

## **Improvement and Recovery Board – Meeting held on Thursday 23 November 2023**

### **Present**

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

### **Members:**

Cllr Dexter Smith – Leader, with responsibility for Improvement and Recovery (remote)

Cllr Pavitar Mann - Leader of the Opposition (remote)

### **Officers**

Stephen Brown - Chief Executive and Head of Paid Services

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

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

Nasreen Brittain, Executive Assistant to the Commissioners

### **Also present**

Andrew Merritt-Morling, Programme Manager; Deemple Brain, Programme Manager; Sarah Wilson, Assistant to Director of Legal and Governance

### **Apologies for absence**

Stephen Taylor, Monitoring Officer Cllr Wal Chahal - Deputy Leader, and Lead for Financial Oversight and Council Assets, Sue Butcher - Executive Director, Children's Services

### **Minutes**

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

1.1 no new introductions.

#### **2. Declarations of Interest**

2.1 No declarations of interest expressed.

#### **3. Minutes of the Meeting held on Thursday 26 October 2023**

3.1 The minutes of the previous meeting held on 26 October were approved.

#### 4. Finance update (Denise Murray)

- 4.1 Benefits and work in terms of speed of processing and change in circumstances showing a positive trajectory. Challenges remained in the areas of capital receipts reserve, there was a still a significant gap that still needed to be addressed.

##### **Items being worked on/thought about:**

- (i) The request for increase in CD and borrowing.
  - (ii) Balance sheet review and how to get a clear steer of any further issues that might arise.
  - (iii) Asset disposal strategy - need to quickly ascertain the HRA business plan and 30-year business plan to be developed. Provide clarity on Axel Nobel.
  - (iv) 22/23 outturn and how balance sheet will impact this. Also 23/24 forecast will be impacted on the balance sheet. Ability to complete this work in a very short turnaround timescale. Being very clear about any exceptional support that might be required and long-term sustainability.
- ii. Adele responded that work was happening rapidly. HRA and 30-yr plan were being worked on with Pat Hayes' team. Been running through the next 5 years' numbers which looked healthy. The 30-yr plan was more of a refresh than a rewrite. Balance sheet work items also being worked through, had found some potentially positive numbers that could help with the overall outlook.

All this was feeding into the 22/23 outturn and 23/24 forecast. Some areas identified that would help in-year and next year too, e.g., dividend payments from companies. Subsidiaries were also being looked into. Collection fund work was ongoing. Using external providers across Berkshire to look at the numbers for objectivity and assurance.

Cashflow required more work around re-financing the currently held loans. Treasury Management piece required more work to still be done and included backpay issue for staff and covid payments for example. These areas in particular needed to be strengthened. Denise wanted to understand the severity of the cashflow position. How urgent was the requirement for additional cash injection as would need treasury and DLUHC approval for that. Adele agreed to brief Denise offline later today as it was a live conversation.

- iii. Gavin reflected that the biggest risk in the immediacy was the cashflow position. If that materialised, Commissioners noted that would be a route through to Treasury. Implications if this were to manifest would be very significant. Adele responded that to set a balanced budget, she needed more answers. The issue was if some of those issues could be resolved, it would reduce the pressure in the short to medium term and would reduce the significant gap in the budget. The pressure however, remained in finding increasing levels of savings and reducing borrowing. To that end, all CLT had been briefed on what the number was. The gap was moving on a daily basis, however. CLT were asked to look at 10-20%, with some going over and beyond that. Adele and the finance team would have more complete answers by close of play Friday 24 November.

**(Action Adele/Finance Team).**

- iv. Denise wanted clarity that Members were sufficiently engaged with the difficult decisions that would be arising as a result of this situation. Ged asked about adults and the gap between the expenditure and the spend and whether this was more aligned yet. Adele responded, they were not aligned in-yr, but had been able to reduce the size of the pressure. Adele was not able to give a figure at this stage, as there were other things going on that would impact that. An approximation was around 700k to 1m. Marc commented that the growth at Slough had been slower than the projections resulting in the reduction of the initial gap.
- v. Gavin reflected that the savings that would need to be achieved at pace, and that they didn't have too much of a negative impact on the overall recovery.

- 4.2 In response to Stephen Brown's question, Claire confirmed written advice would be going to the Minister before Christmas for all Councils in intervention.

## **5. Improvement and Recovery Assurance Framework – Developing Approach**

### **5.1 *Improvement and Recovery Progress***

- i. Detailed in the pack. Gavin wanted clarity on the headline commentary, bullet 5 – *Collation of evidence to inform Commissioners' second annual report underway. Discussion required at IRB to agree requirements to evidence 'closing the gap'*. This point is explained in 5.4.

### **5.2 *Member Officer Relations (Sarah Wilson)***

- i. Primarily a rework of the protocol. Allowed the Council to speak with Members and Officers to enable good relations. Half the elected Councillors were new and inexperienced, and holding some key positions. Some members did not understand their role. This had been mitigated by having support sessions/conversations to assist them. Had looked at best value guidance, in particular, high-level conduct, contact was to be with heads of service and above, added a new section on relations between Officers and Executive. Provided considerable support to existing and new members of Committees.

Main changes in the draft were around access to information rules. Had tried to simplify them into a principle-based approach. Staff were much more likely to know Members in Slough than other Authorities due to many living in the area and the small size of the Borough.

Incorporating systems relating to bullying, harassment, and complaints of corruption. Members had been receptive to advice. Sarah felt it was improving and was reducing down to a smaller number of Members too. Rule to combat issues of competence or conduct, e.g., not copy the complainant in where there is criticism of an Officer.

Leader commented that this was a work in progress. Guidance continued to be provided by all three leaders. Regular group leaders' meetings had been initiated, which would help manage this situation.

- ii. Ged believed the report was a positive. The benchmark would be how well the Leadership and Officers were supporting the Councillors. He felt this was very good and there had been a good level of engagement and support given. It was helpful to use this protocol to open a conversation. Ged felt it was a difficult task to get the overall tone right, however, this was being achieved which was a real positive.

Gavin reiterated that criticism of Officers in a public domain would need to be monitored closely to prevent it from happening. Sarah felt that some public meetings had been difficult where comments made were perceived as a personal attack. Most criticisms had been in internal communications rather than external, however. Sarah Hayward had two specific examples but didn't feel that they were more egregious than other Councils.

Denise reflected on Commissioners comments that the report was well written, and Section 16 was an important and clear inclusion.

Sarah Wilson reported that the recommendations would go to an informal meeting at the Standards Committee.

Stephen Brown commended the work done on the protocol by Stephen Taylor and Sarah Wilson.

**5.3 *SEND written statement of action and the DfE review (Stephen Brown)***

- i. The DfE meeting last week was attended by Leader and CEx. The theme was very positive, and the Commissioner had been complimentary of the route being taken. The Leader agreed and reflected there had been acknowledgment of the progress made. That said, there was remained a lot of work to be done.

**5.4 *Requirements for evidence to inform Commissioners annual second report (Sarah Hayward)***

- i. Wanted to understand whether there were specific issues that were concerning Commissioners and what additional information they might need. Commissioners responded that they wanted to have the most up to date information from the senior team in a timely manner

**6. *Performance Report (Gavin Jones)***

**6.1 *Issues to highlight to Commissioners:***

- i. Marc responded that nothing had significantly changed in the adults' arena. The CQC had been a learning exercise in understanding the pressures and demands of adult social care within Authorities. There was a significant issue with changes in the NHS for Slough. Frimley's consultation regarding worker place had a different angle on it. Suggested the NHS had been absorbing some of the Council's cost pressures.
- ii. Denise reflected on the dual challenge of the NHS and the Council's and wanted to know how impact assessments were being done for the medium term and how funds could be directed appropriately. Marc responded that the consultation had only been received today. The presentation would be given this afternoon at the Board. Conversations would need to start happening around this. Processes around what the Council was buying in place would also need to be looked at. ICB would need to be part of these conversations. It was about preparation at this stage, potential risks and forming a strategy to address that.
- iii. Pat Hayes reported on the issues around waste collection. The number of complaints had dwindled and missed collections had practically disappeared. By March 2024 he hoped to get a food waste collection service trialled in three areas. If that worked, would look at expanding it Borough-

wide, which would have a huge impact on collections. Discussions were ongoing with the current provider to reduce the price of the service contract. Contract to include no payback on the energy grid. Speaking with London Waste and Reading as well regarding waste.

The other main issues were on housing management side. Were continuing to drive down the backlog of repairs, significant reduction in complaints as well, which was a positive. On the temporary accommodation side, HSA payments were being looked at. Pat had met with Deputy Director of Home Office and the Asylum Team regarding management of properties in Slough. Raised issues around quality of property and usage.

- iv. While recognising the improvements made, Ged cautioned against declaring final victory too early, as the target was still a way off,
- v. Denise wanted to understand the void rates, as there had been a deterioration in that area. Reflections on plan b if landlords did not comply in the way anticipated, to meet Temporary Accommodation needs. Regarding voids Pat responded this would get worse before it got better. There had been a temporary freeze on new lettings while the new system was put in place, this had created a backlog which was now being brought down and should resolve itself rapidly now the system was in place.

Relating to Temporary Accommodation, he reflected that there had been a drastic reduction in the use of overnight accommodation and had secured longer term procurement with landlords. Longer term would need to look at out of Borough placement of tenants. Regarding general needs policy, the priorities were Children, Temporary Accommodation, and then general need and all this was confirmed in the policy.

## **7. Updates (CLT)**

### **7.1 Customer Service (Sarah Hayward/Pat Hayes)**

- i. Intended to have a high-level customer service strategy in the new year with early options coming to CLT in December. This was a 3-5yr business plan. First service deep dive with Housing was done recently, feedback was very positive with good systemic changes that would help drive the changes required at the Council. Pat reported that longer term more strategic improvement was positive.

### **7.2 ICT strategy (Sarah Hayward)**

- i. Data centre move went very well. Congratulations to the team for completing that. Issues were resolved very quickly.
- ii. The AD Chief Digital & Information Officer would be leaving the organisation in the new year. Discussions were taking place now around backfill. A refresh of the IT Strategy would be produced before the leave date.
- iii. Good news around end user impact. Bringing in a chat box onto the website to reduce number of calls which would go live early in the new year. Residents and staff would start to see the benefits.
- iv. Cyber security update provided. **Action: A detailed update to be provided by Simon Sharkey Woods to Commissioners**

### **7.3 HR (Sarah Hayward)**

- i. Applicant tracking system to go live on Monday 27 November. This would be a big change for the organisation. It had been internally socialised as well. Recruiting managers would need to use the new approach and support to be provided for that.
- ii. On boarding work had also been done, an entirely new onboarding process would come into effect in January 2024. A significant capability gap had been exposed in the team dealing with this, however. Good response to the Director role that had been advertised, which would help with the capability issue. No use of management information to any great deal recently, Agresso contract changed some months ago, and now sat with finance and a task and finish group. Some of the report structures would require rewriting, however.

### **7.4 Culture change (Sarah Hayward)**

- i. Had a good session on Wednesday 22 November with an external provider. It was generally felt that this had gone very well. Stephen reflected that some structural weaknesses had come out of that session which would need to be addressed. Marc reflected that during the profiling process it highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the team in a transparent way.
- ii. Staff workshop scheduled for week commencing 27 November using Kinetiq to provide this service. Analysis from the staff survey would be used to help develop the staff actions in the new year. This was a transition between the fix it and analysis mode. Front line staff had not yet been involved in designing the culture change programme.

- iii. Ged felt the sooner staff could feel engaged with this, the better. He personally found Kinetiq a difficult organisation to work with and too academic in their approach.

## **8. Commissioner Update**

- 8.1 Commissioners intend to provide very strong advice on the audit committee vice chair. It would then need to go through the governance procedures to be approved. Gavin would provide Sarah Wilson with that advice letter Friday 24 November.
- 8.2 Will discuss how IRBs will be run in the new year. Allow some items by exception and be able to discuss difficult issues in depth.
- 8.3 The Chief of Staff would be leaving Slough at the end of November. A huge gratitude was extended to Claire Willerton for her contribution during the Intervention. The new chief of staff, Mandy Brown, would start early December.

## **9. AOB**

### **9.1 Terms of reference**

- i. Monitoring officer to be added into the standing attendees. On that basis the TOR was accepted and approved.  
**(Nasreen to action, and recirculate)**

**The meeting closed at 12.20pm.**

### **Date of next meeting**

The next meeting is scheduled to be held at 11am on 14 December 2023, Meeting Room at The Curve. Ladbroke Road, Chalvey, SL1 2SP