

**Minutes of the Improvement and Recovery Board
Thursday 24 August 2023**

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Thursday 24 August, 11am-12.30pm
Council Chambers, Observatory House**

Attendees:

Commissioners:

Gavin Jones – Lead Commissioner (Chair)
Gerard Curran, Commissioner
Denise Murray – Finance Commissioner

Members:

Cllr Dexter Smith – Leader with responsibility for Improvement and Recovery
Cllr Wal Chahal Deputy Leader, and Lead for Financial Oversight & Council Assets
Cllr Christine Hulme, Labour

Officers:

Stephen Brown, Chief Executive and Head of Paid Services
Adele Taylor – Executive Director of Finance and Commercial Services and S151 Officer
Patrick Hayes – Executive Director Housing, property & Planning
Stephen Taylor – Monitoring Officer
Sarah Hayward – Executive Director of Strategy and Improvement
Sue Butcher – Executive Director, Children’s Services
Marc Gadsby – Executive Director of People and Adults
Tony Wisken – Associate Director of Transformation

Secretariat:

Nasreen Brittain – Executive Assistant to the Commissioners (minutes)
Claire Willerton - Chief of Staff to the Commissioners

Apologies: Cllr Pavitar Mann, Leader of the Opposition, Dean Tyler – Associate Director of Strategy & Insight

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Minutes

1. *Welcome and Introductions (Gavin Jones)*

Introductions made.

2. *Declaration of Interests*

No declarations of interest expressed.

3. *Minutes and Actions of the May Improvement and Recovery Board*

3.1 Approved and actions updated.

4. *Commissioner Update (Gavin Jones)*

4.1 *Next Phase of Intervention*

- 4.1.1** The Leader responded by reflecting that the new Administration valued the positives the Intervention brought. The Minister had encouraged looking at how to deliver the recovery plan. The Council had added some nuances and new aspects to the corporate plan, such as addressing children's futures. There was evidence of improvement however, acknowledged in Customer Service and IT. Wanted to get the Members to engage in robust testing of the Administration. The Leader was keen to stress it was not a 'tick box' exercise, however. Wanted to make it would be a new way of operating that would continue post intervention.

The Leader had reported to Commissioners that he would be taking leadership of the Berkshire Prosperity Board on Health and Inequalities.

Stephen Brown valued the letter and thanked the Commissioners. He felt it set out clear financial priorities required to achieve success. Paragraph five of the letter related to the management structure, and there was agreement that this was a priority.

Lack of staff development would be looked at to provide training for staff and in particular managers. The Estate Strategy was also acknowledges as key to recovery, as well as ICT. While some deep dives had been done with the Commissioners, it was vital this was maintained. HR needed to be resolved so it was fit for purpose as there was general agreement that currently the HR function was not.

- 4.1.2** Commissioners met with CLT on 23 August. One of the key messages that came out of it was that the recovery plan should be supportive of what the Administration was trying to do for Slough within a cost-effective envelope.

- 4.1.3** Commissioners were keen to explore the new structure, where things were and in particular the thinking around how the new staff would be trained, assisted to become the desired team, e.g., clear job roles and responsibilities and clarity on what they were being asked to do along with clarity on being held to account, with support to achieving that.

Stephen Brown reflected there were concerning health inequalities within Slough. Needed to ensure the new staff were fully briefed on this priority. Measures of success were the introduction of appraisals, team meetings, one to ones, targets and where everyone fitted into that. This formed part of the culture change.

Accountability would ensure the priorities were being successfully delivered. The culture would need to align with the culture that the organisation wanted to have. Cllr Hulme responded that she did not get a sense of who was looking at the class

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inequalities within Slough. How were inequalities being identified across the Borough and how that translated into the Corporate Plan. The Leader responded that they were looking at why NHS testing had gone down in the Borough for example and had realised that Slough needed its own Director of Public Health. Stephen added that Members would be crucial in determining where the focus should go. Sarah confirmed that appraisals would align with the corporate plan and Commissioners would be able to see that work and the direction of travel. Work would begin in early September to plug the gap in HR. Ged reflected on Cllr Hulme's comments and agreed that in order to improve health inequalities, social/class inequalities would need to be looked at first.

4.1.4 Letter to Minister

Meeting had been scheduled with the Minister later in the afternoon of 24 August. Report was submitted on 13 July. This meeting would be a 'check-in' before the Minister responded to the Commissioners' letter. Commissioners would update the Minister on what progress had been made since the report was written in July. The formal response from the Minister was expected in two weeks' time. No new Directions requested.

Recurring message had been around pace. The Council felt it would be helpful for Commissioners to give a steer on how pace would be monitored and measured. That was what the letter to CEx was intended to be about. Commissioners were open to discussion around this.

4.1.5 Review how IRB worked:

4.1.5.1 Discussion took place around whether some areas such as internal audit and procurement were taken out of the IRB and whether to deprioritise some of the Directions now, or at a later date. Gavin responded that in part Commissioners wanted to put the power in the hands of the Council to own the recovery, that said, Commissioners would remain interested in other areas of the Council. Commissioners wanted the Council to demonstrate this to them, to make a judgement call with what was being shared with the Commissioners. They would go back to particular areas if there was a need to. Stephen Brown reflected that they were not looking at 'perfection', but rather 'good functioning' of each area of the Authority. It was agreed to take another look at the frequency of IRBs to give time for more focus; that would be at a later date.

4.1.5.2 Commissioners were trying to encourage the Council to move away from focussing on exiting the Commissioners including the DfE Commissioner and focus on the improvement which would organically lead to the Commissioners exiting. The real shared incentive was for the resident of Slough to have a Council they could value and trust and one that was delivering for them.

4.1.5.3 Would be good to have some indicators with Commissioners and the Council to see the direction the improvements were going. Sue Butcher added that she was using stress tests with Paul Moffat, the DfE Commissioner, and was finding them very useful; and perhaps if those stress tests could also be more specific which would help.

4.1.5.4 Denise reflected the Council would need to think about whether they were able to not only be financially sustainable but sustainable post intervention. The judgements on whether things were functioning well would need to be revisited

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regularly over time to ensure they remained on track because there needed to be a balance. Stephen Brown expressed concern that the Council could end up feeling that it might not ever get out of intervention if there were no exit planned discussed. Gavin responded that it would be good to have a framework that the Council could use and could look in the new calendar year to have this exit framework. That said, before that could be really considered, the next six months would be absolutely vital. The Council would need some measurable and evidential success that could allow the conversation around exit to start. Ged responded that this did not mean the Council would be out of intervention by November 2024. That was not the message the Commissioners were giving the Council. At some point the assistance from Commissioners could be dialled down or removed, but needed to be clear that the Council would not be out of intervention by that date.

Denise reflected that a Council that required exceptional additional support would need to ask itself whether it could realistically be out of intervention by November 2024. Adele responded that from her perspective what would need to be achieved to secure the 'step forward' that the Council and Commissioners were aiming for would need to be clear. If that were not possible, it would start to feel like a relentless process and the feeling that the intervention may never end. Staff needed to feel a sense of achievement over time to keep engaged with the recovery.

Gavin reflected that the most important indicator was how the residents felt about Slough Borough Council. Whether the Council wanted to achieve perfection or 'good enough' would depend on what resources the Council could provide to achieve whichever it wanted to reach. Stephen Taylor did not want to hear about exit in the next six months, he preferred to use milestones that could be celebrated when reached. He felt that would be a much better approach.

Cllr Chahal added that training would assist with culture change and celebrating team members when milestones/goals were reached. Valuing staff and teams would be key to getting the culture change implemented well with staff.

The letter also covered 'Leads' where Commissioners will focus on the different themes. Stephen Brown commented on the RAG rating of the reports for Cabinet. He wanted clarity on which reports Commissioners wanted to see, e.g., red, amber, and green. This would be taken offline with Commissioners.

(Action: Nasreen to set up 30-minute mtg with Stephen Brown and Commissioners).

5. Update from the Finance Board on 17 August 2023 (Denise Murray)

- 5.1.1.** Update summary papers submitted in the suite of documents. Will be critically important in 23/24 to be to demonstrate financial stability. Some challenges will be recurring and will carry into 23/24 and it would be key to show how it will be managed and the £5m variance. The Council needed to think about how that would truly be brought down. Will need to clearly demonstrate how the Council will live within its means. Adele reassured the Board that the CLT was concerned about this, and it was already part of the thinking for next year. The £5m figure was not in the public domain at this stage. The mechanics of how this would be done was understood.

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5.1.2. Commissioners confirmed they would be discussing this with the Minister as finance was the overriding concern.

6. *Progress Update on Improvement (Sarah Hayward/Stephen Brown)*

6.1. Plan on a page was completely aligned to the Directions. The SEND direction had been included in the RAG rating slide for each Direction with an action plan. Milestones to January 2024 at the moment but would be extended. Deep dive into HR had been scheduled with Commissioner Ged Curran. Sense checking of the milestones outside of the IRB.

Gavin Jones commended the honesty of the CLT in acknowledging the issues and where the Council was in its recovery.

6.2. Our Futures had hollowed out the organisation of staff leaving the organisation stretched in resources and this was linked to the recovery as well. The current risk of this to the delivery of the plan was that it was manageable at the moment, however, that said, delivery of change programme would require corporate support.

Funding went to September 2024. Some requests had been for capacity in services to enable them to deliver core services. If this was not addressed, then needed to make choices around service vs speed, this could become critical risk if not resolved. Denise wanted to know whether all the risks were being brought together across all workstreams and whether they had all been amalgamated across the **whole** organisation. Sarah responded that there was a maturing of the understanding of risk and of its management. Adele agreed that capacity was the overarching risk to recovery. Staff were beginning to ask for clarity on what should be prioritised, which reflected the maturity of the understanding around risk. This was at all levels within the organisation.

Adele confirmed that the MTFS was the main focus for the finance team. Gavin wanted to know whether the restructure was adding to the corporate anxiety and had that been factored into the delivery of the recovery. Sarah responded that she had been pleasantly surprised with the reaction of staff and the anxiety being felt by them. GMs had engaged in a mature way regarding their upcoming restructure which was not currently in scope. The restructure would be phased in to minimise the capacity risk. Staff leaving before the restructure was another risk that would need to be considered. Commissioners agreed they would request deeper dives into particular areas offline.

CIlr Chahal asked about the costing of the restructure and any risks to that. Adele responded that there was more work to be done to risk management.

Commissioners thanked Tony Wisken for his work at Slough. Tony would be leaving for new pastures this September.

7. AOB

7.1. None.

Meeting closed at 12.20pm.