

Minutes of the Improvement and Recovery Board
Thursday 28 September, 11am-12.30pm
Council Chambers, Observatory House

Attendees

Commissioners

Gavin Jones – Lead Commissioner (Chair)

Denise Murray – Finance Commissioner

Paul Moffat (DfE Children’s 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 Pavitar Mann - Leader of the Opposition

Officers

Stephen Brown - Chief Executive and Head of Paid Services

Adele Taylor - Executive Director of Finance and Commercial Services and S.151 Officer

Stephen Taylor - Monitoring Officer

Sue Butcher - Executive Director, Children’s Services

Marc Gadsby - Executive Director of People and Adults

Patrick Hayes - Executive Director Housing, Property and Planning

Sarah Hayward - Executive Director of Strategy and Improvement

Dean Tyler - Associate Director of Strategy and Insight

Secretariat

Claire Willerton - Chief of Staff to the Commissioners

Apologies

Ged Curran, Commissioner

Nasreen Brittain, Executive Assistant to the Commissioners

Minutes

1. Welcome and Introductions

1.1 Gavin Jones welcomed Paul Moffat to the meeting.

2. Declaration of Interests

2.1 None.

3. Minutes and actions of the previous meeting:

3.1 The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed. Gavin thanked Nasreen Brittain for producing accurate and timely records of the meetings. He also thanked Dean Tyler for helping to record and track progress on actions.

4. Commissioner update:

4.1 Gavin explained that the next report to the Secretary of State was due at the end of the year and was likely to be submitted in January 2024. It would be important for the Council to focus on delivering the priorities set out by the Commissioners to inform the nature and content of that report.

5. Leader's update:

5.1 Cllr Smith described the main outcomes from the recent Cabinet/Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) away-day. They had agreed to reinstate corporate performance reporting as a standing item at Cabinet to track progress. They had also agreed that Stephen Taylor would lead on addressing member behaviours, while keeping in mind individual styles and preferences. Cllr Smith was clear that mutual respect was vital to proper conduct of the Council's business. Cllr Smith went on to say that initial thinking had been done on the vision for Slough and that he would welcome another workshop to develop this further.

5.2 Stephen Brown emphasised the development required for CLT, and all other managers would include team building and relationships between officers and members. Gavin was pleased to see the focus on member/officer relationships. Adele Taylor and Cllr Chahal gave a joint commitment to ensure this was the case in their areas of responsibility and that members were fully involved. Sue Butcher wanted to ensure Slough Children First (SCF) was also fully involved. She explained that she was already working with Hampshire on how to make sure such management development was appropriate and linked into professional specialisms.

5.3 Adele explained that the budget for management development was held in Sarah Hayward's area and would be sufficient to cover what was proposed. Marc Gadsby reminded the meeting that the apprenticeship levy might help for social workers' development.

5.4 Stephen Taylor wanted to see both the cabinet and shadow Cabinet involved in the member and officer relationships and development work in due course. He agreed to update the Board at a future meeting.

Action: Stephen Taylor

6. Update from the Finance Board on 21 September 2023

- 6.1 Denise Murray explained that there had been good progress against some of the items set out in the papers, including the financial controls in place, internal audit, and the DSG 'safety valve' funding. Further improvement was still required in other areas, including reduction of the educational and health care plans backlog, handling of housing benefit claims (following DWP's review), and the conduct of business at the Audit and Governance Committee.
- 6.2 Stephen T explained that, following the most recent Audit and Governance Committee, he had spoken to the chair, Cllr O'Kelly, to make sure he understood and was comfortable with his responsibilities and he would do so again before the next meeting. Stephen T had spoken to Cllr Mann about her concerns about member behaviour and interaction. He had also reminded Cllr Anderson of the requirements set out in the Council's constitution.
- 6.3 Gavin sought assurance that there would be no repeat of the poor behaviour and lack of respect exhibited by all parties at the most recent meeting. He explained that Grant Thornton would not hesitate to make statutory recommendations if there were a repeat. Denise felt there had been a clear deterioration between the previous Committee meeting and the most recent one. The Audit and Governance Committee should be non-political, with professional disagreement where appropriate but less of the political knockabout seen in full Council meetings, for example.
- 6.4 Cllr Mann saw adherence to and understanding of the Council's constitution as separate matters from the poor behaviour and lack of respect. Cllr Akram had resigned from the Committee following the most recent meeting which was disappointing as she was the only female member of the Committee and now refused to serve on it because of her treatment by other members. Gavin and Cllr Smith both agreed it was a shame Cllr Akram had resigned and both offered to support efforts to improve the conduct of the Committee's business so that members felt comfortable serving on it. Cllr Smith offered to meet Cllr Mann to discuss the issues and Cllr Mann confirmed she was content to work with Cllr Smith.
- 6.5 Adele explained that the process to appoint independent members to the Committee would conclude the following week. She would report back on the appointments in due course.

Action: Adele Taylor

- 6.6 Gavin reiterated that he wanted to see improvement in the Audit and Governance Committee's conduct of its business and asked for an update after its next meeting.

Action: Adele Taylor and Stephen Taylor

- 6.7 Adele explained that she would get the conclusions of the DWP review of housing benefits tomorrow and that she would be able to provide a detailed update at the next Finance Board.

Action: Adele Taylor

7. Improvement and recovery forward plan

- 7.1 Gavin observed that Thurrock Council reported to Full Council on their improvement and recovery plan twice a year. The Leader of the Council introduced the report and Commissioners attended to take questions. He urged colleagues at Slough to consider doing likewise.
- 7.2 Sarah explained that the corporate plan and the management restructure had been reported to full Council already. She would consider when and how to report on the overall

improvement and recovery programme. Gavin suggested additionally reporting to Full Council.

Action: Sarah Hayward

7.3 The Council's focus was on the priorities set out by the Commissioners and further highlighted by Minister Rowley's response to the Commissioners third report. Denise proposed that Sarah and her team should work with Commissioners on the co-development of performance objectives and metrics to measure progress against those objectives. Commissioners would discuss further what they wanted to see and then meet separately with Sarah and her team.

Action: Commissioners

8. Progress update on improvement and recovery

8.1 Gavin made clear that Commissioners would want to be actively involved in the recruitment to roles in the new management structure. He reminded colleagues that this was a requirement in the Directions. He saw this recruitment as an opportunity to show-case Slough and wanted to ensure a good experience for candidates. Stephen Taylor suggested that a video featuring the Leader, Chief Executive and the Opposition Leader might be part of the recruitment materials. Gavin agreed, if all parties were comfortable doing so. Sarah explained that two recruitment agencies had submitted bids (Starfish and Penna) and she would share their bids with Commissioners before a final decision was made. As such, work on the employer branding was still at a formative stage.

Action: Sarah Hayward

8.2 Adele expected to fill eight of the ten posts in finance by November and was pleased to report some of the new joiners would be local people from the community.

8.3 Cllr Mann asked that the progress updates to the Board made clear when members would have the opportunity to scrutinise proposals and to clearly signpost the issues for consideration. She did not want anything to slip through the cracks. Sue asked for an increased focus on children during the scrutiny process Stephen Taylor agreed to look at these points and to set out a scrutiny programme that was linked to the Directions. He would welcome the opportunity to discuss this further with Ged Curran and would look to implement the new programme next year.

Action: Stephen Taylor

8.4 Paul Moffat explained that he would be looking at scrutiny arrangements when considering when and how SCF could be reabsorbed into the Council at the end of DfE's intervention. He would be speaking to Stephen Brown and Sue about this next week and seeking clarity on what was proposed without imposing any additional burdens on children's services. Paul would be conducting his review of the children's services intervention soon and would present his report to the DfE Secretary of State. He would also report to the Council on DfE's response.

9. AOB

9.1 None.

Meeting closed at 12.08pm