

Minutes of the Improvement and Recovery Board
Wednesday 27 April 2022
2pm 3rd Floor Observatory House / Microsoft Teams

Attendees:

Commissioners:

Max Caller – *Lead Commissioner (Chair)*

Gavin Jones – *Assistant Commissioner and Head of Paid Service*

Members:

Cllr James Swindlehurst – *Council Leader (Deputy Chair)*

Cllr Dexter Smith – *Leader of the Opposition*

Cllr Rob Anderson – *Cabinet lead for Finance and Performance Management*

Cllr Christine Hulme – *Lead Member for Children’s Services*

Officers:

Steven Mair – *Deputy Chief Executive & Section 151 Officer*

Secretariat:

Claire Willerton – *Chief of Staff to the Commissioners*

Lucy Storr – *Deputy Chief of Staff to the Commissioners*

Guests:

Trevor Doherty – *Department for Education Commissioner (Children’s Services)*

Andrew Fraser – *Chief Executive of Slough Children First*

Tony Hunter – *Chair, Slough Children First*

Debbie Knopp - *Strategic PMO Support*

Graeme McDonald – *SOLACE support for SBCs recovery plan*

Apologies:

Margaret Lee – *Finance Commissioner*

Meeting Minutes:

1. Welcome and Introductions

Max Caller thanked the attendees for joining and explained that Trevor Doherty and Tony Hunter had been invited in their roles Department for Education Commissioner and Chair of Slough Children First respectively as Slough Children First was a substantial item on the agenda.

He also clarified that these and the Finance Board meetings were not public, though minutes are published on the Slough Borough Council (SBC) website.

2. Declaration of interests

No interests were declared.

3. Minutes and actions of March Improvement and Recovery Board

James Swindlehurst commented on the minutes from the March Improvement and Recovery Board, noting that he had remarked that the 'Our Futures' programme was flawed in its premise rather than only in its implementation, and that the analysis from the programme could help to identify current challenges. James also corrected the spelling of 'SEGRO'.

Action: Lucy Storr to update March 2022 minutes with the correct spelling of 'SEGRO'.

Trevor Doherty flagged a matter of accuracy regarding Children's Services and indicated that he would address this as part of the agenda item on Slough Children First.

Max Caller noted that the actions had been updated in writing. No amendments to these were made.

4. Update from the March 2022 Finance Board

Cllr Anderson pointed the Board towards the minutes of the March Finance Board and highlighted that the next key milestone was sign off for 18/19 accounts expected in May 2022, with 19/20 to follow in September 2022. He reiterated that finalisation of accounts is necessary to allow financial decisions to be made with more certainty.

Cllr Anderson then outlined a recent meeting with external auditors noting that it was his first with the current team. He reported that the lead auditor was happy with the SBC Finance team's work to date and believed that the council was accepting the accounting challenges and taking appropriate action. They will meet quarterly.

Cllr Anderson also noted that Margaret Lee gave an overview of the procurement work and that he was hoping to discuss any 'quick wins' identified at the next Finance Board, and that Max Caller had provided an update on the asset disposal work noting that it was complex and agreed to update the Leader and Lead Member for Finance as appropriate.

Max Caller added that he intends to write to Cllr Anderson about commencing marketing of out of borough properties shortly to allow capital receipts to be received within the 22/23 financial year rather than waiting to take proposals to the next in-person meeting. He confirmed that there would always be a Cabinet report to support proposals, that he was happy to consider any concerns or objections from Members, and that valuations will be based on red book principles.

Cllr Swindlehurst responded that it was preferable to get Cabinet reports before sales were made, but that he understood the necessity of expediting the process in this instance, adding that there is consensus from Members to dispose of out of borough properties.

Max Caller also highlighted concerns raised about auditing savings proposals: he explained that Commissioners, officers and members all needed confidence that savings and associated service changes could be delivered in the timescale specified, and that this should be done ahead of annual budget approval. Steve Mair added that one of the benefits of submitting savings plans for 23/24 by the 31 May 2022 was to allow for Scrutiny and Cabinet approval before Christmas and ahead of the budget in April. Cllr Anderson reflected that this was similar to past processes, which had not been followed in recent years.

5. Slough Children First

Andrew Fraser outlined the latest position with the Department for Education (DfE) transformation and running cost grants and explained the work to bring together a revised business plan which Margaret Lee had been supporting.

Tony Hunter welcomed Margaret Lee's engagement, scrutiny and experience, and agreed that the Company needs to be open and transparent with the council and Commissioners.

Trevor Doherty noted that previous Improvement and Recovery Board minutes state that he said that the Company could not make savings and wanted to inform the group that he had also given reasons to support this judgement.

Cllr Hulme confirmed that she was fully briefed on the funding situation and was keen to ensure that proposed savings were realistic and deliverable. She also stated that working on early intervention is a council-wide issue and needs engagement across the organisation.

Andrew Fraser flagged that the revised business case had been written at significant pace and that working with partners to the degree suggested and focussing on early help as a system rather than a team within the council will require significant cultural change for all involved. Gavin Jones agreed with this and emphasised the importance of helping officers and partners to understand how they could contribute to a more preventative way of working.

Steve Mair informed the group that he, Margaret Lee and Peter Robinson would be feeding back on the Slough Children First business case later in the week.

Max Caller added that the need for confidence in reporting of expenditure, accurate forecasting and robust spending controls applies across all services, not just Children's, and that this confidence is fundamental to savings and growth proposals; he added that he would be unable to sign off on plans until he had this. Gavin Jones agreed with this and noted that there needs to be clear messaging about the realism of the council's financial position and a culture where people feel comfortable making disclosures when appropriate.

Tony Hunter emphasised the importance of basing a budget on realistic assumptions and monitoring these assumptions regularly.

Cllr Swindlehurst highlighted that the Children's Trust did not balance its budget in any year of its operation and agreed that the Company has been more open but is still not financially secure in his view.

Cllr Hulme added that rating assumptions may be helpful to be clear about which were easier to adjust and which were outside of council control.

Trevor Doherty highlighted that it was important to stress the levels of deprivation seen in Slough and that, in his view, spend was not high compared to other areas in a similar position. He added that he would assist with making the tough decisions necessary in Slough and that controlling demand would be extremely tough, particularly considering external factors such as high inflation and a gap between this and universal credit payments.

Max caller agreed that the Company needs to be clear on forecasting, manage risks and their mitigation, and have some contingency money within its budget.

Cllr Swindlehurst reflected that RAG rating how realistic plans are would be useful, citing the challenges of getting more foster carers, and noted that multiple savings plans in the past had not been realised.

Tony Hunter and Trevor Doherty left the meeting when the item ended.

6. Improvement and Recovery Plan update

Gavin Jones introduced the item, thanking Graeme McDonald and SOLACE for his support in writing the plan and clarifying that the papers contained an outline of the plan rather than the full document. Gavin also emphasised the importance of the plan being data-driven, informed the Board that he has put a weekly meeting in place with officers from all aspects of the council to drive the work forward and ensure that the plan is realistic, and noted that he has produced a 'corporate' rather than 'recovery' plan to reflect the priorities of the council itself.

Graeme McDonald then went through the plan in detail, drawing out the context of Slough, noting the opportunity for officers to be part of real positive change and reiterating the scale of the financial challenge, before explaining each section in more detail.

Gavin Jones briefly talked about resourcing and his intention to incorporate values and behaviours into the performance management framework, as well as the importance of representative groups. He confirmed to Cllr Hulme that ensuring that SBC was representative of the local population was part of this plan.

Cllr Hulme asked if whistleblowing was an issue: Max Caller responded that the organisation needs to ensure that action is taken and appropriate feedback given.

Gavin Jones confirmed that he has asked the Monitoring Officer to align plans for scrutiny with the corporate plan and informed the group of his intent to do a development review of tiers two and three of the organisation to identify areas where organisational capability and resilience need to be strengthened to face the

challenges of recovery. He expressed his intent to deliver a revised organisational structure in June 2022 and begin recruitment shortly afterwards.

Cllr Hulme asked if there were areas of good practice within the council; Max Caller responded that all councils have some areas which operate brilliantly, with Gavin Jones adding that celebrating success and rewarding officers for these was powerful.

Cllr Hulme asked about plans for engagement with residents; Graeme McDonald flagged that a conversation about longer term plans for this was needed and Cllr Swindlehurst outlined past challenges with resident forums.

Cllr Anderson expressed the view that risk management had always been an area of weakness and recognised that this needed to improve to allow officers to put forward unpopular decisions which may be challenged by residents.

Max Caller recognised the challenge in presenting another programme of change shortly after the recent organisational restructure and the importance of motivating officers and members to do something different, including more ongoing engagement and challenge between officers and members.

Cllr Swindlehurst raised ongoing frustrating with fully understanding the councils plans and their path to implementation; Max Caller emphasised the importance of supporting members to question the right things rather than seeking additional levels of detail by default.

Cllr Swindlehurst also expressed the opinion that key messages in the plan were similar to those in the past, and that safety and outcomes should be drawn out more clearly. He also informed the Committee that he intended to make some more changes to roles in Cabinet but was aware that they also needed a sense of stability.

Cllr Hulme emphasised the importance of listening to residents when defining the council's priorities. Max Caller pointed her to resident engagement proposals. Cllr Anderson expressed the view that moving to all-out elections every four years would reduce levels of engagement with residents: Max Caller responded that councils can effectively engage with residents outside of campaigning activity and would need to do this to support them through challenging times ahead.

7. AOB

Max Caller thanked the group for their contributions.

The meeting ended at 16:11.

Ref: SBC/IRB/04