

## **Minutes of the Improvement and Recovery Board**

**Thursday 3rd November 2022 11am**

Council Chambers, Ground Floor Observatory House / Microsoft Teams

### **Attendees:**

#### **Commissioners:**

Max Caller – Lead Commissioner (Chair)

Gavin Jones – Commissioner

Margaret Lee – Finance Commissioner

#### **Members:**

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

*Cllr Rob Anderson – Lead for Financial Oversight & Council Assets*

*Cllr Dexter Smith – Leader of the Opposition*

*Cllr Zaffar Ajaib – Lead for Customer Services, Procurement and Performance*

*Cllr Balvinder Bains – Lead for Public Protection, Regulation and Enforcement*

*Cllr Christine Hulme – Lead for Children’s Services, Lifelong Learning and Skills*

*Cllr Pavitar Kaur Mann – Deputy Leader and Lead for Housing and Planning*

*Cllr Nazir Mohammed (joined remotely) – Lead for Transport and the Local Environment*

*Cllr Natasha Pantelic (joined remotely) – Lead for Social Care and Public Health*

#### **Officers:**

*Nasreen Brittain – EA to the Commissioners*

*Stephen Brown – Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service*

*Sarah Hayward – Operating Officer*

*Steve Mair – Director of Finance and S151 Officer*

*Stephen Taylor – Monitoring Officer*

#### **Secretariat:**

*Claire Willerton – Chief of Staff to the Commissioners*

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

## **Meeting Minutes**

### **1. Welcome and Introductions**

1.1 Max Caller welcomed the group and invited everyone to introduce themselves.

### **2. Declaration of Interests – Max Caller**

2.1 There were no declarations of interest.

### **3. Minutes and Actions of the September Improvement and Recovery Board**

1.1. The minutes of the previous meeting agreed, and actions updated as per the action log.

1.2. Cllr Smith asked if members of the Shadow Cabinet could also receive regular updates on budget and savings; Steve Mair confirmed that a meeting was planned for 7 November to do this.

### **4. Update from the Finance Board**

1.3. Margaret Lee directed the Board's attention to the Finance Board minutes included in the meeting pack then highlighted recent conversations about focussing on contract management and negotiation skills in next phase of training related to the Central Contracts Register project, that a risk register was going to be included in future Board papers and that internal and external Audit would be invited on a regular basis to ensure that good controls are in place across the council.

### **5. Improvement and Recovery Plan Update**

5.1. Cllr Swindlehurst introduced the item noting recent additions to the reporting pack, particularly highlighting the summary of Council directions and recent meetings with workstream leads and Commissioners to discuss plans in more detail. It was noted that more work had been done by officers than previously been communicated to Commissioners, that there had been further conversations about culture change, and that the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny's report had now been published and a Member briefing arranged. The Leader also outlined recent significant asset disposal decisions.

5.2. Stephen Brown supported Cllr Swindlehurst's update, emphasising the usefulness of meetings with Commissioners on each Direction in more detail and noting that there is more work to do to bring together a clear view of the future shape and culture the Council is aiming to create, using the previously published Corporate Plan as a starting point. He also informed the group that the body of evidence shared with the Board was going to November Cabinet and Council meetings and would be available on SharePoint for Members and Commissioners to access as needed.

5.3. Sarah Hayward shared the view that officers had found meetings on Directions very valuable, particularly direct interactions with Commissioners, and went on to summarise each of the meetings held to the group. She noted that evidence-based decision making had seen significant improvements have been made in some areas on core data, but more needed to be done to ensure that this was consistent across the organisation and feeding into decision making effectively. The Board agreed with Sarah that the democratic services Direction was fundamentally about having good governance in place for every Council decision.

5.4. Stephen Taylor noted that the lack of corporate memory was challenging in some areas, and that he was talking to the senior leadership team about ensuring that the constitution is working effectively including improving accountability, ownership, evidence-based decision

making and quality of reports. He also outlined plans to improve the Scrutiny Committee. Cllr Mann asked if post-decision making was being factored into this; Stephen confirmed that this was briefly covered at the 1 November Scrutiny Panel and that tracking needs to be carefully considered to ensure that it is proportionate and meaningful. Cllr Bains shared his view that joint training with Officers and Members was preferable to separate.

- 5.5. Steve Mair confirmed that work on 18/19 accounts continued and that 2019/20 accounts had gone to external audit this week, that progress was being made on delivery of savings and that a new Finance structure had been approved and was being recruited to.
- 5.6. Cllr Swindlehurst also drew attention to a recent day and a half workshop with Cabinet and Commissioners. A set of values was discussed, and it was agreed there was a need to discuss the future operating model at a future date.
- 5.7. Gavin Jones expressed that he was pleased to see advancements in the plan and a refreshed feel to the Council, and that culture change and good leadership remain key to the Council's sustainability.
- 5.8. Margaret Lee agreed that tremendous progress has been made on the improvement journey, that she would like to see the Council being more proactive about taking Directions back from Commissioners. She also responded to a comment in the meeting that if training for officers and members was to be undertaken jointly, then it is important that the differences in respective roles and officers and members needs to be very clear. . She also noted that she had requested that the internal audit RAG rating was amber rather than green due to improvements needed in culture change which was not included in the commentary.
- 5.9. Cllr Swindlehurst noted that progress on the recovery plan had been challenging while there were several vacancies across the management team and that recent appointments had aided its progress.
- 5.10. Stephen Brown agreed with Gavin Jones that cultural change was the most crucial element to get right once immediate financial challenges were addressed and committed to build on previously agreed actions.
- 5.11. Gavin Jones also noted that it was good to see the Chief Executive taking on sponsorship responsibility for the recovery plan and suggested that the Leader do the same. He also shared his view that more can be done to both make the recruitment process more effective but also improve relationship management with all applicants.
- 5.12. Cllr Hulme flagged that Slough Children First need to be included in plans where appropriate, and that more tailored questions could be included in interviews.
- 5.13. Cllr Ajaib agreed that he had seen progress on ownership and a significant amount of change in senior leadership and agreed that there is more work to do on HR and recruitment.

Cllr Bains added his view that preparation before interviews by the panel, timely feedback, and support for existing officers to progress within the organisation are key.

## **6. Commissioners update**

- 6.1. Max Caller thanked Officers and Members for work done to date and noted that not all of this work had been shared with Commissioners previously. He emphasised that the intention

of the intervention is to improve the Council rather than only meet Directions, and so emphasised the importance of reporting on the plans and their progress going through Cabinet and Full Council with appropriate use of Scrutiny.

- 6.2. He clarified his expectations around the recent addition of recruitment across the Council to Commissioner powers, outlining that the Council should present a plan to show how they would regain the Commissioners confidence in their ability to take this responsibility back. He added that this should include feedback processes to all applicants as well as inductions, internal target setting and appraisals. No such plan was in place presently, so significant work was required.
- 6.3. Max noted that Commissioners had seen officers doing some excellent work including on procurement and that this was not all necessarily visible to the organisation as a whole or Cabinet. Cllr Ajaib agreed that Council had been briefed on contract management.
- 6.4. Max Caller also noted that directions are currently listed as 'Commissioners Directives' in Council documentation and clarified that the Directions were in fact a piece of law to make the Council improve with Commissioners in place to oversee and support this.
- 6.5. Cllr Mann made the group aware that she had already asked for more transparency over the use of delegated powers by officers and agreed that there was further work to do on culture, including on how democratic processes operate. Max Caller noted that this was an important point and that he had requested the Council commission an Internal audit review of all decisions of Cabinet which approved delegation to officers in consultation with Members over the past 3 years to establish how this delegation was complied with and reported.
- 6.6. The group discussed asset disposals including the potential sale of the Azko Nobel site, with Max Caller noting that the report reviewed the Council's acquisition of the site highlighted major gaps in correct reporting and failed to identify where funding was to be sought if it had been used for housing as originally intended. Now that the site would not be used for housing, there was an urgent need to revise population estimates as these were used for service modelling creating a demand for budget allocation not now likely. Cllr Swindlehurst provided additional context around the original purchase of the site and noted that the key reason for buying the site in was to ensure that it did not go to unsympathetic developers. Max Caller reported that he was considering using this site as a case study in the next report to Ministers.
- 6.7. Cllr Smith shared his opinion that employment continues to be a significant issue including securing a pipeline of candidates for the future, and that both tailoring questions and asking both successful and unsuccessful candidates for feedback would be helpful.

## **7. Forward Plan for Improvement and Recovery Board meetings**

- 7.1. Max Caller suggested meeting twice more in 2022 and moving the current December meeting to earlier in the month to allow its content to inform the next Commissioner report. He suggested that the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny may need to attend, as may Cabinet Leads for each direction. He noted that meetings could be flexible to accommodate Members' other commitments, and that planning for 2023 should begin to present more detailed reviews of work done for each direction.
- 7.2. Max also noted that the DfE Commissioner would continue to be invited as appropriate, and that conversations between the Best Value Commissioners and the DfE Commissioner

continue to determine the best way forward for Children's Services in Slough, with the Lead Member engaged as much as possible in this.

- 7.3. Cllr Swindlehurst asked if there had been any progress on recruitment of a new DCS; Max committed to updating the Lead Member on this.
- 7.4. Sarah Hayward noted that it would be useful to better understand the sign off process for the next Commissioners report and ensure that the Council is given the opportunity to do a factual accuracy check before finalisation. Max Caller intended that factual points would be checked, as last time but that the content was for Commissioners.

**AoB**

None.

The meeting closed at 12:24pm

SBC/IRB/10