

Slough Borough Council: Improvement and Recovery Board
Second meeting: Wednesday 19 January 2022 at 1500

Minutes

Attendees:

Max Caller CBE – Lead Commissioner (Chair)

Margaret Lee – Finance Commissioner

Gavin Jones – Assistant Commissioner

Cllr James Swindlehurst – Leader of Slough Borough Council

Cllr Rob Anderson – Cabinet lead for finance

Cllr Dexter Smith – Leader, Opposition

Peter Robinson – deputy for Steven Mair, Section 151 Officer

Debbie Knopp – seconded programme manager

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

1. Welcome and introductions

1.1. Max Caller opened the meeting and attendees introduced themselves. Apologies were received from Steven Mair.

1.2. Mr Caller welcomed Gavin Jones, Debbie Knopp, Cllr Anderson, and Cllr Smith to the Board for the first time. Mr Jones was appointed as Assistant Commissioner on 11 January; Ms Knopp would be providing programme management support to the Commissioners; Cllr Anderson replaced Cllr Carter following the Cabinet reshuffle; and Cllr Smith replaced Cllr Strutton who had stood down as Leader of the Opposition Group.

2. Declarations of interest

2.1 None.

3. Minutes of the previous meeting and matters arising

3.1 The minutes of the previous meeting, the Board's first, held on 15 December were agreed.

3.2 There was one matter arising on paragraph 3.2. Cllr Smith asked about support from neighbouring councils and whether anything had been agreed. Mr Caller explained that he had had conversations with the Chief Executives of neighbouring councils, including Reading and Windsor and Maidenhead,

and that they were ready to offer support when the Council was clearer about what was needed. Mr Caller encouraged members and officers to use their relationships with the local government sector to maximise the practical help and support available to the Council.

4. Finance Board report

- 4.1 Margaret Lee went through the terms of reference and membership of the Finance Board as agreed at its first meeting on 12 January. She invited comments from the Board.
- 4.2 Cllr Anderson said he supported the Finance Board's approach, especially Mr Mair's recommendation that it be risk-based as this would enable the Council to focus on the right areas. Cllr Smith asked about debt repayment, particularly the loans and borrowing in the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), and whether the Finance Board and this Board should consider them. He also asked how the financial position of the companies owned by the Council would be considered.
- 4.3 Mr Caller reminded the Board of the scope of the Directions in which the Secretary of State expected the Commissioners to have oversight of all the Council's activities except the internal workings of Slough Children First. Companies were specifically mentioned in the Directions and would be included as a work-stream in the Council's Improvement and Recovery Plan. The Finance Board should have an overview of the HRA and the amount of attention it received would depend on the risk profile.
- 4.4 Ms Lee emphasised the risk-based approach again. She hoped that the outstanding accounts could be closed soon and that they would identify any risks for the HRA. Mr Caller said that he wanted the Finance Board to look closely at the HRA to be sure there were no issues similar to those recently uncovered at Nottingham City Council and which had taken a year to come to light since that Council's Improvement and Assurance Board was appointed.
- 4.5 Ms Lee closed this item by emphasising that the Finance Board would consider procurement and contracts, and how they contributed to the vision for the Council in 2024 and delivered value for money.

5. First report to the Secretary of State

- 5.1 Mr Caller wanted clarity from the Council on the skills gap analysis and reassurance that it would be consistent with a vision for the Council in 2024. He wanted to be sure this Board had the opportunity to discuss the draft analysis before it was cleared through Cabinet and the whole Council. Gavin Jones would take the lead on steering this process. Mr Jones said that the Improvement and Recovery Plan needed the active involvement of members and officers and that the whole Council had to own the Plan. This Board would provide expertise and challenge.

- 5.2 Mr Caller explained that the Commissioners wanted the first report to set the tone and direction for the intervention and to provide the 'seed corn' for the Council's improvement and recovery. He reminded the Board that the vision for the Council in 2024 was likely to mean a smaller Council, operating over fewer sites, and doing more in partnership. The first report to the Secretary of State and the Commissioners' commentary on it would establish the foundation on which the detail in the report on the first six months of the intervention would be built.
- 5.3 Cllr Swindlehurst informed the Board that the Local Government Association (LGA) would facilitate a workshop on 18 February for officers and members to define the vision for the Council in 2024 and begin the process of agreeing the Improvement and Recovery Plan. The Cabinet would have a separate preparatory session with the LGA facilitator on 11 February. Mr Jones had asked for a similar session from the LGA facilitator for the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT, formerly the Executive Board) to help them prepare for the joint workshop with members. There would be special Cabinet meeting to review the outputs from the workshop on 21 February. This would precede consideration of the likely content of the Plan by this Board and final sign-off by Cabinet, scheduled for 28 February.
- 5.4 Cllr Smith said that the employment committee would look at the workforce profile its next meeting. He wanted to make sure that members had the correct knowledge and involvement to enable the Council to close the gap on capability and capacity to deliver the improvement required.
- 5.5 Mr Jones expected that a separate workshop would be required on how to finance the Improvement and Recovery Plan, Mr Caller said that the Plan should be clear on the resources, both people and money, to deliver.

6. Forward plan and future meeting dates

- 6.1 The Board's next meeting would be on 23 February and would receive a presentation on the likely content of the draft report to the Secretary of State which would be considered by Cabinet on 28 February. Cllr Swindlehurst would agree with Mr Jones and Mr Mair who should lead on that presentation. The Cabinet and Corporate Leadership Team would be invited to attend on 23 February.
- 6.2 Invitations would follow for the remainder of the calendar year, with the Board expected to meet on the third Wednesday of each month. The Finance Board would meet on the second Wednesday of each month. Ms Lee noted that the next meeting of the Finance Board, its second, would receive reports from business areas by exception.
- 6.3 The meeting closed at 1605.

Date: 25 January 2022

Ref: SBC/IRB/02