

**Minutes of the Improvement and Recovery Board
Thursday 26 October**

Attendees

Commissioners

Chair: Gavin Jones Lead Commissioner
Denise Murray, Finance Commissioner
Ged Curran, Commissioner.

Members

Cllr Dexter Smith – Leader, with responsibility for Improvement and Recovery
Cllr Wal Chahal - Deputy Leader, and Lead for Financial Oversight and 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
Deempul Brain – Programme Manager

Secretariat

Claire Willerton - Chief of Staff to the Commissioners

Apologies

Dean Tyler, Associate Director of Strategy
Nasreen Brittain, Executive Assistant to the Commissioners

Minutes

1. Welcome and Introductions

- 1.1 Gavin Jones opened the meeting and welcomed Deempul Brain who was deputising for Dean Tyler

2. Declaration of Interests

- 2.1 None.

3. Minutes of the previous meeting on 28 September

- 3.1 The minutes of the previous meeting held on 28 September were approved. The action log would be updated separately.

4. Finance update:

- 4.1 Denise Murray informed the Board that there was an emerging financial issue that related to the accounting treatment of the capital receipts from the asset disposals. Adele Taylor explained that this issue had become apparent over the last few days and that she was still establishing the scale of the issue and options to resolve it.
- 4.2 Denise regarded this potentially significant issue as a setback for the Council that could affect the timescale for the work required to achieve long term financial sustainability. There were no easy options and DLUHC approval would be required for any additional exceptional financial support or borrowing. Denise emphasised that earlier engagement with Commissioners on such issues was required so that Commissioners could work collectively with the Council to find solutions.
- 4.3 Adele said she would be briefing more widely on the issue in due course, including the opposition group. Stephen Taylor asked Adele to ensure appropriate confidentiality and to check what information could be shred.
- 4.4 Cllr Smith had been made aware of the issue the previous day and wanted to understand the scale of the problem and its impact. He supported the work of officers to that end.
- 4.5 Gavin reminded the Board that it would not be appropriate to share information on the issue more widely until it was properly understood. He re-emphasised that Commissioners were there to help the Council and that it was better to come to Commissioners early than to wait until it might be too late. Gavin wanted the Council to be clear on the issues, potential mitigation, and the implications for the Council's overall recovery. He wanted the Council to maintain its focus on recovery despite this setback.
- 4.6 More generally, Denise acknowledged the focus on the medium-term financial plan that would need to be consistent with any capitalisation direction assumptions agreed with DLUHC. She had also discussed with Adele consultation on the plan. Adele explained that the plan was still under development and that she would continue to keep Denise up to date on progress.

5. Improvement and Recovery Assurance Framework – Developing Approach

- 5.1 Sarah Hayward set out the Council's proposals for measuring success and invited comments.

- 5.2 Gavin asked for more detail and an explanation of the components of the indicators as well as what would be different when they were achieved. He wanted to be clear on how the Council would hold itself to account for delivery, its governance arrangements for this work and how the Council would report to the public. Ged Curran thought the proposals were a helpful start and that Sarah and her team should continue to work with Commissioners to develop the framework further. Ged wanted to see improved prioritisation, rather than trying to do everything at once, with a rationale for why things were prioritised or not.
- 5.3 Cllr Smith felt that improvement and recovery activity was mapped out to the end of the year and into 2024. He thought there was potential for some slippage but was confident that the majority of activity required in response to the Minister's letter would be completed by the end of 2023.
- 5.4 Denise asked about how the Council proposed to demonstrate improved customer service, for example by peer reviews or customer satisfaction surveys. She wanted the Council to become a learning organisation that learnt from its peers but also its own experience. Stephen Brown replied that the scrutiny committee had picked up on the ICT strategy and its impact on residents and had asked for a report for its next meeting.

6. Operating model

- 6.1 Sarah explained that the operating model would be developed in line with the Leader's vision for Slough which in turn aligned with the corporate plan. Gavin agreed that developing the operating model was difficult, complex work and wanted the Council to be clear on the outcomes and the scale of the task. Gavin also wanted clarity on what needed to be maintained during the change programme to keep services running for residents. Denise agreed that the Council should not underestimate the scale of the change required and it should ensure that the strategies developed for its recovery aligned with the longer-term operating model, e.g. the estates strategy. Gavin reminded the Board that the Council should not be afraid to ask for the Commissioners help.
- 6.2 Stephen Brown undertook to start developing a 'straw-man' for the operating model and to share it with Commissioners for joint development. Stephen Taylor said that all political parties needed to support the new operating model and that the Board provided a space for political differences of opinion to be explored. He wanted to see Cllr Mann's views fully taken into account.
- 6.3 Ged said that, based on his experience elsewhere, development of the new operating model could take at least ten months and he cautioned the Council against trying to set too ambitious a timetable. Gavin reiterated that Commissioners were there to help but that they needed to have confidence in the Council's plans and its ability to deliver.

7. Updates

Customer service

- 7.1 Sarah explained that there had been some tactical improvements, e.g. reducing reliance on temporary staff for the call centre, and that online resources were being improved. A long-term, funded plan (three to five years) was being developed.

ICT strategy

- 7.2** Commissioners had seen reports to Cabinet recently which set out the important work to be done in November to switch data centres. This was one of a series of high-risk infrastructure projects that needed to be tightly managed. Commissioners were exploring with the LGA the possibility of a peer review of the Council's ICT strategy and its implementation.

Human resources

- 7.3** The current service was transactional and broken. It did not support the Council's business and represented a high risk to its recovery. An improvement plan had been developed to bring it back to a stable, baseline. Sue Butcher suggested that the recruitment workflow used at Slough Children First could be expanded to include the Council.

Culture change

- 7.4** Sarah explained that the building blocks were being put in place to enable culture change with staff workshops planned for November.
- 7.5** Ged acknowledged that there was lots of work going on and encouraged the Council to be realistic about resources and timescales for the culture change programme. He wanted to see improved customer services and customer care at the heart of it with a clear definition of what that meant for residents. Denise stressed the need for inclusivity, and for reflecting Slough's community. She encouraged Sarah and her team to engage with staff who lived in Slough to help make sure the approach was right for Slough's community, in particular, whether digital services were the right way to go.
- 7.6** Sue described the success of the youth parliament session held the previous week where young people had spoken impressively and powerfully about what they wanted for their community and how they could help deliver it. She would be keen to see young people involved more.
- 7.7** Stephen Brown mentioned the community engagement taking place on public health and that staff groups were used to support that.

8. AOB

- 8.1** Stephen Taylor mentioned he was working with Sue to ensure that children's services were fully included in the Council's scrutiny processes. There would be items on the agenda for the February scrutiny committee to consider progress on the SEND written statement of action and the report from the 'Getting to Good' Board's task and finish group on children's services improvement.
- 8.2** Sue highlighted the DfE and Children's Commissioner visit the following week which would be a good opportunity to explore the progress her team had made.
- 8.3** Gavin asked Stephen Brown to ensure that Commissioners were fully involved in every stage of the recruitment to the new management structure. He reminded the Board that the Directions required/gave Commissioners powers over recruitment and appointment to the top three tiers of management at the Council.

9. Date of next meeting

The next meeting is scheduled to be held on 23 November 2023.

Meeting closed at 12.15pm

APPROVED MINUTES