

Improvement and Recovery Board – Meeting held on Thursday 14 December 2023

Present:

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
Sue Butcher - Executive Director, Children's Services, Chief Executive Slough Children's Services
Adele Taylor - Executive Director of Finance and Commercial Services and S.151 Officer
Stephen Taylor, Monitoring Officer
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

Mandy Brown - Chief of Staff to the Commissioners
Nasreen Brittain, Executive Assistant to the Commissioners (Minutes)
Also present Andrew Merritt-Morling, Programme Manager; Deemple Brain, Programme Manager; Patrick O'Connor, Political Officer

Apologies for Absence

Marc Gadsby - Executive Director of People and Adults
Paul Moffat – DfE Commissioner

Minutes

1. Welcome and Introductions

- 1.1 Introduction of the new Chief of Staff Mandy Brown made to the team. She has extensively across Whitehall. The position as Chief of Staff was now at a higher level than previously.

2. Declarations of Interest

- 1.1 No declarations of interest expressed.

3. Minutes of the Meeting held on Thursday 23 November 2023

- 3.1 The minutes of the previous meeting held on 23 November 2023 were approved.

4. Commissioner Update (Gavin Jones)

- 4.1 Formal update to the new Minister was in progress. Timescale working towards was end of January at the latest. Commissioners would socialise the planned letter with the Leadership and CEx ahead of that date.
- 4.2 Chief intervention officer at Thurrock, Luke Tyson came to Slough to meet with staff to discuss the model employed at Thurrock and see if it would be useful to have the same at Slough. Stephen Brown thought it would be very helpful to have someone in the same role at SBC. Cllr Chahal asked for terms of reference. Agreement that it would be important to get the right person in the role with the right skills set.

Action: Commissioners to share a job description for circulation.

Action: Commissioners to check whether this would be a Commissioner appointment and update the Monitoring Officer.

Sarah Hayward confirmed a meeting with the Slough team had been scheduled. Cllr Chahal wanted the Slough stamp to be put on the job role.

4.3 Update from DfE Commissioner (Gavin)

- i. Gavin provided an update on behalf of Paul Moffat, the DfE Commissioner. Update on savings was that for any future challenges to budget changes, the Council must keep Paul informed in a timely way for planning purposes.
- ii. A good journey of improvement, going in the right direction. Still a lot of work to do however, as started from a low base.

- iii. Provider market costs had increased dramatically in other Authorities and Slough would need to prepare for that going forward.
- iv. Feedback from recent DfE visit had some good positive messages. A formal letter from the Department would be issued by Monday 19 December at the latest.

Highlights included:

- a. Seeing a better culture and support for staff. Good visibility and investment.
- b. General support for the new social work model.
- c. Governance was highlighted as an issue regarding the board.

5. Update from the Finance Board (Denise Murray)

- 5.1 The meeting was out of sequence as Finance Board was taking place on Thursday 21 December. Update for that was were In the process of pulling together key themes. 23/24 was going to be a pivotal year. Thinking predominantly about the sustainability of Slough in delivering core services and also resilience to future shocks.
- 5.2 Expectations of future years and savings, and treasury management activity. Want to go back to DLUHC with a clear settlement figure and seek to reduce level of exceptional support required. Only go forward with what was actually required.
- 5.3 Accounts work required rightsizing of the team. Other areas to think about were skills, and capacity.
- 5.4 Current position: gap remained in the outturn report. 23/24 position and Q2 report indicated a gap of £8.2m which needed to be addressed. MTFP work had started. The task undertaken had been significant, however, it was not balanced as it required the use of reserves to balance the accounts. There was still more work to be done. All of this accumulated around the uncertainty of risks and opportunities on the balance sheet. Some work had been undertaken to look at that, but there could be other risks/opportunities there. Needed to truly conclude discovery before releasing any reserves. To do so without that work having been concluded, would not be prudent.
- 5.5 Adele reported the team was now in place. She had been working with the auditors Grant Thornton, where some delay had been created following discussion on what may nor may not have been required nationally. Adele was meeting with them to discuss things further.
- 5.6 Were also engaged in a review of strategic advice capability and support around balance sheet with Ernst & Young. In particular around HRA as well as balance sheet review. The amount of work to do had not been underestimated. Draft budget paper had been produced for December, which had not been possible last year and indicated progress and an

important step. Risks and need to move very swiftly on resourcing were discussed. The chief accountant position had now been filled. Procurement and internal audit work had also been going on. Improvements in this area have been made. Now had an in-house internal audit, which was much stronger. Quality of the reports and follow-up on actions were now taking place. Ensuring this continued was going to be very important going forward.

Denise summarised the need for assurance which Ernst & Young would be able to provide. However, Denise noted this was not an audit. They would be able to help identify any further risk that may be lurking and provide the Commissioners with the assurance required around sustainability; and that there was nothing else that could come to light.

The work that would take place now would provide the assurance that there would be a sound platform to work from while the accounts were not audited. Collection rates were high, putting Slough in the top percentile nationally.

Cllr Chahal expressed huge gratitude to Denise Murray, Finance Commissioner; for the support, expertise and input she had provided over the past weeks. The lens she had applied had been beyond valuable. Denise thanked Adele's team for their hard work in producing the figures.

Gavin responded that Commissioners' role was not only for holding the council to account, but also for providing the skills and expertise they brought to the Council; and encouraged everyone to use them.

6. *Improvement and Recovery Progress – July to December 2023* **(CLT)**

6.1 Leader's Reflections:

- i. Good progress made; challenge going forward was to maintain that progress at pace and make it part of the 'business-as-usual' approach. Cabinet was working closely with the senior team. Would take the opportunity from the IRB and the Finance Boards this month to provide a consistent message to the Minister.
- ii. Areas of particular progress against Directions:
 - a) **Procurement:** now had a team in place. Have rolled out a scheme of contract review and tender analysis. Felt they had been particularly successful at moving away from consultancy support to having their own team. £1.8m of potential savings from procurement had been made; some already delivered and others to be delivered in the next financial year.

Democratic governance: Managed to begin the budget scrutiny process ahead of schedule. It was a proactive budget. Weaknesses had been addressed in adult social

care and a major component of investment would go into this area. Fully up to speed on the co-opted vacancies on the committees. Audit committee vice chair issue also resolved.

- b) Children's Services:** Strong support given by Sue Butcher and her team in special education needs and disability requirements. Prior to that, education plans were being produced within the guideline of 20 weeks. Latest data showed were producing about 40% within the 20-week guideline period. Dramatically reduced reliance on agency staff which could be used as a model to the rest of the Council.
- iii. Stephen Brown, CEx update:**
 - a) Covering letter:** was included from CEx in the meeting pack. Recognised there was still a long way to go to provide best value to the residents of Slough.
 - b) Culture change:** governance and decision making had improved. Scrutiny had also improved and was a departure from the previous culture that had initially created the issue for the Council. Appraisal processes were being introduced. Focus groups had been carried out by CEx to understand what needed to change to create a good culture in the Authority.
 - c)** Felt some of the directions could end due to the progress on the directions highlighted in the letter from the CEx, evidence of which had been included in the meeting pack. Felt it was important to give a picture of the last two years to give context.
- iv.** Gavin responded there was a long way to go for the Council to deliver on best value for residents. Most important was the sense of realism of where the Council thought it was on that. Government and Commissioners would not want to keep the directions in place for longer than necessary. Discussions ahead of and after the 4th report to the Minister would be around the directions and whether they would need to be extended. The current directions were currently in place until November 2024.

Learning and practice needed to be consolidated so sustained change could take place. Commissioners would need to be confident this had been achieved.

Commissioners were also very interested in the leadership behaviours and culture that was reflected in the organisation. Advice was to demonstrate to selves and staff that the organisation was clear about the behaviours it set and were demonstrating them very clearly.

The organisation should embrace staff feedback and not hide it and be comfortable with the uneasiness of receiving uncomfortable/unpalatable feedback.

Denise commented that some of the areas previously talked about in the vision of the future needed to be for the longer-term future of the Council, and not just the period of intervention. She wanted to know whether there an operating model that would be built upon the current financial constraints. Was the Authority testing its model for some of the scenarios that could be ahead, austerity etc., did all the plans align and interface. Wanted to see the whole Council was thinking so it joined together.

v. Progress Report against the Directions and associated improvement activity:

Commissioners confirmed they would do a deep dive into this piece offline.

(i) Democratic governance improvement plan:

Stephen Taylor reported this area had come quite a long way over the past few months. Scrutiny had been revamped, members were being briefed more extensively and there was better scrutiny of the report writing. There was also more dialogue with the Group Leaders. Shadow cabinet was attended by the Monitoring Officer and Chief Executive. Results of the councillor survey had been received and were being worked through. Some demonstrating positive behaviours, and others more disturbing, which were being addressed. Would carry out a refresh of induction processes. Annual governance review also completed. Group Leaders were leading on setting the standard for behaviours.

Cllr Mann challenged that scrutiny was not operating very effectively. She had not been happy with the quality of the reports and indeed with Scrutiny itself. The budget was going to Scrutiny on 30 Jan 2024, which was not enough time for proper scrutiny ahead of the meeting itself.

Unacceptable behaviours had been reported across the board and she felt they had not been dealt with adequately. Stephen Taylor was encouraged that Members had reported they were not happy with the quality of the reporting.

(ii) Cllr Mann wanted the record to show she had very serious concerns about culture within the organisation and was meeting with the CEx to discuss this.

(iii) **Companies:** remained a challenging area. Were market testing to see what options there were for disposing of assets.

vi. **Evidence of progress towards becoming a Best Value Council – Two years on since the Directions (CLT)**

- (i) **Evidence based decision making:** still work to do around data insight function but were developing into a well-functioning team.
- (ii) **Recruitment:** more work to be done but has come a long way. Tracking system for applicants and procurement of Matrix contract had been improved. Feedback on this had been positive so far. Were now contract managing the Matrix contract.
- (iii) **Estate strategy:** how to produce a strategy at pace without an existing operating model and data around stock. Were addressing the issues around where the assets fitted into the strategy. Good progress being made on Observatory House with more still to do. were limited by what had happened in the past, a lack of data, particularly around billing. The estate strategy paper was going to December cabinet.
- (iv) **Customer experience:** IBR gone live, early indications on call handling were positive and the translate function had now also gone live. No feedback was available at this time, however.
- (v) **SEND and Getting to Good Board:** getting to good board, review from DfE had taken place and they agreed with the work and feedback on culture. Live access into information required more work to be carried out. Youth Justice Service needed to be included and were expecting an inspection soon. It was a service where the work needed to be brought to the fore. Had opened up to scrutiny, corporate parenting from LGA and peer review.

A revisit from SEND review team was also planned. Openness of children's services was a development. Were on the cusp of making significant improvements. Aiming for an average of 35 completed ECPH plans per month.

Schools were also generally more positive about SEND. Sue was confident that once the annual review cycle got underway, parents would see the benefits of the work being done.

- (vi) Denise commented that diversity had not been mentioned in any of the areas covered in the meeting. The Council would need demonstrate how it was being intentional in this area. Commissioners also required assurance on the whistleblowing procedures, to demonstrate that these were being done properly.

Gavin reminded the Council that a paper had been approved by cabinet back on 29 March 2022 titled 'Slough: Solid Foundations for Recovery', which required a BAME support and training programme that would enable those of an ethnic minority to be able to get into senior leadership roles. However, since then, there had been no demonstrable evidence this had been progressed. Cllr Chahal confirmed he was visiting Bristol to liaise with them on their diversity model to see what Slough could learn and then adopt.

- (vii) Sarah Hayward asked whether the pack for today's meeting could be published for scrutiny meeting. Commissioners agreed it could, but it would need to be clearly caveated that this would only be okay provided they were not mentioned in it, as they had not agreed with the contents of the pack and were going to do a deep dive on it offline.

7. AOB:

7.1 Terms of Reference for approval:

- i. Terms of Reference approved and adopted.

The meeting closed at 12.31pm.

Date of next meeting: Thursday 25 January 2023 at 11am – 12.30pm.