

Minutes of the Finance Board
Thursday 22 September 2022
10:00am, Council Chambers/ Microsoft Teams

Attendees:

Commissioners:

Margaret Lee – *Finance Commissioner (chair)*

Members:

Cllr Rob Anderson – *Cabinet Lead for Finance (deputy chair)*

Cllr Zaffar Ajaib - *Lead for Customer Services, Procurement & Performance*

Cllr Dexter Smith – *Conservative Group Leader*

Secretariat:

Monica Barreto – *Executive Assistant to Gavin Jones*

Lucy Storr – *Deputy Chief of Staff to the Commissioners (attended remotely)*

Officers:

Marc Gadsby – *Interim Executive Director of People, Adults*

Steven Mair - *S.151 officer*

Richard West – *Executive Director of Customer and Community*

Guests:

Johnny Kyriacou (*joined for agenda item 7 only*)

Cllr James Swindlehurst - *Council Leader and Lead for Council Recovery, Forward Strategy & Economic Development*

Apologies

Max Caller – *Lead Commissioner*

Andrew Fraser – *Executive Director of Children's Services*

Clare Priest – *Central Contracts Register Project Lead*

Gavin Jones – *Commissioner and Head of Paid Service*

Phil Brookes- *Crown Representative*

Debbie Knopp - *Strategic PMO Support*

Claire Willerton – *Chief of Staff to the Commissioners*

Meeting Minutes:

1. Welcome and declaration of interests

- 1.1. Margaret Lee welcomed attendees. No interests were declared. Margaret informed the group that the meeting was being recorded.

2. Minutes and actions of the Previous Meeting

- 2.1 The minutes of the 18 August meeting were approved: Cllr Smith requested clarification on paragraph 6.3 relating to the asset disposal report.
 - 2.1.1. Action: Margaret Lee to share redrafted wording of paragraph 6.3 of the August 2022 meeting minutes with Cllr Smith and Steve Mair for approval
- 2.2 Actions were then discussed;
 - 2.2.1 Action 180822.1 was confirmed as closed
 - 2.2.3 Action 180822.2 was noted as outstanding: Steve Mair agreed to send a note clarifying the status of business cases
 - 2.2.4 Action 180822.3 was confirmed as closed
 - 2.2.5 Action 210222.2 was noted as outstanding, and the original request briefly discussed
 - 2.2.6 Action 090622.3 was noted as not started
 - 2.2.7 Action 090622.4 was noted as outstanding, with Lucy Storr flagging that further discussion was needed with Stephen Brown to agree next steps
 - 2.2.8 Action 200522.02 was confirmed to form part of the later finance update, noting particular challenges with rental income from Observatory House, energy costs, and leisure management and mitigations in place to manage this

3. Finance Update

- 3.1 Steve Mair presented the 22/23 finance update, noting that the budget needs to balance and savings need to be made, which are both challenging and that the position was set out in meetings papers, including current capitalisation requirements.
- 3.2 The current overspend was flagged, with Steve Mair signalling that the majority of this was from Slough Children First and the Place division.
- 3.3 The current savings shortfall was also discussed, as was the slippage in capital which will come through the budget process in early 2023.
- 3.4 3m of savings required for 23/24 too
- 3.5 Cllr Anderson shared his view that the revised figures, as discussed in the September 21 Cabinet meeting, now mean that services have achievable though challenging targets to hit, and that making and embedding savings as well as identifying radical structural changes to the council need to remain as core priorities.
- 3.6 Margaret Lee also commented on the September 21 Cabinet discussions, stating the extraordinary benefits seen from delivering asset sales early and the profound impact on figures, while echoing Cllr Anderson's comments that savings are still key and an ongoing significant challenge to deliver, particularly taking into account the difficult external context faced by all councils. She added that the closing of some current gaps in the budget had been fortuitous and gave the council some breathing space rather than a full solution to its financial situation.
- 3.7 Cllr Swindlehurst also emphasised the importance of making service changes to facilitate savings in future years, and noted that Cabinet are still lining up meetings with relevant officers to drive this work forward. He also expressed concern over past sight of decisions about asset sales,

noting that the new Asset Disposal Sub-Committee and new Head of Housing and Property joining the council in October should help with this.

- 3.8 Cllr Smith asked for clarity on savings, which Steve Mair provided.
- 3.9 Cllr Ajaib agreed with prior discussions, noting that the earlier that Members are engaged with work on savings, the more opportunity there is to discuss these and agree a way forward
- 3.10 Margaret Lee added that there have been some positive steps in recruitment which begin to repopulate the corporate centre and should aid the councils progress towards recovery, including the previously mentioned ED for Housing and Property joining the council in October, the Finance restructure which is now in progress, steps towards recruiting a permanent S151 Officer and team, and the new PMO and Communications Directors appointments

4. Internal audit update

- 4.1 Steve Mair indicated the summary tables in the papers and explained that 85% of actions from years prior to 2021/22 have been completed and 40% of actions from 22/23. Further detail will be brought on 2022/23 in the next update to this group.
- 4.2 Steve signalled that the approach to closing audit actions is now much more proactive and regular updates are being provided here and to the audit committee.
- 4.3 Margaret Lee noted that the trend has been moving in the right direction but that there are still a number of high priority audit actions outstanding or with revised due dates: Steve Mair confirmed that he does not believe that these carry a high degree of risk and that people are working to close them before the end of the financial year.

5. Disposals programme update

- 5.1 Lucy Storr apologised for listing Max Caller as the presenter and pointed attendees to the update report circulate in the meeting papers.
- 5.2 Margaret Lee clarified that she had asked the team to add the risk to deliverability to future reports, and that the Asset Disposals Cabinet Sub-Committee has been set up, though the date of the first meeting has had to move due to the mourning period for the late Queen.
- 5.3 Cllr Smith requested clarity on three properties: Cllr Anderson clarified where agreement had been given to move to the marketing stage and that in future further transparency would be provided via the Asset Disposals Sub-Committee previously mentioned.
- 5.4 Margaret Lee informed the group that she had requested a paper to declare relevant assets as surplus to allow the sale processes to move ahead, noting that this is normal practice in other councils.
- 5.5 Cllr Swindlehurst added colour about the importance of the SUR site

6. Update on the central contracts register (CCR) project

- 6.1 Cllr Ajaib led the update on the Central Contracts Register in the project lead's absence, and informed the group that the project is continuing to identify efficiencies including the merging of existing contracts, the process and procedures documentation is being reviewed, and that training sessions are planned for September and October.
- 6.2 Margaret Lee shared her opinion that the development of a procurement pipeline was positive and would hopefully help to link together groups across the council and the leadership team to achieve timely efficiencies. She added that training people to renegotiate contracts was key, and

that she planned to spend more time with the project lead to consider where follow up conversations are needed to ensure follow-up of previously agreed actions, including work with partners.

- 6.3 Cllr Anderson drew attention to the item in the risk register concerning key person dependency: Margaret Lee noted that this is a risk across the council, and that developing good governance processes should mitigate against this.

7. Dedicated Schools Grant Safety Valve update

- 7.1 Johnny Kyriacou joined the meeting to present the update and gave an outline of the approach and deficit reduction plans. He noted positive working with the Department for Education (DfE) including workshops, bi-monthly safety valve meetings with the DfE, council, and partners, and ongoing internal project work.
- 7.2 Jonny highlighted the principled way of working being applied, noting that the aim is to be more efficient in serving childrens' needs rather than cutting services and that DfE have reviewed the initial plan, and informed the group that a recent workshop focussed on linking the safety valve work with the written statement of action. He added that he had taken Steve Mair's advice to plan deficit reduction over 4 years with the potential to extend to 5 if needed, and that block transfer from schools to high needs was an area of potential risk.
- 7.3 Margaret Lee asked for clarity on how delivery would be monitored: Jonny explained that the programme currently goes through multiple governance channels, but that there is more to do to rationalise milestones and use tools effectively.
- 7.4 Steve Mair added DfE colleagues are working very well with the council.
- 7.5 Margaret also asked for positive comments from DfE advisors about a member of the DSG team to be passed on. Margaret asked for performance indicators to show that we are on target, delivery plans, actions and how we are going to monitor and report this.
- 7.6 Cllr Anderson asked if there were any lessons to be learned now or further through the programme for other areas of the council: Margaret Lee reflected that there may be positive lessons to share about project delivery and maintaining focus on commitments if the work is managed correctly.
- 7.7 Jonny Kyriacou shared his view that high staff turnover has contributed to past challenges within DSG, and that improvements can be seen over the last two years including the principles-based services previously mentioned.

The meeting closed at 11:05

Ref: SBC/FB/08