

**Minutes of the Improvement and Recovery Board/Finance Board  
Thursday 23 March 2023 11-2pm**

**Minutes of the Improvement and Recovery Board/Finance Board  
Thursday 23 March 2023 at 11am  
Council Chambers, Ground Floor Observatory House / Microsoft Teams**

**Attendees:**

***Commissioners:***

Gavin Jones – Commissioner (Chair)

***Members:***

Cllr James Swindlehurst – Council Leader (Deputy Chair) and Lead for Council Recovery, Forward Strategy & Economic Development

Cllr Dexter Smith – Leader of the Opposition

Cllr Rob Anderson – Lead for Financial Oversight & Council Assets (remote)

Cllr Zaffar Ajaib - Lead for Customer Services, Procurement and Performance

Cllr Christine Hulme – Lead for Children’s Services, Lifelong Learning and Skills

***Officers:***

Stephen Brown, Chief Executive and Head of Paid Services,

Adele Taylor – Executive Director of Finance and Commercial Services and S151 Officer

Sarah Hayward – Operating Officer

Stephen Taylor – Monitoring Officer

Patrick Hayes – Executive Director Housing, property & Planning

Marc Gatsby – Executive Director, People - Adults

Savio de Cruz – Associate Director Operations, (Representing Richard West, ED for Place & Communities)

Steve Muldoon – Deputy Director Financial Management (Interim)

Sue Butcher – Executive Director, Children’s Services

***Secretariat:***

Nasreen Brittain – Executive Assistant to the Commissioners (minutes)

Lucy Storr – DLUHC – Local Government Interventions

***Apologies:***

Richard West – Executive Director, Place & Communities, Claire Willerton - Chief of Staff to the Commissioners, Cllr Pavitar Mann – Lead for Housing and Planning, Cllr Natasa Pantelic – Lead for Social Care and Public Health, Cllr Nazir Mohammed – Lead for Transport and the Local Environment  
Cllr Balvinder Bains – Lead for Public Protection, Regulation and Enforcement, Cllr Sabia Akram – Lead for Leisure, Culture & Community Empowerment

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**Minutes**

**1. Welcome and Introductions (*Gavin Jones*)**

To Adele Taylor as the new S151 Officer. New commissioner will be appointed after the election. Gavin will remain as Commissioner for the foreseeable future.

**2. Declaration of Interests**

No declarations expressed.

**3. Minutes and Actions of the February Improvement and Recovery Board**

**3.1** Minutes noted for Improvement and Recovery Board and Finance Board approved.

**4. Finance Update (Adele Taylor)**

**4.1** Close-down very important. Many actions already underway. Close-down for 2022/23 is very clean.

**4.2** Since the last board, there is now a budget which has been signed off and approved by Council. Adele Taylor is meeting her team to ensure there is a sound process to monitor the delivery of savings for next year and getting the Council to think more long term. All Directors have committed to their budgets and know to work within their budget envelopes. 2024/25 will need to find the savings to close the gap. 2023/24 relying on asset sales to come through which will keep the financial journey on track. Pension fund was being looked at as well. Adele Taylor reported she didn't have any concerns, however.

**4.3** Cllr Swindlehurst reported that this year's budget had a capital programme that was fully funded, and asset sales would further help with this. 19/20 accounts were with the auditors and 20/21 would also be going to the auditors soon. The next two years' accounts would continue with legacy issues, however. The challenge now was to deliver against the budget. Needed to save £9m per year for the next few years. Short term debt needed to be reduced, once that was achieved, the pension deficit would need to be looked at with a view to reducing it.

**4.4** Cllr Dexter Smith recognised the transformation to-date but reflected there were still some areas where the Council needed to go a lot further. He thanked all those who have brought this transformation about. He asked if the Council would be getting capitalisation in this financial year, and if it didn't, what would that do to the Council's plans. Would it get another audit before the end of this financial year? Adele Taylor responded the capitalisation direction was still at a 'minded to' stage. She was expecting to do a formal sign-off with the auditors and was aiming to move from minded-to. 19/20 account also remained as 'minded to'. 20/21 accounts were at 'minded to' and were in the hands of the external auditors. Cllr Smith responded that Minister Kimi Badenoch's schedule covered a two year period. Senior appointments in the finance department remain vacant, and Cllr Smith wanted to know what was being done about them. Adele Taylor responded that the vacancies were being covered by interims until they could be recruited for permanently. The interim replacing the previous Financial Management Advisor had also started. Adele Taylor reflected she needed to be confident in the team that was recruited, and confident that good, permanent replacements would be found, and that there were good, strong people doing the work in the interim.

**4.5** Cllr Rob Anderson reported on the risks to the Council hitting the budget. The risks remained the same for next year's budget. The challenge on the budget side would be getting the services that had been hollowed out, back into a fit state for the Council to run. In some areas, there were no services at all. The biggest risk going forward was how the Council right sized the rest of the organisation once other problems had been resolved. Also, the question of how to get the Council to live within its means remained. Needed to start looking at the future

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direction of the Council once the elections were over. Cllr Anderson was confident that the members of the cabinet now had a much better understanding of their budgets. This was due to the rigorous work done by the Commissioners. Unspecified unknowns would need to be invested in. Getting the transition period right for the finance team would also be key. There could be no compromise on the people the Council brought in.

- 4.6** Adele was unable to confirm confidence that members had had enough visibility and were fully engaged with the budget process as she had been in post for just four days but gave assurance that she would closely monitor this and would be reviewing this process to ensure it was as transparent and clear as possible. Planning meetings had been scheduled with the financial planning team to ensure these were looked at.
- 4.7** The Leader felt confident that the lead members were well engaged with the budget.
- 4.8** Cllr Ajaib reported he was having regular meetings with finance team and was confident that he is on top of things.
- 4.9** Cllr Hulme reported on three issues; firstly, that while Safety Valve had been done very well, the Service was not doing what it should be, despite better fiscal management. Regarding savings she reported that due to the Company's structure, the Board was ultimately responsible for ensuring savings were being made, however, this was not happening. Secondly, regarding SEND, there was a need to get a grip of this Service. Needed to look at the overall working culture and practices. Corporate parenting was where the Finance and Improvement and Recovery Boards could make a difference. Home Schools Transport savings were making progress, and parents would need to be educated on processes going forwards as well. Culture and finance needed to be tackled in tandem. Paul Moffat had offered very good advice and guidance, which was proving useful.
- 4.10** Savio de Cruz reported there had been some significant changes to home to school transport since Cabinet approval. Officers at levels 9, 10 and above would now sit on the appeals panels in a bid to take more ownership. They would therefore control what was approved, and what was not. The Leader felt that previously there had been a lack of good quality members, something that he hoped would change going forward due to the more rigorous vetting process that had been introduced.
- 4.11** Gavin updated the Board that the children's agenda would be more significant going forward and he was looking forward to seeing much more ownership of this area by all Council members. Commissioners were happy to assist. Gavin reflected that the new Commissioner approach would be more collaborative moving forward. Gavin commented that he had seen a real change and improvement in the past year since the Commissioners had started at Slough.
- 4.12** Gavin reiterated that the intervention would be in place for quite some time to come. Sustainability would be the key for any future and success of the Council. Gavin was particularly interested in the culture piece and would be working closely with the Council to achieve its goal in this area.
- 5. Review of Recovery Plan and Progress against Directions (Sarah Hayward)**
- 5.1.** The Leader referred to slide 8 of the slide deck, which was the 'plan on a page', and reported that it demonstrated what the Council was going to do and when. Work was being done to move to digital. The Workshop on 22 March regarding the Director and AD restructure had moved this process along. Staff roadshows had taken place this week as well and the Staff Survey was also underway.
- 5.2.** There was a desire to confirm the 2024/25 budget quickly so the organisation could concentrate on the planning required for the recovery. Sarah Hayward welcomed the

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opportunity to have more of a discussion on this. The 'plan on a page' was about outputs, not outcomes at this stage. To get to the next stage, more work needed to be done. Sarah Hayward felt the CLT now had a far better corporate understanding than previously. In terms of the directions themselves, now knew more about what needed to be done with each. Customer Services, Housing, and Children's Improvement with DLUHC had not been included in the directions however, and Sarah wanted to know from Commissioners how to report on these areas. Commissioner response was that the organisation needed to better prioritise what it was going to invest in and when. The Council still didn't have the right Officers in post at Director level, this had remained a challenge which required resolution.

- 5.3. The Leader reported that the Council had reported itself to the Housing Regulator. The dialogue had been positive, and they were supportive of what the Council was doing. This was another example of the progress and improvement that the organisation had made and illustrated that the Council had taken ownership of its problems. Reporting mechanisms online needed to be sorted out, this in turn would reduce the amount of additional and repeat work that was currently being experienced. Gavin reflected that self-awareness was the most important thing to demonstrate to selves and others. The danger with reporting using PowerPoint slide decks was that it became mechanistic, but the real value was what the Council determined what things to do and when. Gavin prefer a dialogue to a run-through of slides in future meetings.
- 5.4. Stephen Taylor reported that the governance of the authority was key, and steps were being taken to do that and good strides had also been on the scrutiny side. On the officer side there was more work to still be done to make sure the process of the reports was adhered to. A clarification on report clearance had been circulated, i.e. The S151 officer and the Monitoring Officer would need to have reviewed and approved reports before they were then sent to Commissioners for comment. Gavin responded that one of the frustrations he had was with the current report clearance process. There was no proper process with forward planning and the Council would need to ensure this happened going forward. Nasreen Brittain to assist Commissioners with this. Informing cabinet members was a vital component of the process to be followed in future. Another key element was more consistency in the quality of reports across the board.
- 5.5. Regarding the structural pieces, Gavin felt it would be good to understand what the design principles were for structural change. He wanted the Council to think about this as it would be very helpful for the Council and Gavin would be very happy to assist where necessary.
- 5.6. The Staff Survey was being undertaken in conjunction with the LGA. It was hoped to be sent out in the first or second week of April for a period of three weeks, which would be extended depending on uptake. When the results are received later in the year, it would be good to bring it back to the Improvement and Recovery Board.

**Action: results of the Staff Survey to be brought back to the IRB by Caroline Adlem.**

- 5.7. Gavin asked to what degree did the Council think it had the digital maturity to embark on this journey. Sarah Hayward responded that it was hugely variable. There were some poor behaviours where staff were not engaging with the digital tools that had been given out. Gavin felt it was important that the council and CLT understood the difference between digital and technology.

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- 5.8.** Stephen Brown acknowledged that training was an issue. Cllr Ajaib agreed, and added there were tools that had been invested in, but the training was not allowing them to be used fully. Gavin felt the Council had a lot more thinking to do around this issue. It needed to think about what this meant to it as an organisation. The Leader responded that the Council needed more time to think and reset things so that the operating model could include more than just what the issues were. He felt that the deadline set by Commissioners on some deliverables had had the effect of a hindrance and he requested a new one to now be set by Commissioners. He reflected that trust between the Council and Commissioners has been affected over the past year. Needed to redefine the relationship between the two parties, when the new Commissioners were on board. Gavin reported to being very happy to commit to a new style of relationship post-election. Gavin reflected he did not want to put inappropriate pressure on the delivery and would prefer to allow the Council to have the space to do the thinking to ensure a sustainable solution and then produce the work. The overarching milestones would need to be reached, however. Stephen Brown felt that the Council now understood what it needed to do, the corporate plan was being reworked and he wanted the Commissioners to view it as it progressed. It was agreed that it was important to build on the previous plan rather than rewriting it.
- 5.9.** Sue Butcher reflected that relationships with Partners needed resetting. Schools appeared to have an expectation that the Director of Children's was there to do what the schools wanted, this would need to be reset as well as in a number of other areas, which would cause some consternation with the schools. Gavin responded that some pain would be experienced while the reset in the relationships took place. Lucy Storr reflected that the Directions did not include every single area of the work that Council needs to do. The key was back to the element of trust between Commissioners and the Council. Needed to be sensible and pragmatic about the issues and priorities that the Council needed to address.
- 5.10.** Gavin reflected the most difficult part now would be how to make simplicity of the complexity and how the Council balanced the Service imperatives and the priorities. The Council was encouraged to reach out to others for assistance, such as other authorities that have gone through similar experiences, who would be able to assist.
- 6. Operating Model Update (Sarah Hayward)**
- 6.1.** It was felt that originally the paper was brought to the IRB to meet a deadline which had been set by the Commissioners. Margaret had been keen for some key lines of enquiry to be brought to the board in March. Sarah commented it was worth pointing out that the disposal contract came up for renewal which was another risk to the budget and would need to be given some extra thought.
- 6.2.** The amount of transformation that the Council had to deal with is also an issue. The HR function was being dealt with and there was a 1:1 scheduled with HR staff; Sarah would provide Commissioners with an update once that had taken place. Sarah had some ideas around sourcing and using Windsor and Maidenhead as a critical friend, which she would be exploring and would report on in due course.
- 6.3.** The Leader commented there continued to be day to day blockers around whether the authority stays at Observatory House. If the Council made the decision to stay, then other commitments could start to progress. Pat Hayes responded that there were two main issues with Observatory House. The first being there was little market value in Observatory House as a vacant building. So, one option was to remain in the building, occupying some of the

floors and renting out the others. This would give security to IT as well as other parts of the Council. It would also enable the Council to do some modest, but effective investment in Observatory House. Pat was confident he knew what the operating model was in detail. Asset sales and operating model were interlinked. Timescale was for the initial report to be completed by early summer 2023.

## **7. Progress Report on Culture Change (Sarah Hayward)**

**7.1** There had been slower progress in this area that would have liked. Strategy was making very good progress on the workstream as well as good progress on communications and engagement. There were some staffing issues within Communications, however and while it was much more collaborative now, there were still challenges to be met. Some messages had now been agreed. HR processes would be much more stringently followed, e.g. appraisals, reporting sick leave etc. OD piece remained the most challenging. Milestones were developed by an external consultant, but the organisation was not able to deliver them, so some steps backwards had to be taken. Investment would need to be made in the HR function, some of it upfront, but savings were expected to be made within HR. Currently there were too many staff, so savings would need to be made in this area as well. There was a transformation fund, which Gavin requested to see.

**Action: Sarah Hayward to provide Gavin with a copy of the transformation fund.**

**7.2** When would be the right time to bring a more comprehensive culture programme would need to be firmed out, without being dogmatic about the deadline. Gavin wanted to know about children's and culture change. Sarah said would be speaking with Sue Butcher about it. Sue Butcher felt it was vital that children's and culture were married up. Everyone aspired to bring children's back into the council and Sue Butcher would liaise with Paul Moffat on this. Stephen Brown agreed it was imperative that children's services was brought back into the Council to be run. The current structure was a blocker rather than an enabler to progress.

## **8. Forward Look Revenues and Benefits Deep Dive (Adele Taylor/Andy Jeffs)**

**8.1. Background:** Andy Taylor been with the Council since October 2022. Has worked in Revs and Bens and in London Boroughs for a long time. Andy Jeffs updated on revenues and benefits: the pack contained the details of shortfalls identified.

**8.2 Headline of current position of Revs and Bens Service in Slough:** A lot of the issues were a legacy from the Arvato contract, and it had proved very difficult to deliver those initiatives. Some great improvements had been made over the last 18 months, however. The Services had worked very hard to get to where they were with the new government initiatives. Improvements showed refuse collections would be back to pre-pandemic levels, except council tax. The cost of living crisis had also impacted things significantly. Residents who were in the lowest income households would be supported on council tax and energy and there were mitigations built in. Leadership layer needed to be strengthened. One question was how resilient the new team was to be able to drive the new improvements. Andy felt that previously there had not been the investment into AI or digitalisation, but that investment was now available so should see more automation which would help the services. New technology and automation would drive service improvement. Recruitment and retention remained an issue nationally. Discussions were being had on how to deal with this and it had been included the risk register.

**8.3** The reason why this had come to IRB for a deep dive was because it had been requested by Commissioners to ensure good progress was being made.

**8.4 Key risks to be aware of and to mitigate:** Changing the culture and behaviours was going to be key to future success, as well as strengthening the leadership roles and getting the

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structure right. One of the issues with leadership has been not enough investment in the right people in those leader roles. Needed to see what best practice was and it was generally considered that it would be good for the Council teams to go and visit good authorities to learn from them. Needed to see what a good, high performing council looked like. There as confidence that with the right level of development, this could be achieved. The staff were very knowledgeable and qualified. Cllr Ajaib, the lead member for this area reported there were 30 actions, 22 of which were green, which showed good progress. He was confident in the new leadership of the S151 Officer as well as the new Interim Head of Transactions who expressed interest in the role on a more permanent basis.

**8.5** In this area specifically Cllr Hulme felt it would benefit from more apprenticeships for example to bring more people in. Needed to demonstrate that this Council created opportunities for younger people from diverse backgrounds. More flexibility on working hours should be brought in to attract younger people and those with young children. Adele agreed and was very committed to having flexible working hours and create opportunities for staff in her area. Stephen Brown also agreed and reported he is looking at 4-day weeks. He was also putting a business liaison group together to see how to get younger people into local businesses. Children in care was also being looked at.

**8.6** Rob Anderson was encouraged that this Council was now a team 'on the up' and this sentiment should be encouraged for future recruitment. It was a great opportunity for new people to carve their careers and the Council should be seen as an opportunistic place to work.

**9. Forward Look (Sarah Hayward)**

**9.1** A forward plan of meetings had been produced for the Commissioners. Once the new Commissioners are in place, it would be good to have an offline conversation with Sarah Hayward and the Commissioners. If a deep dive needed to be done, that could be reviewed at that point.

Gavin thanked everyone for their hard work and contributions.

**10. AOB**

**10.1**None.

**The meeting closed at 1.15pm**