



Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities

Councillor Andrew Jefferies
Leader
Thurrock Council

By email

Lee Rowley MP
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BEST VALUE INSPECTION REPORT ON THURROCK COUNCIL

I am today publishing the Best Value Inspection Report into Thurrock Council, authored by Essex County Council (ECC) in their role as Best Value Inspector. The final version of this report was submitted to the Secretary of State on 19 May 2023 and is being published today following a representations process whereby any particular individuals criticised were given an opportunity to read and respond to those relevant parts of the report before it was published.

The Best Value Inspection report lays bare the failings in the Authority's finance, governance, and leadership functions. It notes that whilst individual officers and members of the Council made significant mistakes, particularly in relation to financial investments, the challenges facing Thurrock Council are attributable to deeper and systemic weaknesses which have allowed for repeated failures at the Authority over many years. In my update to Parliament about the publication of the Best Value Inspection report, I have been clear that I expect Thurrock Council to carefully consider and reflect on the findings and recommendations.

The report makes clear the profound need to secure improvements at Thurrock Council. As you know, in March 2023 the Secretary of State and I considered it necessary and expedient to expand the existing intervention, appointing an independent Managing Director to the Commissioner team to improve senior capacity at Thurrock Council, alongside ECC and expanding Commissioners' powers to include oversight of governance and staffing functions. The expansion to the intervention therefore addressed the majority of recommendations made in the report directed to the Council or Commissioners. Turning to the future, it will now be for your Authority, with the support, guidance and oversight of the Commissioner team, to ensure that vital improvements to the Council's finance, governance, and staffing functions are fully realised.

The report also highlights the pressing need to strengthen the capability of the elected members of the Council. I share this concern, as the engagement and commitment of

all members will be crucial to the Council's recovery. To this end, the report makes an additional recommendation that the Council should implement a programme of work to deliver a continuing member development programme, as well as a programme of work to encourage local residents to participate in local democracy, and to consider standing for election. This accords with the concerns about leadership and member training raised in the first Commissioner's report and the Best Value Inspection update letter, both received in December 2022.

I expect that your Authority will carefully consider this recommendation and will work closely with the Commissioner team to explore how you can take this forward as a matter of urgency, for example, by incorporating this into your Authority's Improvement and Recovery Plan. I would expect that equally close attention is paid to the section of the report which focuses on your Authority's delivery of major projects, where there are clearly lessons to be learnt.

Finally, the report recommends that the Council should move to all-out elections by 31 July 2023, to promote greater consistency and longevity in your work. Given the pressing need to bring stability to the Council, the Secretary of State has concluded that he wishes to seek representations on using his powers under Section 86 of the Local Government Act 2000 to bring about a move to whole council elections from May 2025. The May 2024 elections of one third of members will go ahead as planned to ensure residents have the opportunity to have their say.

Your Authority is now invited to make such representations as it wishes about the Secretary of State's proposal to move your Council to whole council elections from 2025. All such representations should be sent by email to interventions@levellingup.gov.uk or in hard copy to the address above marked for the attention of Max Soule, Deputy Director for Local Government Stewardship, so as to be received on or before 29 June.

I appreciate that since Thurrock Council was placed in statutory intervention in September 2022, and following the expansion of the intervention in March 2023, your Authority has been working closely with Commissioners to address the Council's challenges across finance, governance, and staffing. This work is commendable and to be welcomed and progress has been made in recent months, however, today's Best Value Inspection report makes clear that the Council faces a long road ahead to secure compliance with its Best Value Duty.

I am copying this letter to Councillor John Kent, Leader of the opposition, because all members will have an important role to play in your Authority's improvement journey.

Yours sincerely,

LEE ROWLEY MP
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE FOR LOCAL
GOVERNMENT AND BUILDING SAFETY