

Minutes of the Improvement and Recovery Board

Wednesday 2nd March 2022

12:30pm Council Chambers

Attendees:

Members:

Sabia Akram, Rob Anderson Pavitar Mann (Deputy Leader), Balvinder Bains, Dexter Smith, James Swindlehurst (Leader)

Officers:

Alan Sinclair, Andrew Fraser, Gavin Jones, Phil Brookes, Steven Mair, Angela Wakefield, Sarah Wilson, Christine Hulme, Richard West,

Commissioners and supporting team:

Margaret Lee, Debbie Knopp, Max Caller (Chair), Lucy Storr

Apologies: Natasa Pantelic, Martin Carter

Meeting Minutes:

1. Welcome and Introductions

Max Caller welcomed the board members and invited the group to introduce themselves.

2. Declaration of Interests

There were no interests declared.

3. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

There were no comments on the minutes of the 19 January 2022 meeting.

4. Finance Board Report

Margaret Lee summarised the 16 February 2022 Finance Board, outlining the focus on the 2022/23 budget, the introduction of the procurement project and associated project board, and the development of a board to oversee the asset disposal programme. Ms Lee thanked Steve Mair and team for their continued efforts.

Cllr Rob Anderson echoed Ms Lee's feedback and commented that these are the most comprehensive set of budget papers he has seen from Slough Borough Council (SBC).

Mr Caller added that the medium-term financial strategy and ensuring that disposals are of good value and processed in a timely manner are crucial for the future financial stability of SBC.

5. Directions Update

Mr Caller introduced the update, noting that this meeting had been postponed to allow the council more time to complete the functional capability assessment required by the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' (DLUHC's) 1 December 2021 Directions, and invited the Leader Cllr James Swindlehurst to present to the group.

Cllr Swindlehurst provided his thoughts on the functional capability assessment and outlined a number of challenges facing SBC including staff recruitment, pay and retention, the need to offer more flexible terms, and the impacts of the upcoming minimum wage increase.

Gavin Jones noted the feedback from Cllr Swindlehurst and echoed the importance of a good workforce strategy to support SBC's recovery.

The group then discussed the historical Our Futures programme, with Cllr Swindlehurst highlighting that it was intended to remedy some of the challenges mentioned and, though he felt that the premise was good, the project failed in its implementation. Cllr Swindlehurst also opined that members could have provided more challenge during the process.

Mr Caller then invited other members to comment, noting that the functional capability assessment did not yet have Cabinet endorsement.

Cllr Sabia Akram expressed frustration that Our Futures work had been led by consultants, suffered from a lack of challenge from the senior leadership team and had not involved members as closely as it could, though did indicate that staff engagement was a success of the programme. Cllr Akram also noted the importance of diversity and succession planning in a future workforce strategy and the need to build trust and stronger working relationships between political leadership and officers.

Cllr Balvinder Bains stated that he felt that officers had not been honest enough throughout the Our Futures process, that sufficient information was not provided to members, and that concerns were not taken seriously enough. He indicated that focus should be given to growing capability in SBC in future rather than relying on temporary consultants.

Cllr Pavitar Mann echoed Cllr Akram's comments on diversity and agreed that officers had been kept away from members in the past. She also noted the challenges felt by the Place directorate including considerable cost savings, and the impact this has had on delivering political priorities.

Cllr Christine Hulme described how many issues within Children's Services are historic and linked to socio-economic factors. She expressed that these could be aided by an economic development strategy linked to skills and employment demands in the area, including those of the council, and the need for a set of clear priorities as part of the next stage of recovery work.

Cllr Swindlehurst noted that a priority list had been discussed at the recent away day, and that members support building basic functional capability before enhancing services as finances allow. He added that there had been some positive developments, including the building of new homes and associated increases to council tax revenue.

Cllr Anderson echoed the group's comments on the importance of building a modern, flexible working culture at SBC and making it an attractive employer.

Cllr Dexter Smith, Leader of the Opposition, voiced his agreement for the discussion so far as well as his disappointment with the failure of the Our Futures programme to deliver a review of the current skills shortage or promised cost savings. He also noted concerns around the lack of information about SBC staff returning to offices.

Mr Caller noted the importance of points raised and explained his intention to delay writing back to the DLUHC Secretary of State until the functional capability assessment had been produced in a more consistent manner and endorsed by Cabinet. He also noted that the discussion had highlighted that the current capability assessment did not include input from members setting out the challenges they faced and the impact this had on their ability to make informed decisions, or how they plan to move towards a corporate recovery plan.

Mr Jones added that the report should make clear how SBC will act differently in future to ensure that similar issues are not repeated.

Action: Cllr Swindlehurst to review the functional capability assessment and add member input with a view to a report to SBC's Cabinet before the end of March. (31/3/22)

Cllr Akram provided an example of challenges faced when she was the lead for Treasury Management, outlining the background work that she did to ensure that she understood the role and the barriers she faced when requesting information or changes to governance structures.

Mr Caller noted the importance of the primacy of members and of Council, and an agreed standard for responding to member enquiries which is acted upon.

Cllr Swindlehurst echoed Cllr Akram's frustrations about getting information from officers in the past, and the frequent questions and challenge he receives from residents.

Cllr Anderson agreed that members need to demonstrate that they can ask the right questions and build trust in information given to them by officers when they know that this has been incorrect in the past, particularly referencing finances.

Ms Lee advised that a respectful relationship between both officers and members is needed for a properly functioning council, including frequent communication.

Mr Jones referenced the recent officer and member workshop, the need for officers and members to build trust, and the significant challenges ahead.

Cllr Swindlehurst explained that he was not shy of accepting responsibility for past failures of SBC, that frustration felt was not directed at individuals currently in the organisation, and the importance of focusing on the future.

Cllr Mann endorsed this view and added that self-reflection by members is also needed.

Action: The proposed Improvement and Recovery Plan, due for submission at the end of May, to incorporate proposals for improved Member support and briefing as part of the proposals addressing Corporate Governance. Cllr Swindlehurst and Mr Jones (1/6/22)

6. Forward plan and future meeting dates

Mr Caller concluded that he will share his draft first letter to the DLUHC Secretary of State with this group before sending it, and that the revised capability assessment needs to have gone back to Cabinet before the end of March, understanding that the budget requires significant attention in the coming days. The next meeting would be held on a date to be agreed in April.

Action: Claire Willerton

He thanked the group for their input before closing the meeting.

This will need updating MMC

Date: 2 March 2022

Ref: SBC/IRB/03