

Slough Borough Council: Finance Board
First meeting: Wednesday 12 January 2022 at 1500

Minutes

Attendees:

Margaret Lee – Finance Commissioner (Chair)

Max Caller CBE – Lead Commissioner

Cllr Rob Anderson – Cabinet Lead for Finance (Deputy Chair)

Cllr Dexter Smith – Leader, Opposition

Steven Mair – Section 151 Officer

Andrew Fraser – Executive Director of Children’s Services

Alan Sinclair – Executive Director of People (Adults)

Richard West – Executive Director of Customer and Community

Claire Willerton – Chief of Staff to the Commissioners (Secretary)

1. Welcome and introductions

- 1.1. Margaret Lee opened the meeting and attendees introduced themselves. Apologies were received from Gavin Jones, Assistant Commissioner.

2. Declarations of interest

- 2.1. **None.**

3. Terms of reference

- 3.1 Ms Lee referred to the draft terms of reference which had been distributed before the meeting. The Finance Board would monitor and report on spending on the recovery and improvement plan to be developed by the Council following the external assurance reviews by CIPFA and Jim Taylor last year. A balanced budget was vital to the Council’s recovery. To that end, there should be collective discussion and decision making to ensure delivery and to manage the risks. There could be no overspends and proper financial discipline would be required to forecast spending and adjust budgets as required.

- 3.2 Max Caller explained that finance was a major element of the Secretary of State’s Directions. The Improvement and Recovery Board which he chaired would look at the recovery and improvement plan for the whole Council and individual service area plans by rotation. Children’s Services would be the first area to be considered at the Improvement and Recovery Board’s next meeting on 19 January. The finance aspects of all the plans would be considered at this Board.

- 3.3 The Council's dialogue with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) would be conducted on a 'no surprises' basis with both parties keeping each other fully informed. Honesty in reporting was essential to that dialogue.
- 3.4 Ms Lee said that procurement and contract management would need to improve to ensure value for money and financial probity. The Council spent millions on contracts and an accurate, up to date contracts register was required. The scale of the savings that the Council had to achieve meant that every contract had to be challenged and reviewed. The Council needed to know what contracts were due for renewal, and when, and fully explore whether there might be a better way of doing things rather than simply extending or renewing a contract without any other options being considered. Once the vision for the Council at the end of the intervention in 2024 was set, no goods or services should be procured that would no longer be needed in 2024. Not renewing or extending a contract for goods or services that would no longer be required would be a simple way to save money quickly.
- 3.5 It was agreed that there should be a review of the next three months procurement activity at the Finance Board's second meeting in February.
- 3.6 Cllr Smith said that the terms of reference were clear. He liked the focus on procurement and added that he would like to see options explored for partnerships and joint procurement with neighbouring councils.
- 3.7 Cllr Anderson wanted to see a focus on the high value/high risk issues. He said he would like to be clear on where expenditure stood against budget at any point so that early action could be taken to control outgoings. He said it would also be important to have a clear picture of the assets held by the Council. Cllr Smith agreed and wanted all Council decisions to be data driven.
- 3.8 Mr Caller reminded the meeting that LG Inform was an excellent resource for understanding the comparative data for the Council with its peers in the CIPFA family. The Directions required a data driven approach. The Council should report its own data confidently and promptly to LG Inform and choose the right comparators for each service area. Ms Lee said exposing the data was the only way to make decisions based on the data and would encourage the provision of high quality data.
- 3.9 The terms of reference and membership of the Board would be amended to reflect this discussion and redistributed with the minutes of this meeting. They would also be shared with the Improvement and Recovery Board.

4. Commissioner approach and monitoring

- 4.1. Ms Lee expected the reports to this Board to be clear and honest to ensure openness and transparency. All reports should provide high quality data, explore the options and demonstrate how value for money would be delivered. Decisions would not be taken on poor data or poor reports.
- 4.2. Budget holders were accountable for their budgets and it was their responsibility to spend wisely. The Council should always have regard to value for money to ensure it spent the council tax paid by the residents of Slough properly. Budget holders should be open to new ideas, question the status quo and be inquisitive and curious about what was possible. Responsibility for that rested with everyone at the Council, not just those in the finance function.

- 4.3. Cllr Anderson wanted to be able to hold each business area to account for its budget and for them to come forward with solutions to any problems.
- 4.4. The 2022-23 budget had to be deliverable. Steven Mair pointed out that the capitalisation to be requested from DLUHC meant that the Council was 'overdrawn' and capitalisation should not be regarded as a bail out.
- 4.5. Ms Lee referred to the 2022-23 and 2023-24 savings programme and the 2021-22 savings tracker distributed before the meeting and asked attendees to review them carefully. They would be considered in detail at the Board's next meeting in February.

5. Forward plan and future meeting dates

- 5.1. Ms Lee explained that the Finance Board would meet monthly, one week before the Improvement and Recovery Board. Papers would be prepared in advance and distributed at least a couple of days before the meeting.
- 5.2. Ms Lee agreed with Alan Sinclair's suggestion that deputies be allowed if officers could not attend. She made clear that any deputy that attended should be fully informed and able to contribute. She would leave it to Cllrs Anderson and Smith to decide whether they wished to appoint deputies should they be unable to attend.
- 5.3. Claire Willerton would arrange the next meeting of the Finance Board for February.
- 5.4. The meeting closed at 3.45pm

Date: 14 January 2022

Ref: SBC/FB/01