

10 February 2016		ITEM: 10 (Decision 01104345)
Cabinet		
Fairness Commission Report		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non key	
Report of: Councillor Jane Potheary, Portfolio Holder for Communities and Public Protection		
Accountable Head of Service: Karen Wheeler, Head of Strategy, Communications & Customer Services		
Accountable Director: Steve Cox, Assistant Chief Executive		
This report is public.		

Executive Summary

In April 2014 Cabinet agreed to establish a Fairness Commission for Thurrock as recommended by the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee Task and Finish Group. This report presents the Commission's report and recommendations following a summer of consultation and engagement across the borough.

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 Note the contents of the report and agree how the Council responds to the recommendations detailed at 3.8.

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 The Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed on 12 September 2013 to establish a Task and Finish Group to look at how other local authorities have deployed equality commissions, within budgetary constraints, to progress equality issues within their localities. The panel's overall aim was to make recommendations on the relevance of a commission for Thurrock, other alternatives, as well as any costs involved.

2.2 The Fairness in Thurrock Review Panel was subsequently established and undertook this investigation, reporting to Cabinet in April 2014. Cabinet approved recommendations to establish a Fairness Commission to progress equality issues within the Borough, and agreed that a Thurrock Fairness Commission Annual Report is received by Cabinet to review and monitor progress.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 3.1 The Fairness in Thurrock Review made a number of recommendations to progress a Fairness Commission as the most relevant mechanism for progressing equalities in Thurrock.
- 3.2 The Review provided a draft Terms of Reference with suggested members for a steering panel. An open nomination process was held from November 2014 to identify suitable and willing candidates. This included two articles in the local press, as well as contacting target organisations and partnership groups. The final membership list for the Commission is as follows:

Membership Criteria	Commissioner
Chair, Voluntary Sector and resident	Demus Lee
Voluntary Sector and resident	John Rowles
Voluntary Sector and resident	Diane Lee
Voluntary Sector and resident	Len Orpin
Head teacher	Dr Asong, Gable Hall School
Health	Len Green until June 2015 then Lesley Buckland, Thurrock NHS CCG
Economist	Andrew Sentance
Local business and industry	Matthew Johnson, Palmers Solicitors
Housing Tenant Representative	Carol Purser
Youth Cabinet	George Wright
Labour Councillor	Cllr Oliver Gerrish
Conservative Councillor	Cllr Robert Gledhill
UKIP Councillor	Cllr Graham Snell
Assistant Chief Executive representing Senior Management Team, Thurrock Council	Steve Cox

- 3.3 One resident representative left the Fairness Commission shortly after its first meeting. It was not possible to fill the post for a disability group representative, something the Commission had aimed to achieve.
- 3.4 Thurrock Fairness Commission held its first meeting on 12 March 2015. Work prior to this concentrated on the recruitment of Commissioners according to the recommendations set out in the review report.
- 3.5 From its first meeting the Fairness Commission highlighted the need to understand more about local perceptions of fairness. The Commission undertook a 'Summer of Listening' from June – October 2015, capturing over 300 written comments from events across the Borough, along with 200 responses to an on-line survey.

- 3.7 The attached draft report sets out the Commissioner's consideration of the consultation results and their recommendations. Services have been asked to respond to the comments as the Commission is keen to ensure local people recognise their views have been listened to, and answers provided to some of the concerns raised as well as recommendations to tackle inequality in the Borough.
- 3.8 The Commission has made a number of recommendations and will be formally requesting agencies working in Thurrock to respond. Thurrock Council endorses the recommendations made by Thurrock's Fairness Commission and our initial response will result in the following actions.

Recommendation	Proposed Response
1. Principles of Fairness	The Council will support by issuing press releases, publicising the principles and promoting the process to support residents who have reason to complain about something against the principles.
2. Strengthening Communities	The Council will arrange a summit of partners to consider how best to design a campaign. This will include businesses and the potential for inward investment. It will also include Stronger Together a partnership supporting asset based community development of which the Council is a partner.
3. Improved Communications	Thurrock Council will be developing a new Customer Service Strategy in 2016. The strategy will be informed by recommendation 1 and 3.
4. Residents Survey	Thurrock Council agrees that a regular survey would support policy development and will be exploring the feasibility of this in the coming months.
5. To provide feedback to those consulted	We will publish the report on the website.
6. Review Thurrock's Single Equality Scheme	We welcome the observations provided by the Commission and will be reviewing the Single Equality Scheme accordingly.

- 3.9 As part of the process for considering the council's response, The Fairness Commission report was considered by Corporate Overview and Scrutiny at its meeting in January 2016.
- 3.10 Corporate Overview and Scrutiny welcomed the report as a good indicator of work in Thurrock, and noted the unenviable difficulty of taking on a review into something as broad as 'fairness'. However some points were also made with the request that these be shared with Cabinet when they consider the report.

- 3.11 Number of responses
The first point questioned the number of people who responded as a percentage of the population of Thurrock and asked whether it was premature for the report to determine priorities for the future.
- 3.12 The Commission considered the number of responses at its meeting September 2015 and concluded that the qualitative nature of the research taken by Commissioners outweighed concern with numbers. Commissioners attended a number of public, open events and offered to attend meetings and AGMs to gather further information. Many more people were spoken to than the 300 written comments from such events, however, the Commission has only quoted figures that it can evidence. For example, a talk at Thurrock Over 60's club meant that the Commission engaged with approximately 40 people. This resulted in six comments from the group – endorsed by a wider number of individuals, but counted as six out of the total number of responses.
- 3.13 A further consideration of this point by the Commission referred to the wider body of evidence around inequality in Thurrock produced by the Overview Task and Finish Group 2014. The Fairness Commission accepted this body of evidence as a valuable facet of its evaluation. It did not seek to replicate the research undertaken, and used key points from the report to engage with the wider public about their perceptions of fairness.
- 3.14 The Commission found it useful to talk to residents about their perception of fairness and how they felt about examples of inequality. Often, the wider public response to fairness did reflect on the 'common good' of the borough rather than how to tackle key indicators such as poverty or life expectancy. However the exercise in itself helped to raise awareness and discussion of key issues. The recommendations made by the Commission seek to strengthen how people can express how they feel about the Borough, and how residents can work together to help raise awareness and resolve issues – as well as expecting services to resolve key concerns.
- 3.15 Duplication
The second point questioned whether the council would be duplicating any work by taking forward actions as a result of the recommendation. Discussion on the night informed by officers helped to conclude that the report and recommendations from the Fairness Commission adds weight to taking forward actions that would probably have been considered as part of business as usual, and that the report helps add leverage to taking forward improvements in Thurrock for example, the emphasis on health.
- 3.16 Is 'Fairness' the right focus?
Discussion raised the question of whether fairness was the right focus for the report, or whether it would be better to focus on a wider ambition. As noted at 3.2, the Commission inherited a Terms of Reference with consideration of 'fairness' at its core. The Commissioners all agreed that their work should not duplicate the work of services already exploring issues in Thurrock, and that they did not want to reproduce the work already considered through the Task

and Finish Group. The Fairness Commission therefore felt understanding people's perceptions were the best course to take.

- 3.17 The work of Thurrock Fairness Commission was achieved without any allocated budget and within the existing resources of an officer team providing support to the Commission. The Commission often felt that a lack of budget hindered its ability to pursue actions which may have resulted in a higher profile and a larger degree of public engagement.
- 3.18 Overview and Scrutiny asked whether further work should be considered so that officers bring back a report with more data. However, The Fairness Commission was a time limited focus with officer support to an independent group, rather than a Council led project. Although individual Commissioners have indicated their support to stay involved and help ensure that recommendations are responded to by public services, it does not intend to continue as an active Board following the publication of the report.
- 3.19 As noted at 3.8, officers will be refreshing the Single Equality Scheme in light of the Fairness Commission report and consideration of this later in 2016 provides the most appropriate opportunity to consider whether any further research or data is required to inform tackling issues of inequality in Thurrock.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 To share the draft report and recommendations from Thurrock's Fairness Commission and to seek comment prior to the final publication.

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

- 5.1 As detailed in the report, Thurrock's Fairness Commission has carried out extensive consultation including outreach and an on-line survey. Consideration of local views has helped inform the recommendations set out by the Commission.

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

- 6.1 A Fairness Commission for Thurrock will have a positive impact on all of corporate priorities.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Jonathan Wilson**
Chief Accountant

The actions to be taken by the council in response to the Fairness Commission recommendations will be funded through existing resources,

facilitated by existing staff and incorporated into current workloads and priorities.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **David Lawson**
Deputy Head of Legal Services and Monitoring Officer

There are no legal implications arising from this report beyond the fact that this recommendation will contribute towards good and informed governance as to our equality duty.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Price**
Community Development Officer.

The Council is under a statutory duty as set out in the Equality Act 2010 to eliminate discrimination, advance equality and promote good relations. The Fairness Commission will provide a good mechanism for meeting our equality duties.

7.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

None.

8. Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- <https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/diversity-and-equality/thurrock-fairness-commission>

The Fairness in Thurrock Review and related information can be accessed via the above link.

9. Appendices to the report

- Fairness Commission Report, January 2016

Report Author:

Natalie Warren
Community Development and Equalities Manager
Strategy Team, CEDU