

Thurrock Borough Council

Improvement and Recovery Board

Minutes – 10:30am, Wednesday 20 September 2023

Attendees

Gavin Jones (GJ) – Essex County Council Commissioner (Chair)

Nicole Wood (NW) – Essex County Council Commissioner

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

Cllr Andrew Jefferies (AJ) – Leader

Cllr Deborah Arnold (DA) – Deputy Leader

Cllr Graham Snell (GS) – Cabinet Member for Resources

Cllr John Kent (JK) – Opposition Group Leader

Cllr Lynn Worrall (LW) – Opposition Group Deputy Leader

Steven Mair (SM) – Acting Chief Finance Officer

Jonathan Wilson (JW) – Acting Director of Finance

Mark Bradbury (MB) – Interim Director of Place

Karen Wheeler (KW) – Director of Strategy, Engagement, and Growth

Asmat Hussain (AH) – Interim Director of Legal and Governance

Alix Macfarlane (AM) – Intervention Communications Lead

Claire Demmel (CD) – Interim Director of Public Realm

Luke Tyson (LT) – Chief Intervention Officer

Patrick McDermott (PM) – Chief of Staff to the Commissioners

Vince Waddams (VW) – Assurance Manager

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

Apologies

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

1. Welcome and Introductions

2. Minutes/Actions of the previous meeting

2.1. Minutes from the previous meeting were agreed and confirmed.

3. Managing Director Commissioner Update

3.1. DS provided an update on Senior Leadership recruitment, noting that there is a large pool of interest.

3.2. DS noted constructive conversations with the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council and the Opposition regarding external support to them provided by the Leadership Centre. Diane Neal has been commissioned to do this, starting with a meeting with everyone individually.

3.3. DS commented on the transition stage of recruitment, stating that there has been a review of roles and responsibilities within the Change Team. A critical issue is to manage both capability and capacity. GJ asked if exits are being managed how expected. DS confirmed that exits have been cooperative and supportive; however, it is something to keep under review. DS mentioned some challenges are:

- ensuring everyone sees progress in proposals
- taking the organisation's communication through the recovery journey

DS confirmed that there would be sessions with the Leadership Centre at the end of September / early October.

4. Intervention Progress

4.1. GJ stated Commissioners expect to get a response to Minister's letter in early October.

4.2. GJ acknowledged challenges and issues in the Intervention progress, some of which being early work to building budget for year 2024/25. GJ drew attention to the foundational changes taking place, some of which being an improving culture and actively working towards financial sustainability. This demonstrates the ability for members to make difficult decisions. GJ stated that Commissioners are disappointed where some timelines have slipped.

4.3. GJ stated that there has been excellent engagement and training. However, post October, member training and development opportunities will be given a closer focus. JK and DA asked that the quality of training be improved and tailored to the level of knowledge a member may or may not have. JK stated members are keen to attend LGA courses.

4.4. GJ noted that there is more work to be done regarding risk management and internal audit. Commissioners would like information on programs and projects undertaken by the Council be presented to Commissioners and Members at the earliest stage.

4.5. LW raised concerns with budget setting and the rate of which information is presented to Members. LW noted it would be in the best interest of members to be better prepared when communicating with the public.

5. Improvement and Recovery Plan

5.1. Financial Sustainability

- 5.1.1. SM provided an overview, noting that CCLA is due to be processed soon. He also noted the ongoing consultation on the structure of the finance team.
- 5.1.2. NW asked how approaching previous challenges with auditing was going to be handled. A discussion followed on the wider issues in the external audit market and the backlog.
- 5.1.3. NW noted possible the need to change focus when looking at accounts. Accounts for 2022/23 need to be robust, otherwise, there will be challenges when approaching 2023/24 accounts. SM noted that this would free up resources, with the potential to focus on 2022/23 accounts. PM notes colleagues in DLUHC are working closely to ensure the approach to backstop is appropriate for Thurrock.
- 5.1.4. DA noted that the audit department is under resourced, inquiring what plans are in place when Mazars leaves. SM clarified Mazars are in place to provide resources whilst going out for advert for audit.
- 5.1.5. NW highlighted the importance of not losing the quality of capital reporting and capital review.

5.2. Governance and Scrutiny

- 5.2.1. AH stated there has been significant improvement regarding governance and scrutiny. The Governance team structure is ongoing and in consultation. There have been appointments for two political advisors to assist members. Due to go out for advert on 28 September 2023 for remaining roles in Member Services.
- 5.2.2. AH noted feedback about quality and quantity of training is important. A training passport will be implemented for members.

5.3. Leadership, Culture and Strategic Direction

- 5.3.1. Due to absence, information for this Theme was taken as read and there were no questions raised by Board members.

5.4. Place Leadership and Growth

- 5.4.1. MB stated that Interim Chief Planning Officer will be leading on PAS review of service. This Officer will be supporting with additional resources for the planning service. Training for the planning committee will commence in October.
- 5.4.2. There has been a restructure of the roles of Regeneration and Economic Development.

Action: Ensure the Asset Review takes into account the possible community building use.

Action: Members to be provided with briefing note on the audit backlog and the government's proposed approach and impact on Thurrock.

6. Enhanced Improvement and Recovery Plan (IRP) Update

- 6.1. Expanded directions in March prompted the Council to produce an enhanced IRP within 6 months. This deadline was pushed by a month to account for the Best Value Inspection Report. There will be Member engagement sessions looking at the enhanced IRP. LT stated that recurring themes are communication and engagement, particularly for backbenches. Trust and confidence between members and officers continue to be a theme throughout conversation. Comments from these conversations will be used to map outcomes/benchmark in the Enhanced IRP.
- 6.2. The three priorities that are being focused on are: improving leadership, improving governance and control, financial sustainability, and assurance. The working draft will focus on outcomes and bringing in external bodies to quality assure. LT stated that finalising the draft will involve bringing it forward to IRB in October then, to full Council in October.
- 6.3. LW welcomed the approach to Member Engagement in the development of the Enhanced IRP and said that Members felt that they were listened to.

7. Communications and Engagement Update

- 7.1. AM noted that there was work taking place to reflect on the recovery journey, noting different external stakeholders have contributed.
- 7.2. LW asked that when going out to residents, any communication regarding intervention be in clear language. AM agreed and clarified that an element of the report will be presented in a clear way, defining key words for residents to understand.

8. Any other business

- 8.1. GJ thanked KW for her work at Thurrock as it was the final IRB meeting for KW.
- 8.2. There being no other business, the meeting closed.

Appendix I: Full Meeting Actions

Action: Ensure the Asset Review takes into account the possible community building use.

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