

Improvement and Recovery Board – Meeting held on Thursday 25 January 2024

Present:

Commissioners:

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

Members:

Cllr Dexter Smith – Leader, with responsibility for Improvement and Recover (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

Stephen Taylor, Monitoring Officer

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

Cllr Christine Hulme, Deputy Leader of the Opposition (deputising for Cllr Mann, Leader of the Opposition)

Apologies for Absence

Paul Moffat – DfE Commissioner

Sue Butcher - Executive Director, Children's Services, Chief Executive Slough Children's Services

Patrick Hayes - Executive Director Housing, Property and Planning

Cllr Wal Chahal - Deputy Leader, and Lead for Financial Oversight and Council Assets

Cllr Pavitar Mann - Leader of the Opposition

Minutes

1. **Welcome and Introductions**

1.1 none.

2. **Declarations of Interest**

2.1 No declarations of interest expressed.

3. **Minutes of the Meeting held on Thursday 14 December 2023**

3.1 The minutes of the previous meeting held on 14 December 2023 were approved.

4. **Commissioner Update (Gavin Jones)**

4.1 **Fourth Report to Minister:**

- i. Copy of the Commissioners' letter to Minister was shared with CEx and Leader. CEx confirmed that a readout had been done with CLT and since then a copy had been shared with the statutory officers. Commissioners shared the letter with Cllr Hulme before the Board meeting. Commissioners confirmed that this was in complete confidence and at this stage was not for sharing with anyone else.
- ii. In the report Commissioners had tried to be balanced and fair and had split the report into broad areas. On the political side, the report reflected the new Administration had landed well at the strategic level but still had a long way to go, in particular in getting new Members up to speed. It was also felt the Labour Group were making good strides to being an effective Opposition. Cllr Hulme responded that the Labour Group also had new Councillors which needed training. Getting a shadow cabinet was also something the Group needed to set up and they wanted a further meeting with the Commissioners to discuss how this could be achieved. The Labour Group wanted to be an effective opposition. **Action Nasreen to arrange regular Labour Group meetings with Commissioners.**

Sue confirmed that week commencing 29 January she was conducting a full Member briefing on corporate parenting. Gavin responded that on governance the Commissioners had been quite positive overall in their reflections of this area; and despite a politically challenging environment, Commissioners were heartened by the progress made in governance. Ged acknowledged it wasn't easy with the steep learning curves of the Members coupled with past histories. He reflected that Scrutiny and Audit had some way to go and there are individual difficulties that would need to be managed. Some effective work was in hand which would bear fruit in the future.
- iii. The areas that would prove more challenging contained within the report were the leadership and culture pieces. Commissioners were informed by quite a lot of feedback from staff who had wanted to give a view to Commissioners. They also had feedback from exit interviews, which was important in order to get a view on the organisation more broadly. Putting all that feedback together, Commissioners concluded there was concern around culture.

Commissioners had been talking about the need for a well embedded culture programme, where staff felt empowered and supported in this difficult environment. If they raised issues, they would need to be able to do so without fear and know they would be listened to. Unfortunately, this had not been the experience throughout the Council and was not consistent across the organisation.

As a CLT member there were two roles to play, which were service responsibility and the corporate culture which had to be owned by **all** members of the CLT. The experience of many of the staff and Members was that this was not consistently good across the board. The environment being experienced by staff was of high challenge, low support and Commissioners' and staff's sense was that this was not being properly owned.

Stephen Brown recognised and understood the message but felt people seeking Commissioners out were following their own personal agenda. He felt there had been a lot of churn and a lot of trauma within the organisation following events leading to the S114 being issued. Staff were feeling traumatised, which presented a real challenge to the organisation. He recognised the need to bring stability via the restructure and shared that recent successes had been achieved. There had been very good recruitments of HR Director and Strategy and Change Director in the past week.

He reported that up until now, it had not felt right to look at the values of the organisation as other things had been more pressing. Now, however, needed to look at what the Leadership needed to do now and get on top of the challenge.

Commissioners reflected they were required to model transparency when writing to the Minister. Gavin asked the CEx to think very carefully about how the Leadership would signal to staff how they could trust them before embarking on the cultural change and to seek out advice on how best to approach that.

Recent sense from staff was nothing was better within the culture from the legacy one, so real trust would need to be rebuilt. CEx reported that they also received this feedback through the workshops that had been undertaken, and he reported that some of the feedback was quite brutal and committed to sharing it openly and honestly, which in turn would hopefully help with the trust issue.

The next Roadshow would also have culture as its focus. The Leader responded that he perceived the organisation was articulating a desired culture change, but that messaging was being brought down by the messages of bad behaviours of both Members and staff. His view was that they were getting this pushback because the Council was trying to do something challenging.

Second tier reorganisation had created some scepticism. Added to this, many new Members had also come in with some with unrealistic expectations. They had experienced frustrations with casework and together with fortnightly bin collections were colouring the picture.

Gavin reflected on this and responded that fundamentally people looked at the Leadership as being key and staff would be watching everything they did and that would tell them far more than any words spoken. The Corporate Leadership needed to think about how they were being perceived by others. This was another reason why it was so important to get more people into the building.

Prioritisation would be key going forward, finding the time to get out and about and talk to people. Staff needed to feel valued by being engaged with by those in leadership positions. Cllr Hulme agreed with this particular point, and the feedback she has received was staff felt out of touch with the reporting because didn't get the sense the leadership and CLT have a good understanding of Slough and jobs being done on the front line. They did not have a good understanding of what staff had to deal with day to day. It was vital to find a way of getting the message through to staff that the Senior Leadership understood the culture of Slough.

Stephen Taylor added the message from volunteer groups was that more visibility was required from the Corporate Leadership. He also felt that staff misconstrued the meetings CLT were having and misread behaviours/discussions/facial expressions etc., and as a result they were thinking of moving the meeting to another room.

Stephen Taylor reported there had been a series of workshops and Andrew Merritt-Morling, the Project Manager had provided 18 recommendations which he had been asked to finesse. The recommendations were a good start, however.

Gavin reported that an enormous difference had been made by Sue Butcher in Children's Services by getting staff to being in the office more regularly. The CEx had tried to get staff back into the office but it hadn't successfully happened as it had in Children's Services.

Adele felt that CLT sometimes had not been good at 'you said, you did', and as a result, the follow through needed to happen more going forward. She felt that it been a question of capacity for many of them, however; and the restructure and recruitments would help with this.

Adele saw this as an opportunity to do a reset with staff engagement sessions. The Our Futures continued to be used as a stick against CLT. Adele felt she had been able to spend a little more time her teams and felt more people were coming into the office for some teams, but not all. So, consistency across the organisation was necessary.

The CLT had also discussed going out into the community more and this would be made easier with fuller teams. The 'permafrost' had had to be thawed.

Sarah Hayward responded that the feedback was well heard, and the Corporate Leadership needed to live and demonstrate the culture more than they had been.

She felt capacity had not been carved out by CLT and the team was less than a year old, although the intervention was over two years old. Sarah

said she also encountered people who were not happy, and felt staff churn was pre covid, and pre 2019 and going back seven to eight years where there was high staff churn in senior roles. Slough has a low trust environment, so needed to be mindful of this when doing the culture change.

She felt the restructure was possibly not helping either because some long standing ADs were leaving. Gavin responded that the new recruitments would need to be successful, so they did not leave after a short period. Collective onboarding of the new leadership cadre would be vital for ultimate success. The Leader agreed and added that as well as low levels of staff trust, there was a low level of trust from residents, many of whom were also staff. Therefore, the Leadership need to think about what confidence measures they should be considering. They would also have to ensure they did not take for granted that the message had been properly articulated to the new joiners so they were made aware of the changes that had taken place or would be taking place. The Council needed to work on securing them as well and making them feel embraced by the organisation and empowering them.

Gavin said that talented hires would make the Leadership feel uncomfortable and the leadership needed to be mature enough to deal with the challenge they would provide. CEx responded that the good news was some work had begun around the culture change piece, including workshops, appraisals, training and development needs to be identified with staff. He had spent a day with the adult social care also in children's services teams where the environment had been good. Other areas such as the depot were proving more of a challenge.

Gavin wanted the Council to remember that the Commissioner team were very experienced leaders and encouraged CLT to embrace the relationship with them. The reality was that ultimately Commissioners held the power during the intervention. It was important to remember that their success was the Council's success. The Leadership needed to think about how they progressed their relationship with Commissioners.

- iv. The Operating Model was also covered in the 4th report. Every Council was tackling this and whoever won the next election, this wouldn't change. The MTFP was vital for sustainability with the operating model. The Council needed to consider how IT would be used, form relationships with the community, and what elements needed to be pursued strategically to move to the new model with the reduced financial envelope. Strategically think through what the organisation needs to be in order to provide the services for the residents of Slough. There were good practices available that Slough could look at and use. Commissioners would be happy to attend CLT to discuss this further.
Action: Nasreen to arrange for Commissioners to attend CLT.
- v. Stephen Brown felt the language in the letter undermined the mission and asked Commissioners if following his response letter, they would be prepared to change the language. Gavin responded that there would no changes to the letter that was written for the Minister, as there was no material difference to the content, it was more about the optics of the presentation. The reason for this was the need for Commissioners to be totally transparent with the Minister and was in line with the Best Value

report which required they be open and honest with the Minister and the public. Stephen Brown accepted this response and position. On Commissioner advice, Stephen Brown agreed to have Commissioners note the response privately and not submit his response letter to the Minister. Ged reminded everyone the letter would need to remain confidential until it was published.

- vi. The 4th report referred to a lack of strategic focus and referenced the operating model. The transformation team were working on what an operating model would look like and would bring it to the February Improvement and Recovery Board.

5. Update from Finance Board (Denise Murray)

5.1 Some good progress reported. Items that were considered on track were benefits, safety valve, contract management and procurement. Adele updated on the balance sheet work and reported that prior year ledgers were progress and the work with Ernst Young had started and were expecting a report in January. The MTFP residual gap work was underway and was currently approx. £4.5m. Asset disposal discussion and query regarding the HRA pipeline, colleagues needed to agree way forward and when the report would be going to cabinet. The current proposal was to bring the paper to the March cabinet which was outside the date anticipated. Adele had a meeting with DWP last week and following good progress, had now moved them to quarterly updates.

6. Update on:

6.1 General Update on Progress:

- i. Not covered.

6.2 Culture:

- i. Covered in the previous section.

6.3 Restructure/Recruitment:

- i. Adele reported they had been successful in recruiting a Director of Commissioning, Director of Transactions, Director of Education as internal appointments. A Monitoring Officer had also been appointed. Had also offered and received verbal acceptance for Director of Strategy Change and Residential Engagement and also Director of HR and Workforce. The Director of Property yielded a preferred candidate but wanted to have member engagement before finalising the process. The applications had now closed for remaining roles and are in various stages. Adele reported that the Director of Finance had resigned, and an interim would be sought.

7. Thurrock Intervention Model (Stephen Brown/Sarah Hayward)

- i. Stephen Brown reported he had found it to be very instructive to spend time at Thurrock and would now be setting up a new intervention unit

which would sit centrally in the CEx's office, reporting to the CEx. It was hoped that this would create more of a focus. He had spoken with internal staff about who could be the Chief Intervention Officer (CIO) and what business support it would require. The concept of a deeper team was something that would be looked at in more detail. He would also be putting some details down and reported this would be done quickly in the next few weeks. Needs to speak with the Leader to get political buy-in. Gavin pleased that thought was being given to this.

Adele felt that the phraseology of 'intervention' was not the correct word and perhaps something less contentious could be used. Gavin felt it would be important that whatever was used, it fitted into the broader piece. Sarah reported there was another request that had been made for additional resources. She also felt that Slough was contending with recovery and transformation while having poor adult and children's services whereas Thurrock had much better services in these areas.

Ged looked forward to seeing the product and reminded everyone pace would be key. At the next Board in February, actions would need to be agreed rather than a draft operating model being presented.

- ii. Final point made by Commissioners was it was vital the Council worked in a constructive and collaborative way with Commissioners.

8. AOB:

- i. None.

The meeting closed 12.11pm.

Date of next meeting: Thursday 22 February at 11am – 12.30pm.