

Improvement and Recovery Board – Meeting held on Thursday 11 April 2024

Present:

Chair, Gavin Jones, Lead Commissioner
Denise Murray, Finance Commissioner
Ged Curran, Commissioner (remote)

Members:

Cllr Dexter Smith – Leader, with responsibility for Improvement and Recovery
Cllr Wal Chahal - Deputy Leader, and Lead for Financial Oversight and Council Assets

Officers

Stephen Brown - Chief Executive and Head of Paid Services
Chris Holme, Interim S.151 Officer
Marc Gadsby - Executive Director of People and Adults
Sue Butcher - Executive Director, Children's Services, Chief Executive Slough Children's Services
Stephen Taylor, Monitoring Officer
Patrick Hayes - Executive Director Housing, Property and Planning
Tessa Lindfield – Director of Public Health

Secretariat

Mandy Brown, Chief of Staff to Commissioners
Nasreen Brittain, Executive Assistant to the Commissioners (Minutes)

Also present

Dave Hounsell – Acting Head of Service
Andrew Merritt-Morling, Programme Manager
Cllr Christine Hulme, Labour, deputising for Cllr Mann

Apologies for Absence

Cllr Pavitar Mann - Leader of the Opposition

Minutes

1. Welcome and Introductions

1.1 Introductions made. Tessa Lindfield welcomed to the team.

2. Declarations of Interest

2.1 No declarations of interest expressed.

3. Minutes of the Meeting held on Thursday 22 February 2024.

3.1 The minutes of the previous meeting held on 22 February 2024 were approved.

4. Commissioner Update (Gavin Jones)

4.1 *Fourth Report to Minister:*

- a) Fourth report had been issued, the Minister had responded, and the Council had also submitted a note to the Minister from the CEx and Leader of the Council.
- b) Next step was a further report which the Minister had requested, following the 4th report. Best value was not being achieved systematically across the organisation. The 5th report would focus on the best value framework in line with the Directions and any extension to them beyond November 2024. The Commissioners would provide advice on the extension of the Directions, and the Minister would make the final decision.
- c) Sue Butcher responded that the DfE Commissioner's letter had now also gone to the Minister for Children's Services. This was a separate intervention to the DLUHC one, although there was some link.
- d) Stephen Taylor asked whether a draft would be circulated as had been done for the 4th report. Gavin responded he was minded to share what he could but would need to take advice from DLUHC as to what was appropriate to share, to give the Council an opportunity to see what the Commissioners advice was going to be. The timeline to submit the 5th report was end April, with the draft being sent to the Department first. The pre-election period could impact the timing, and Gavin would also take advice on that. Mandy Brown responded the final report would be published end of May.

4.2 *CEx & Leader response to Commissioners' report*

- a) Included in the above discussion and notes.

5. Update from Finance Board (Denise Murray)

5.1 Recognised 24/25 was a critical year to provide clarity for future sustainability. Just over £18m deficit, which would need to be provided for through the smoothing reserve. The 22/23 and historic years remained uncertain, and this would require a call on the smoothing reserve.

EY started the work on the balance sheet. Need to improve governance on this and Cllr Chahal would be joining that Board.

Asset Strategy still £600m target, delivery was below that figure.

There was a vacancy in Head of Internal Audit, this presented a risk for the annual opinion. There had been a speedy recruitment undertaken to find an interim replacement. Chris Holme responded that interviews were taking place, with the hope of a good interim appointment, with a plan B if unsuccessful. Denise noted that the pool was narrow for the right calibre of person to be able to appoint. Gavin asked who would provide the annual opinion in the absence of the internal head of audit. Denise responded this could not be done retrospectively, so the accounts would need to reflect that there would be no opinion. Denise's view was the incoming interims would not be able to provide that opinion as they would not meet the standards.

- 5.2 Stephen Taylor responded the annual governance statement was provided to the Commissioners. He wanted to take it to the next audit committee. A meeting was being scheduled with Sarah Wilson to discuss this. There would be two opinions, one for the external auditors and the other for internal purposes.
- 5.3 Gavin responded that the fact there was no internal audit opinion, was of significance. Stephen Taylor responded this could not be finalised until this was completed. There had been a good amount of notice that the previous head of internal audit was leaving. Chris Holme responded some work had been done to provide a report, and the aim was to provide this for before July. Denise reaffirmed that the audit opinion must come from the post holder, so unless the post holder had signed it as coming from him with his final findings, this could not be done retrospectively. The annual governance statement would need to state that while some work had been done, there was no final, signed opinion.
- 5.4 Cllr Chahal said there had been an asset team meeting where the full list of assets for disposal were covered and two new members of staff were being brought in to assist with this. These meetings would be weekly, and regular reporting would be provided to Commissioners as well. There was agreement on the actual asset sales target which was £600m.

6. Update from Transformation Board (Ged Curran)

- a) The first Board was a set-up meeting. The Council was not where it was hoped it would be, as the required progress had not been made. There was strong cross-party interest in being more closely involved in this process. Agreed on how best to manage this for the future to ensure good engagement. Need to identify the progress made, the gaps and how the Council would move forward in each of the areas and see what resources would be required to do that.
- b) The first material meeting was scheduled for 18 April. Therefore, the next update would be more real and in-depth. Ged thanked Andrew Merritt-Morling, Dave Hounsell and Deemple Brain on the incredibly hard work they had done, and the fact that we had this level of detail to report on at all, was remarkable. Cllr Chahal also thanked the transformation team, and reflected he would be more involved in the transformation process going forward.

7. Target Operating Model (Andrew Merritt-Morling)

- a) Gavin reflected every Authority across the country was having to do this exercise in deciding how to deliver it's services.
- b) Andrew Merritt-Morling reported that what was being presented today was the Officers view of where things currently stood. There needed to be clarity on what the target model was and what it meant for the organisation. Clarity would also need to be provided on what was required, if today's findings were not what was needed.
- c) The case for change is to focus on the seven main areas. A huge amount of work will be required to get partnerships to deliver.
 - (i) **Respond to local community needs:** As things stand today, there is no overarching community engagement strategy, or what messages want to get out and receive back.
 - (ii) **Dependencies between SBC Services:** Currently the Services remain in silos, however, the proposed new operating model will enable people to self-serve, where possible, and for Services to join up around communities locally. A cradle to grave approach.
 - (iii) **Partnership Model:** Current model of delivery is based on a deficit of focused management. Need to coordinate the workforce, people, and communities to build on strengths and identify solutions to local issues.
 - (iv) **Financial challenge:** Over the next 3 years, need to deliver at least c£20.8m of savings. The way of working across all Services will need to change to achieve that.
 - (v) **Poor outcome and inequality:** The Council needs to ensure equality across Slough. To have less people in need and manage need and within the new resource envelope.
 - (vi) **Failure Demand:** Approximately 50% of all demands come from people who are 'not coping'. They are likely to escalate and require more specialist care. Need to forecast demand and better manage it together with improved early intervention
- d) Regarding the analogy of the supermarket comparison, two questions were posed for consideration, one; where the Council thought it was today if it were a supermarket, and where did it want to be. The assumption being made today, was wanting to get to good, recognising there was a lot of work to be done. If the Council were a Tesco, that would be a good place to be. However, the Council was not a Tesco yet, so it needed to think about being a Tesco Express, which were smaller, with a reduced range of products on offer and requiring less staff required to deliver the offer. Only items deemed essential would be delivered, with perhaps the odd offer that would sit outside the essential offering. This was one direction of travel, the analogy was designed to illustrate what type of organisation the Council wanted to be, and for it to then be focused on being the best organisation it could be to deliver the offering it had decided it would do.

As things currently stood, SBC did not have a vision. The approach echoed the approach but there was no foundation yet. Whatever the direction of travel, everything would need to be aligned, with clear accountability. The organisation's culture would also need to embed this.

Ged responded the presentation was very clear and had nothing further to add at this stage.

Gavin reflected, that the headline from the presentation was to know what you are about, deliver it to the best standard and have accountability. There was an opportunity through necessity to gather pace in progressing the operating model.

Thoughts from Gavin were the strategy around technology including AI would be crucial going forward, and there would be social implications of that. Delighted there would be a new Director of HR, as that would be a significant staff impact. A good workforce strategy that described the skills and experience that would be required, would also be crucial. The footprint of the organisation would also be key.

Building with the communities was a good way to progress and it would be good to look internally to see what could be built on. Strategic commissioning capability was about being really clear about what the organisation was trying to achieve and then having the right resources to deliver it. This could also be delivered from within the organisation as well as external partnerships.

Gavin encouraged the team to reach out to Commissioners while at the same time being very connected to the local community.

Mark Gadsby felt it was rare to be in a situation where one could be part of the transformation and liked the supermarket analogy. Given where the Council was at the moment, and the challenges, people didn't want what Councils were offering. That created an opportunity to look at other offerings. There were key pieces of legislation that impacted on what Councils could offer. Sometimes better solutions could be found when local people were given the money directly, as had happened in adult social care. There were things that the Council would have to take responsibility for, but many that could be redirected to the local residents.

- e) Denise reflected on the response to the pandemic local government had had to think about and work with local partners. It helped with focusing on a single purpose, and what the role of local government was. This was an opportunity for the Council to focus on what its core purpose was, and what partners it could use to deliver that. The financial challenge should not be the starting point, however. What was more important was what the future envelope would be that would enable the Council to deliver the core services. The enabling functionality needed to be looked at more closely. It needed to be a realistic core purpose that was affordable and deliverable. The estate strategy and operational estate would underpin the delivery model and would need to be included in the model that the transformation team were putting together.

Sue Butcher commented that the presentation was thought-provoking and would pick this up with Andrew Merritt-Morling offline for further discussion. DfE would be reducing their funding going forward, so would need to look elsewhere for that going forward and would need to look at the Company more. Sue wanted to see the Company as a strong symbiotic development that could be done together with the Council, and generally wanted to see more of this going forward. She wanted the Council to see the Company as a strength. There were a huge amount of resource available, and SEND was becoming a good example of that. Sue felt that in Slough the community and voluntary sector was enormously strong but was not being utilised as much as it could be. Cllr Ahmed was doing a lot of work to bring more community engagement to the Council. Operating outwards needed to be expanded going forward.

- f) Tess reflected she found the analogy thought provoking. Agreed with Denise's comment on working with local partners. She was encouraged by the fact of less of the same, but rather of thinking differently. How data would be better used to measure things. How partnerships and dependencies were being gauged and how data was being used to inform the approach. Data and evidence to inform good decisions would be vital for the Council. The means of getting the right skills to get good data management would be important too. Gavin was encouraged by the discussion and wanted the CLT, Cabinet and the broader Council to have more of these discussions outside the Board meetings. Commissioners preferred the Council to think carefully about how it tackled this and to not try and deliver everything all at once.
- g) Stephen Taylor responded that the issue was the timing of what the effect would be and how quickly it would manifest itself. He did not think it would be quick enough. Also, important to ensure internal liaison was happening. Scrutiny was reporting back but was keen to see one strand rather than different ones, so things were well coordinated. Gavin agreed this was a good point. The phasing and scheduling and linking that with the financial envelope would be vital to success. Keeping people would also be essential for a successful journey. All staff engagement would be key, so parts of the Council were not operating in isolation to the rest of the organisation.

Stephen Brown reflected this could not be done in isolation as opportunities could be missed. Gavin agreed, but pointed out that absolute focus would be required to stay on target.

- h) Cllr Chahal said the work presented by Andrew was excellent, particularly given the short timescales. Community partnerships would be part of the programme going forward to reduce the burden on the Council. In terms of AI and IT, these would also underpin things. It was hoped to have workshops and working groups in place with the right people involved to take the journey forward. There were multiple phases to achieve different aims. Important not to forget the broad offer as well. Needed to champion the message both internally and externally.

Pat Hayes responded that partnerships were key, but others were also trying to do the same, in getting the Council to do more, for example the Police. There had been a decline in government funding over the past

20 years in the public realm. This was something that couldn't be

forgotten when creating the model and the Council would need to do the basics well.

- i) The Leader observations were the Council had to be data driven in the transformation process. There was a lot of data available, and better use of it needed to be made. The Council was the main provider of the data available for Slough which had shaped the decisions in the corporate plan for example. He recognised the Council did not use its data well, however. If AI were to be used, then data sharing would need to happen quickly. Would also need to be able to speak with other public sector organisations better. It was very important to not only capture that data, but use it for early interventions, to try and predict trends and prevent issues becoming worse. Gavin agreed and reflected that the culture of people not wanting to use the data was a barrier to making the best of use it for timely upstream interventions.

8. Transformation Implementation Model (staffing and governance): (Dave Hounsell)

- a) Governance update was the corporate leadership team had made a decision to keep to the board structure as it was and to report accordingly.
- b) On staffing, the new CEx would be looking at the senior structure. Were building the team to fill phase two with project managers who would also be reporting to the Boards.

Gavin was content with the update. Denise was not clear around the £4m the transformation fund and whether that would be governed by the transformation board. The transformation board will oversee where this money was spent over the next two years, so business cases would go to this board giving it oversight of the fund.

9. Recovery Plan: (Dave Hounsell)

- 9.1 At the February IRB a draft phase II recovery document that was shared. Dave welcomed clarity on this and would bring it back to the next IRBin May for that purpose.

He had had a first go at framework of best value and the corporate team had done an initial assessment of it as well. Each of the 7 aspects that would be looked at to be a best value authority would inform the recovery plan. This was circulated to the Board. However, there was a lot more work still to do.

Denise welcomed the self-assessment, and confirmed that Grant Thornton, the external auditors were also doing their assessment plus an independent assessment.

Stephen Brown reflected an amber rag rating showed things that had been done but could not demonstrate sustainability.

Gavin said any opportunity for self-reflection was a positive thing for the authority to do. Dave Hounsell responded that success measures had been put together by Thurrock and Woking, and he hoped to work together with them to produce something for the Council.

10. AOB

- 10.1 Gavin personally thanked Stephen Brown for his hard work at Slough over the past two years. The skills built here would be of enormous value to another

Authority. Stephen Brown thanked the Commissioners for the opportunity to work with them. He also thanked colleagues and CLT. He reflected he was disappointed with the lack of progress that had been made, however. He hoped that with the new CEx and Directors being appointed, the pace would pick up and sustainability could be achieved. The Leader thanked Stephen Brown on behalf of the elected members as over the past year there had been good collaboration with the Officers and Members.

The meeting closed at 10.55am.

Date of next meeting: Thursday 23 May 2024 at 11am – 12.30pm.

Approved IRB minutes 11 April 2024