

COUNCIL - 25 APRIL 2024

Member Questions

Cllr Fiza Matloob - to the Leader of the Council

“Can you advise how the transformation agenda within the council is progressing & what is being done to ensure SBC staff have an input?”

Reply

Thank you Councillor Matloob. You will be aware that the Council has a new Transformation Board, which is chaired by Commissioner Curran- this is attended by myself, the Deputy Leader and the Leader of the Opposition. In my recent changes to Cabinet, I have asked the Deputy Leader to focus on delivering an ambitious transformation programme, for which the administration has set aside £2 million. The delivery of a new Target Operating Model is crucial to the Council’s longer term recovery, and I am clear that I want significant cross-party working as part of this. I meet with the Transformation team on a weekly basis, as does the Deputy Leader. Council staff will have a direct input into the transformation programme moving forward, for example a launch workshop for transformation in Strategic Commissioning was held in January which was attended by 30 staff in January and their innovative ideas will be crucial to its success.

Cllr Maroof Mohammad - to the Leader of the Council

“Can you advise what has been done to tackle staff moral issues as this was specifically mentioned in Best Value commissioners’ letter to ensure we have a happy work force at SBC?”

Reply

Thank you Councillor Mohammad for your question. Unfortunately during periods of intense change, as Slough has seen over the past 3 years, there is always an impact on staff recruitment and retention. As most would admit, Slough is not an easy place to work, in particular when we have such severe financial challenges and staff are being asked to go above and beyond for the organisation and the town we all serve. Also due to our recovery, some posts have been deliberately short-term or covered by interims whilst we stabilised the senior tiers with the restructure and allow new permanent appointees to shape their services appropriately.

With many jobs in local government it is a buyers' market - with many roles being able to literally pick and choose where they work. Part of our role is to ensure Slough is where they pick to come to and stay - and that is a complicated offer.

To help tackle some of the retention issues - in particular people who leave soon after arrival or between offer and start date - we have recently begun training managers to roll out a new onboarding policy and procedure which covers the period between advertising for a new post, all the way to the end of a staff member's probation period and beyond. This aims to ensure consistency of approach across the organisation,

giving all recruiting managers the tools, tips and prompts to ensure new starters, existing staff moving team or department and those becoming permanent after being interim staff enjoy the same excellent experience, transition into the council, feel valued, are clear on expectations, behaviours and our values and can contribute to the council even before their first day.

Research shows a large majority of people will leave an organisation, not because of the organisation as a whole, or even their job, but because of their immediate line manager and the way they are managed.

We will be tackling this through direct management training, which is being formulated currently, revised staff policies and procedures and also and possibly most importantly, fostering a culture of good communication and courtesy, where staff feel and are valued for their contribution, are empowered not disempowered and are treated with respect at all times by their colleagues, management and, of course, councillors

Cllr Martin Carter - to the Leader of the Council

“Given the significant number of resignations in the senior leadership team are you confident that the council has the appropriate management resources in place to ensure the councils recovery plan continues at the pace required to ensure we do not fall any further behind the directions we have been set as a council?”

Reply

Thank you Councilor Carter for your question. The Council has made significant progress in stabilising the organisation through various appointments which are detailed in Agenda Item 6 of the Council agenda. I am confident that we have the right team in place to drive forward the Council’s wider recovery.

Cllr Zaffar Ajaib - to the Leader of the Council

“Labour administration working very closely with the commissioners managed to complete top tier of council’s senior executive leadership team, less than 12 months on we have lost the CEO, S151 officer and 3 other executive directors have left the council, can he provide an explanation for the reason behind these departures and outline the measures the council is taking to fulfil these roles quickly to avoid further delays to key changes that need to be delivered as part of council recovery journey around asset sales, HR restructuring, Improvements to Comms, ICT and Customer Services, while also assuring us that the remainder of senior leadership is content to continue in their current roles?”

Reply

Thank you Councilor Ajaib for your question. If I may refer you to Agenda Item 6 on tonight’s agenda which details the senior management restructure update providing members with information confirming appointment of an Interim Chief Executive, Interim S.151 Officer, Monitoring Officer and various other appointments which are detailed within the report.

Cllr Sabia Akram – To Cllr Bedi

“With the summer holidays fast approaching can you tell us why Slough schools issue the highest rate of fixed penalty fines compared to surrounding boroughs and what work are you doing to ensure that Slough residents are not being disproportionately discriminated when requesting leave outside of term time?”

Reply

Thank you Councillor Akram for your question. The number of fixed penalty notices issued in Slough is in proportion to the number of G codes (Unauthorised Holiday Absence Request) recorded across Slough Schools. Previous research indicates Slough sits closely with our statistical neighbours (similar make up) with regards to the number of fixed penalty notices being issued. This year, the number of G codes issued to date is lower at this point than at this time last year.

In accordance with the DfE Statutory guidance – Slough Borough Councils have developed Local Penalty Notice Code of Conduct which stipulates that request of leave during term time is **not** a right and that **“Only exceptional circumstances warrant a leave of absence. Schools must consider each application individually taking into account the specific facts and circumstances and relevant background context behind the request. If a leave of absence is granted, it is for the headteacher to determine the length of the time the pupil can be away from school. Under education law, parents do not have an automatic right to take their children out of school during term time. The school holiday dates are published a year in advance and parents are expected to arrange their family holidays during those times.”**

In Slough, schools experience a much larger number of holiday requests during school term time. The decision to issue a fine is solely that of the school’s headteacher and each request is considered on a case by case basis taking into account personal circumstances related to the absence request i.e. pupil attendance, repetitive patterns of holiday absence, extenuating circumstances etc.

Cllr Naveeda Qaseem – To the Leader of the Council

“SBC has a serious issue with staff retention which was also mentioned in Best Value Report by the commissioners, can you advise what is being done to address this problem?”

Reply

Thank you Councillor Qaseem for your question. If I may refer you to my response to Councillor Mohammad which was as follows: “To help tackle some of the retention issues - in particular people who leave soon after arrival or between offer and start date - we have recently begun training managers to roll out a new onboarding policy and procedure which covers the period between advertising for a new post, all the way to the end of a staff member's probation period and beyond. This aims to ensure consistency of approach across the organisation, giving all recruiting managers the tools, tips and prompts to ensure new starters, existing staff moving team or

department and those becoming permanent after being interim staff enjoy the same excellent experience, transition into the council, feel valued, are clear on expectations, behaviours and our values and can contribute to the council even before their first day.

Research shows a large majority of people will leave an organisation, not because of the organisation as a whole, or even their job, but because of their immediate line manager and the way they are managed.

We will be tackling this through direct management training, which is being formulated currently, revised staff policies and procedures and also and possibly most importantly, fostering a culture of good communication and courtesy, where staff feel and are valued for their contribution, are empowered not disempowered and are treated with respect at all times by their colleagues, management and, of course, councillors”

Cllr Harjinder Gahir – To the Leader of the Council

“In relation to the strike action over pay dispute by Slough parking enforcement officers which disrupted Slough town centre between February 26 and March 10, affecting parking attendance, back-office support, CCTV monitoring and bus lane enforcement. Whilst I am pleased that the pay dispute has been resolved, what steps did the Leader and Cabinet Member take to meet with union representatives as they requested, the mitigation plans implemented for the future and the response to members who seemed to use the strike action as an excuse to illegally park around the town centre?”

Reply

Thank you Councillor Gahir. I am unclear as to what you are referring to by “members who seemed to use the strike action as an excuse to illegally park around the town centre”. As far as I am aware, my office was not contacted to meet with union representatives relating to strike action.

Cllr Christine Hulme – To Cllr Bedi

“Will the Lead Member for Education and Children’s Services please summarise is there is a deficit of childcare in the borough and confirm that Slough has sufficient childcare places to accommodate parents that qualify for the rollout of the expanded 15 hours childcare support from April 24 and the expanded support from September 24 for eligible working parents with a child from 9 months old.”

Reply

Thank you Councillor Hulme for your question. The team have a good handle on the sufficiency of places and a lot of their work indirectly supports this agenda and increasing participation. The Council and the DfE are also working very closely on the working family’s entitlement and the need for additional places.

Calculations from the DfE show an additional 666 places are required in Slough between April 2024 and September 2025 as part of their New Place Development programme. Hopefully the increase in funding for two year olds means that the PVI sector will produce the majority of places but there is a lot of work being carried out to increase this and the new Early Years Strategy that we are developing, with LGA support, will have a clear focus on this area. The new nursery in the Horlicks development (100 places) will help provide additional capacity and there are other projects planned including:

- Raising awareness of the benefits of early education and specifically linking with the attendance team on this.
- Developing parent champions in the FIS team to carry out outreach in the community.
- Linking with Early Help to promote early years services via Early Help Champion's and specifically targeted faith based groups.
- Supporting partners to understand all the early years entitlements so they can support families, particularly job centre staff and health visitors.

Our biggest challenge with the development of new places for 2 years olds and under 2's is around workforce pressures and recruiting staff. We have a Workforce Plan and will be launching a focused recruitment campaign for childminders launching very soon.

Cllr Pavitar K Mann – To Cllr Manku

It has been some time since the council last passed a Play Strategy which is undoubtedly coming up and due for renewal. Can the Lead Member please provide information as to the plans to progress a new play strategy, particularly in relation to the proposed increase in accessible and disabled-friendly play equipment?

Reply

Thank you Councillor Mann for your question. The development of a new Play Strategy is a priority for the year ahead. I would consider the objectives of the Play Strategy to be intrinsically linked to the objectives set out in the Corporate Plan.

Cllr Dar – To Leader of the Council

Can the Leader of the Council please confirm the costs of SBC new signs displayed on OH, and whether this is part of a wider rebranding exercise across the borough to replace existing SBC logos and signage, and how much money has been set aside for the exercise?

Reply

Thank you Councillor Dar. The cost of the new signs on Observatory House, including installation, was £1,191. I believe it is important that our HQ is visible to the public, and welcoming as a civic venue.