditors are being very cautious. It may be March 2024 by the time the 20/21 accounts finalised.
- 5.2. Nicole Wood said that a roadmap to a financially sustainable future is important, and that Commissioners are interested to see how financial capability throughout the organisation is developed.
- 5.3. A discussion followed around training, pace and challenge in the next six months.
- 5.4. Cllr Worrall said that she was surprised that there is a review of the HRA given no issues were raised in the past. She asked that all aspects be looked at now.
- 5.5. Nicole Wood confirmed that it is part of the Directions to look at HRA and that when Commissioners did the diagnostic, there was nothing that put it higher on the priority of actions.
- 5.6. Cllr Arnold asked a question regarding work on Thurrock Regeneration Limited and if this work has slowed down. Assurances were given that this work will come forward in a timely manner.
- 5.7. Asmat Hussain provided an update on Governance and Scrutiny which is amber overall. The first meeting of GRB has taken place. On the Accountable body for the Thames Freeport, colleagues are meeting internally with Officers and awaiting document from DLUHC which brings all the business case together. A whole refresh of training discussion to come out through Standards and Audit Committee.
- 5.8. Cllr Arnold raised that it is necessary for Members to be involved in their development. There needs to be a baseline for new Members' understanding.
- 5.9. Asmat Hussain said that the BVI report recognised the need to support new Members, discussions ongoing about sessions for potential new members. We are working closely with LGA on the programme, which has also gone to GRB.
- 5.10. Jackie Hinchliffe provided an update on Leadership, Culture and Strategic Direction theme. A lot of the activity is part of the Change Team. Interdependencies are key to this work – especially the design principles. The BVI report has given a clear view and it will be interesting to see if the feedback from diagnostic changes since the BVI was published. Leadership Centre has been engaged and plans put in place linked to the new senior structure.
- 5.11. Gavin Jones reflected that a lot of the change is dependent on the new structure, and this impacts pace.
- 5.12. Dave Smith noted that we are not waiting. The Change Team established and working with PwC. Over the next 8 weeks there will be work with Officers and Members on what

a future state looks like and the development of an executable plan which is broader than just savings.

- 5.13. Karen Wheeler noted that work on strategic direction continues as part of the Change Team. A number of projects will benefit from bringing resource.
- 5.14. Mark Bradbury provided an update on Place Leadership and Growth. The business leaders' group has moved back into design phase to ensure compliance with Section 114 restrictions.
- 5.15. A discussion followed on Local Plan resources.

6. Performance Management and Assurance

- 6.1. Karen Wheeler introduced the paper. This is an example of where the detail in the BVI report is really valuable. This report provides draft principles, objectives, scope and deliverables to shape the framework. This is a significant shift to what we have had to date. There is a need to ensure we have the necessary capacity and capability to deliver. The key dependencies include vision and senior management performance framework. The project will look at whole breadth, touching on Risk and Opportunity management with an interim scorecard and then broader scope.
- 6.2. Gavin Jones strongly endorsed this work and asked about proposed governance. Karen Wheeler said they would explore using GRB and a separate steering group.
- 6.3. Nicole Wood said this work reflects early views. There is a lot of work to be done and need to ensure we are lining up the right capacity and capability.
- 6.4. Gavin Jones said that there's a need to strike balance between creating something which is too big with ensuring it is relevant to Members. Commissioners look forward to seeing how this develops.

7. Communication and Engagement Update

- 7.1. Alix Macfarlane provided an update to the Board on the strategy, communications around the BVI report and monitoring staff sentiment as well as the wider views in communities.
- 7.2. There is good news on stakeholders and consultations. Large number of consultations have taken place but little in the way of update on what has happened since. Meetings are in place to start to discussions with Members.
- 7.3. Cllr Worrall said that the BVI report says we were a good news council, and so residents weren't aware. We need to reflect the issues being faced by the council and the work that's ongoing are communicated to residents.
- 7.4. In the discussion that followed, the Board covered how the weekly newsletter is used, having regular updates on the improvement work which is ongoing and broader engagement with residents.

8. Any other business

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