

Minutes of the Improvement and Recovery Board
Thursday 16 June 2022 11am
Council Chambers, Ground Floor Observatory House / Microsoft Teams

Attendees:

Commissioners:

Max Caller – *Lead Commissioner (Chair)*
Margaret Lee – *Finance Commissioner*

Members:

Cllr James Swindlehurst – *Council Leader (Deputy Chair) and Lead for Council Recovery, Forward Strategy & Economic Development*
Cllr Dexter Smith – *Leader of the Opposition*

Officers:

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

Secretariat:

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

Guests:

Stephen Brown – *Chief Operating Officer*
Debbie Knopp – *Strategic PMO*

Apologies:

Cllr Pavitar K. Mann – *Deputy Leader and Lead for Housing & Planning (attended virtually)*
Cllr Rob Anderson – *Lead for Financial Oversight & Council Assets*
Claire Willerton – *Chief of Staff to the Commissioners*
Gavin Jones – *Assistant Commissioner and Head of Paid Service*

Meeting Minutes:

1. Welcome and Introductions

- 1.1. Max Caller welcomed the group and introduced Stephen Brown, the new Chief Operating Officer.
- 1.2. Max reminded the group that the Commissioner's letter to the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) Minister was confidential and would be shared publicly with the response in due course.

2. Declaration of interests

2.1. No interests were declared.

3. Minutes and actions of the May Improvement and Recovery Board

3.1. The minutes of the April meeting were approved and actions agreed.

3.1.1. Action: Lucy Storr to share Gavin Jones' latest organisational structure with Cllr Smith (completed).

4. Update from the June 2022 Finance Board

4.1. Margaret Lee briefed the group on the June Finance Board noting the discussion of the outstanding high priority actions and agreement to ask the Audit Committee to focus on resolving high priority actions across the Council, challenges with closing the 18/19 accounts and need to reevaluate value for money assessments of services once closed, and the 22/23 budget position.

4.2. Cllr Swindlehurst confirmed that he was mobilising Cabinet as requested by Commissioners to focus on the 22/23 overspend and achieving the necessary level of savings over the coming years, and that an update on the 22/23 position would be regularly brought to the Lead Member and Officer meeting.

4.3. Margaret Lee also informed the group that the contracts register project had been discussed and that a Children's Services meeting with Andrew Fraser was outstanding. Max Caller presented an update on the disposals programme and would take a paper to Cabinet on Monday 20 June. Richard West had outlined activities to investigate the potential to let out some space in Observatory House to an external organisation.

4.4. Cllr Smith agreed that more action was needed to close the 22/23 budget gap.

4.5. Max Caller flagged that Commissioners were getting increasingly concerned with the lack of resolution on spending and suggested that the Council might want to consider partnering with other organisations to run some services, allowing the management team and their officers to focus on recovery efforts.

4.6. Margaret Lee added that commissioning was likely to become more challenging as contractors' resources were stretched by rising costs.

5. Improvement and Recovery Plan update

5.1. Max Caller introduced the item, explaining that it was an update on the implementation of the recovery plan on behalf of officers.

5.2. Steve Mair then presented the update, taking the Board through each area and noting that more work needed to be done to bring consistency to the process.

5.3. Steve outlined current mitigation plans for savings at risk in Place, including energy costs, letting of office space, and a leisure contract, as well as challenges within Housing.

5.3.1. Action: Steve Mair to confirm who needs to put more resource into work with Osborne's to improve social housing provision, as mentioned in the Place update.

- 5.4. Margaret Lee noted that she was in discussion with the Monitoring Officer about the wider review of the Scrutiny function.
- 5.5. Max Caller flagged his frustration with the quality of officer reports and the need for drafters to better understand their role, as well as his ongoing concerns with company governance including his proposal for a company sub-committee to Cabinet. Cllr Swindlehurst agreed that the pace of change was a concern for him and that submitting written feedback on officer reports should not be necessary.
- 5.6. Max Caller highlighted recent conversations about management and staffing in the SEND teams; Steve Mair confirmed that this had been raised in recent discussions with the Director of Children's Services.
- 5.7. Margaret Lee concluded that more standardised reporting on the Improvement and Recovery Plan was needed; Max Caller agreed with this, adding that he expected to see milestone reporting and updates from Lead Members and Lead Officers on each pillar of work. Cllr Swindlehurst agreed that aligning reporting was important, referencing Slough Children First in particular.
- 5.8. Cllr Swindlehurst asked for more information on data-cleansing efforts, recognising that this was necessary before data could be used for performance management; Steve Mair confirmed that work was ongoing but likely to take two to three years to bring visible benefits.
- 5.9. Margaret Lee cautioned Steve Mair about implementing a zero-based budgeting approach at too early a stage, suggesting that the council needed to be clear about the type and breadth of services it intended to run in future first. Steve Mair agreed with this, adding that the discipline introduced when implementing the process could be beneficial.
- 5.10. Max Caller agreed that a view of future delivery was needed and emphasised that this was why Commissioners were encouraging officers to take a longer-term view of savings. Cllr Swindlehurst agreed with this, noting that the need for a long term vision was also true for the senior structure, asset sale plans, and adult services. Cllr Smith also agreed.
- 5.11. Max Caller added that September was a reasonable time to expect this type of picture to be shared, giving officers and members ample opportunity to feed into it.
- 5.11.1. **Action: Lucy Storr to discuss how and where to bring a longer-term vision for Slough Borough Council with Gavin Jones and team.**
- 5.12. The need for further staff communications was also noted, as was the need to restructure the IT function and move to more digital services.
- 5.13. Max Caller commented that the summary of work in the adult services team was presented clearly, and Margaret Lee congratulated those who had worked on customer and resident engagement.
- 5.14. Cllr Smith asked about plans to improve customer service waiting times; Richard West and Max Caller shared plans and ideas for this. Cllr Swindlehurst noted that peaks in demand could often be predicted and mitigated against. Steve Mair commented that the long-term answer was better digitisation of services.

6. Commissioners report

- 6.1. Max Caller reminded the group that the Commissioners' report was not yet public and noted that he anticipated a Ministerial response shortly. He reminded the group that the report was written to enable the Minister to make necessary decisions and so needed Commissioners to clearly set out current challenges as well a past context.
- 6.2. Max Caller emphasised the current high level of overspend and challenging recovery period ahead and noted that officers and members had been more proactive in other authorities which were undergoing DLUHC interventions. He also mentioned the resourcing challenges, potential risks to achieving the necessary asset sales and the challenges of having a largely interim senior management team.
- 6.3. Cllr Swindlehurst confirmed that he had already seen the report, and thanked Max Caller for sharing it with him ahead of submission.

7. AOB

- 7.1. No other business was raised.
- 7.2. The meeting ended at 12:22

Ref: SBC/IRB/06