

Slough Borough Council Productivity Plan

July 2024

1. How you have transformed the way you design and deliver services to make better use of resources

Responding to Intervention

In June 2021 the Communities Secretary announced an external assurance review of Slough Borough Council's financial position and the strength of its wider governance arrangements, following its request for exceptional financial support. The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) led on the financial aspects of the review. Jim Taylor, former Chief Executive of Salford City Council, Trafford Council and Rochdale Borough Council, led on governance.

[The two reviews](#) found that the council had failed to comply with its best value duty of continuous improvement and that it was unable to become financially self-sustaining without considerable Government support. SBC was subsequently placed under intervention by the Minister of State for Equalities and Levelling Up Communities in December 2021, and Commissioners were appointed to oversee the council's recovery and improvement, alongside a set of [Directions under the Local Government Act](#).

The council and children's company are also under [Directions regarding children's services improvement and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities service](#) improvement. The latter is a local area-wide recovery programme. Delivering Best Value is a core theme within those aspects of the council's recovery.

In response to the Directions, the council published its recovery and improvement plan – '[Doing Right by Slough](#)' in May 2022. The plan included a framework of seven key themes for its transformation programme, to create 'the right council for Slough' capable of providing value:

- Leadership and Culture
- Financial recovery and onward sustainability
- Business planning and performance management
- Governance
- Organisational capability, capacity, and resilience
- Technological capability, capacity, and resilience
- Customer and resident engagement.

In 2023, the council produced a [Corporate Plan \(2023-2027\)](#), which introduced a set of strategic objectives, to ensure that resources and service delivery is concentrated on addressing the borough's key challenges surrounding health inequalities, and to support Slough's large young population. The plan also introduced a new 'approach' for the council, outlining the type of council we wish to be, how we will work and our relationship with residents and partners:

- Resident focused.

- Providing financial sustainability.
- Enabling residents and communities.
- Strengthening partnerships,
- and Building trust.

A [Phase 2 Recovery Programme 2024-2026](#) has been developed and a request for adoption of that approach was made to the council's Cabinet in July 2024. This will become the council's new Improvement and Recovery Plan. The Phase 2 programme focuses on:

- Sustainable finances
- Organisational change, and
- Robust children's delivery.

These three 'pillars' aligning to Commissioner-led assurance forums – both DfE Commissioner and DLUHC Commissioner-led. Delivery of the Best Value recovery programme overall is reported to the Commissioner-chaired Improvement and Recovery Board. A new Recovery Programme Office has been established and reports directly to the Chief Executive. Its role is to enable change, and to check and challenge to ensure robust reporting of progress, and discussion of risks, issues, and mitigations.

It is recognised that improvement since December 2021 has not taken place with the consistency and pace that had been hoped, however the council has made progress on several key areas, which have improved the way we design and deliver services to make better use of resources. The council has recently completed a restructure of senior management posts - Executive Directors, Directors, Heads of Service – to enhance the quality and clarity of leadership across the organisation.

Early Intervention and Collaboration

Intervening early before issues for residents escalate is an efficient method for delivering positive outcomes and at lower cost. Early intervention in children's services is a key pillar of change for the council and children's company, in response to the DfE interventions on children's services and the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities service. For example, recent investments in Early Help services have seen a significant reduction in the numbers of looked after children.

To improve efficiency, the six Berkshire unitary authorities have recently created the [Berkshire Prosperity Board](#), which will seek to drive economic growth and secure future investment in the county and facilitate future devolution discussions with central government. The Board will provide a vehicle to enable improved collaboration and efficiency across the following policy areas:

- Health and Inequalities
- Skills and education
- Affordable housing
- Sector development
- Strategic infrastructure
- Net zero

2. How you plan to take advantage of technology and make better use of data to improve decision making, service design and use of resources

Technology

The council has invested in a modernisation programme to make its core technology infrastructure more stable, reliable, and more secure. This is a crucial foundation for adopting new processes and tools for staff and residents. Improving technology access and use remains a key objective in the council's Phase 2 Recovery Programme.

The council has adopted process automation in its Revenues and Benefits service to improve productivity. The council has also enhanced the accessibility of its website, including introducing a [chatbot function](#) to improve the online experience for residents who contact the council. Assistive Technology has also been introduced into services delivered for people requiring care and support through Adult Social Care.

These projects are part of the first stage of a new Digital Strategy, which has been informed by a Local Government Association [Digital 360 Review](#). A new Digital Strategy is integral to improving the experience and outcomes for residents, and at the time of writing, a full Digital Strategy is anticipated to be reviewed by Cabinet in September 2024. As part of the project to develop a new Target Operating Model (please see section 3), the council will be exploring further opportunities to redesign services, automate processes and enable greater self-service for key activities for residents, businesses, and staff.

SBC recognises that there are opportunities to better use new technology to improve workflows and systems, such as predictive analysis and AI. However, to take full advantage of these, it will need to develop an appropriate governance framework for the adoption of emerging technologies to ensure accountability, fairness, and transparency of use. The council also does not have a data platform available which would support acceleration of the use of service data, and improvement in data quality through a single platform.

Evidence-based decision-making

Ahead of the production of the new Corporate Plan, a project was undertaken to develop a new [Slough Insights Pack](#), drawing on data from the 2021 Census and other key sources of data – including the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, Index of Multiple Deprivation and Public Health Outcomes Framework. This resource pack is also used to support service delivery planning and strategy development.

council is also seeking to make better use of resident and partner engagement to enhance decision making and service design. We are expanding our use of the online [Slough Citizen Space](#) platform for consultation and are currently implementing the recommendations of a recent Member Task & Finish Group on resident engagement and building trust.

The council frequently shares data with other organisations for strategic, operational, and safeguarding purposes and is looking to explore more opportunities where it can do so purposefully, securely, and ethically, to good effect.

Organisational performance is reported publicly through Cabinet. Service performance is reported publicly through benchmarking of statutory returns and through OFLOG reporting. Place-based data is available to residents through the council's website, in line with the

Public Sector Geo-Spatial Agreement. The council is committed to Open Data principles and will be sharing greater volumes of data online to inform residents and businesses.

3. Your plans to reduce wasteful spend within your organisation and systems

Performance management

The council monitors, reports on, and actions performance insight at service and corporate levels. This includes insight to determine efficiency and effectiveness. A recovery and [performance update report](#) is reviewed quarterly by Cabinet, and corporate KPIs are used to inform the scrutiny work programme. This is in addition to statutory and regulatory reporting. The council is continuously improving its data collection, reporting methods, and performance dialogue, to deliver Best Value for the residents of Slough.

Our staff and volunteers are the most important factor in the council delivering Best Value, and it is recognised that the council needs a new workforce strategy to improve morale, recruitment, retention, skills development, and culture. A new Workforce Strategy will be developed and launched in the second half of 2024.

The council and children's company have an objective to reduce the use of interim, temporary and agency staff. In the financial year 2023/24 the agency spend via the council's contract with Matrix was £26.6m. 177 out of the 358 placements on the Matrix contract are over 12 months.

Key improvements will be:

- Ensuring effective assessments of value for money are undertaken prior to recruitment.
- Establishing improved contract management arrangements that enable replacement of contingent workers with permanent members of staff.
- Reducing the tenure of agency workers; and
- Where temporary or contingent recruitment is necessary, ensuring we pay a market tested rate.

The council and children's company are prioritising robust procurement and contract management, and are developing a new model for strategic commissioning, all three of which are integral to improving productivity. Change to procurement are aligned to the new Procurement Act.

New Operating Model

In their most recent report to Government, the Commissioners stated that although the council had continued to make progress in some areas, it had not sufficiently accelerated the pace of improvement, especially on tackling organisational transformation, developing a future operating model and that continued financial instability remains a concern. These three areas are central to SBC's plans to design develop a leaner, more efficient, and more productive council, that is best placed to meet the needs of residents.

Building on the principles established in the new corporate plan, the Council has started a programme to design a new [Target Operating Model \(TOM\)](#), which aims to deliver a Best Value council for the residents of Slough. Current projections suggest this will develop an

outline Operating Model by September, which will then be consulted on with residents. This timeline enables the outcomes of the TOM project to inform the council's Medium Term Financial Strategy and 2025/26 Budget and service planning.

There are three guiding principles which are underpinning the TOM project:

1. That we demonstrate we can stand on our own two feet and are able to prove we can make strategic decisions.
2. That we are financially viable and sustainable, meaning that we can future forecast and scenario plan to help us meet future shocks or significant increases in demand.
3. That we place the resident first and make our staff feel appreciated.

There are six initial themes that are being explored, which will be key to making SBC a more productive and efficient organisation:

1. Improving and streamlining customer access.
2. Adopting a Digital First approach.
3. Resolving challenges around Temporary Accommodation.
4. Reviewing income generation, fees, and charges.
5. Developing a flexible workforce and positive culture.
6. Improving Strategic Commissioning and contract & performance management.

The TOM steering group will also be conducting a route and branch review of all areas of service delivery and will be holding a series of directorate workshops to consider how to further embed the new council 'approach' of the corporate plan (see section 1). These will:

- Examine opportunities to adopt enhanced preventative models, improve early intervention or better manage demand.
- Explore alternative delivery models, including further opportunities to work in partnership with other local authorities and key agencies.
- Investigate the potential of alternative staffing structures or ways of working.
- Review service standards and levels.
- Consider options for making better use of council properties and facilities.
- Assess the potential for making better use of grant funding opportunities and other funding streams.

4. The barriers preventing progress that the Government can help to reduce or remove

Barriers

Technological challenges present a consistent barrier to delivering improvement across all service areas. Supporting councils to improve their technological capacity and capability would enable SBC to modernise and transform at a much greater pace and deliver the necessary improvements to its efficiency and value for money.

Uncertainty over the future of the funding environment for local government prevents a challenge for the council in planning for the long-term and in identifying the appropriate operating model for the council for the coming years. These challenges are exacerbated for

Slough Borough Council, given the difficult financial decisions it will need to make as part of its recovery.

There remain several key policy areas which are significantly driving cost pressures for all local authorities nationally, which are adult social care, children's social care, Special Educational Needs, home to school transport and homelessness support. Costs incurred to deliver statutory obligations far outweigh the funding available to deliver key services to the residents of Slough.

Asks of Government

Clarity on the following would help the council deliver for the residents of Slough:

- A long-term approach to funding, with an adequate scale of funding, would enable efficient planning and delivery of adult social care and children's social care.
- A long-term national strategy for reducing demand pressures or creating greater stability in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities services and Housing services.
- The future model of devolution and the process for agreeing a devolution deal with central government. This would enable the Berkshire Prosperity Board (see Section 1) to plan more effectively for the future and could support the Berkshire authorities to identify suitable opportunities for sharing services and attracting investment to meet local needs.
- A continuation of advice and funding support to enable technological transformation and robust cyber security.
- Policy on, and guidance to inform, models of community asset ownership to enable the provision of modern and sustainable sports and leisure facilities.