

**Minutes of the Improvement and Recovery Board
Thursday 27 April 2023 11-2pm**

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Thursday 27 April 2023 at 11am-12.45pm
Meeting Room 1, The Curve**

Attendees:

Commissioners:

Gavin Jones – Commissioner (Chair)
Sean Nolan – Acting Finance Commissioner

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
Sue Butcher – Executive Director, Children’s Services
Alexander Polak – Head of Governance & Scrutiny
Simon Sharkey Woods - AD Chief Digital & Information Officer

Secretariat:

Nasreen Brittain – Executive Assistant to the Commissioners (minutes)
Claire Willerton - Chief of Staff to the Commissioners

Apologies: Marc Gatsby – Executive Director, People – Adults, Steve Muldoon – Deputy Director Financial Management (Interim), Richard West – Executive Director, Place & Communities 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*)

Introductions made.

2. Declaration of Interests

Declaration from Adele Taylor that she is Finance Director of Solace.

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

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

3.2 There were quite a lot of actions that have not been followed up. Those who had actions assigned to them need to give an update to Nasreen Brittain by Friday 5 May 2023. Going forwards all actions will be reviewed one week in advance of the Board meeting by Gavin Jones and Nasreen Brittain.

4. Commissioner Update (*Gavin Jones*)

4.1 *Next Phase of Intervention*

4.1.1 Hoping for third week in May to announce two new Commissioner names, one as Finance Commissioner and another as Transformation Commissioner. Intention is for Gavin to be Lead Commissioner. Full details will be confirmed around 22 May 2023.

4.1.2 Commissioner operating methods will move to a different and more collaborative approach while continuing to challenge.

4.1.3 The next report to Minister is due in June. Confirmed it would be more appropriate this will be an update letter rather than a full report. Broad framework of the letter will be shared with Stephen Brown to give him the opportunity to view and comment on the content. Stephen Brown and the Council would be fully supportive of the true position the Council is in.

4.1.4 Leader wanted to know what the timeline for the Ministerial response would be as there had been a long delay between the Commissioners' December 2022 report and the Minister's response in March 2023. Commissioners noted the Leader's point but were not able to comment further on the Department's timeline for a response back to the Council but hoped it would be timely.

5. Update from the Finance Board on 20 April 2023 (*Sean Nolan*)

5.1. Gavin thanked Sean Nolan for his contribution to date.

5.2. A broader framework had been discussed within the Commissioner team and had also been socialised in the April Finance Board.

5.2.1. Machinery for delivering budgetary control was outlined by Sean Nolan in six key points:

5.2.2. A Finance Improvement Plan properly resourced with clear milestones aimed specifically at the key themes of proper financial practices and clear financial accountability and disciplines across the Council.

5.2.3. Ensuring adequate capacity, skills, and training in the Council's Finance Function.

5.2.4. Machinery in place to give confidence in the management of the council's budget targets, starting with 2023/4.

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- 5.2.5. Asset sales of c £200m in 23/24 and clear targeting of receipts over the medium term consistent with MTFP requirements ('Medium Term Financial Plan').
 - 5.2.6. A clear plan showing the arc of improvement needed to move the Council's external opinion status from 'declined opinion' to 'unqualified'
 - 5.2.7. A **balanced** medium term financial plan – 24/25 to 26/27 - consistent with the Council's aims, ensuring adequate reserve cover and drawing on large scale transformation and Best Value service challenge across the Council.
- 5.3. There is still a substantial arc of improvement to move the Council from Grant Thornton's verdict.
- 5.4. Internal Audit item from the Finance Board showed twenty two reports as outstanding, of these, the majority reported 'minimum or partial assurance' this was not a good reflection of where the Council was, and it was worrying that there were so many partial or minimum assurances on the Council's core systems. The reports had been finalised despite having these low levels of assurance and that needed to change going forward.
- 5.4.1. Adele Taylor said she was aware of this and felt it formed one of the themes of the transformation plan. She was very aware of the internal audit plan and DLT was working with her to ensure good monitoring of it.
 - 5.4.2. Cllr Anderson reflected that the thematic arc of improvement that Sean Nolan had introduced at the Finance Board was a good method. Internal Audit represented a cultural problem within the Council around how it responded to negative reports.
 - 5.4.3. Stephen Taylor reported there was a corporate governance working group that the Head of Financial Governance, Internal Audit was responsible for.
 - 5.4.4. Commissioners wanted to be able to see what the hard measures might be with regards to the exit strategy which would be recognisable to all. Commissioners were going to begin work on this which would then be shared with the Council. It was hoped this would enable everyone to see and understand the path to the Commissioners exiting the Council. Sue Butcher reflected that this was also vital for the children's Services and DfE.
- 6. Scrutiny Deep Dive (Stephen Taylor/Alexander Polak)**
- 6.1 Stephen Taylor reported a great deal of work had been done over the last 6 months culminating in a report to Cabinet. He paid tribute to Officers and Members for their contribution and input. Stephen Brown felt it would be good to have this reflected in the letter from the Commissioners to the Minister. However, there was still a lot of background work that needed to be done.
- 6.2 Alexander Polak reported that the overall picture in local government had been in decline over the past few decades. This had led to an inconsistent standard of scrutiny over different Authorities.
- 6.3 The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) were invited to support Slough Borough Council to review its scrutiny arrangements and advise on ways to improve and develop its role. That work will ensure that Councillors and Officers shared a common understanding of the role, function and demands of scrutiny within a strategic context. It would also provide support Members in acquiring the essential skills, behaviours, and participation methods to

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constructively analyse, explore and challenge the policies, policies and forward decisions of the Cabinet and the Council's corporate plans.

6.4 It was felt the Scrutiny panels had improved a lot over the last six months. Alex Polak reported he would not put the Scrutiny Panel at 'good' yet because there were still issues to be improved, e.g. panel members still not reading the reports in advance, and not coming to meetings with their laptops.

6.5 Sarah Wilson was credited with the work done at the beginning of the journey for the transformation of Scrutiny within the Council.

6.6 Alex Polak felt that the systems, Members, and Officers had every chance of success, but there was remained a great deal of work still to do.

6.7 Gavin Jones invited others to give their thoughts about the presentation.

6.7.1 Cllr Smith recognised the improvement within Scrutiny. Needed to acknowledge that there would be a health scrutiny group as this was a statutory service. Was also concerned that Children's Services was not being given the appropriate attention.

6.7.2 The Leader responded that the task and finish work had been thorough and had produced competent reports which had been acknowledged by the previous Commissioners. Scrutiny had been left unmonitored in the past, which had contributed to the difficulties the Council was subsequently faced with. The move to the single Committee had been a positive one. Members had been prepared to do things that were good for the organisation despite being challenging. The Leader formally acknowledged the work done by the backbenchers. Raising the level of work more consistently remained an issue but improvements had been made. The Leader felt investment in this area was also required, in the form of a dedicated resource within Scrutiny.

6.7.3 Cllr Anderson commented that the new municipal year and the refresh of Members would provide a good opportunity to allow proper focus on Scrutiny. When new Members came in, it would be important to give them the message that the Council valued Scrutiny.

6.7.4 Cllr Ajaib commented that the challenge with continuity for the work on Scrutiny would be with the new Members. That said, it would also be good to have fresh people with new ideas and energy. Having the right support in place would also be key to any success.

6.7.5 The Leader reflected that in the past there had been a strained relationship between Scrutiny and Cabinet, but which had since improved.

6.7.6 Cllr Hulme reflected that more broadly, Scrutiny in Slough was more about understanding the actual themes. For example SEND and how improvement was measured by using the other Committees within the Council.

6.7.7 Sean Nolan agreed with Cllr Hulme's comments and felt it would be helpful for Alex Polak to suggest to the Commissioners what success would look like in terms of assurance. Under 'impactfulness' and 'internal audit committee' what learning had

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gone on in the past, and therefore learning going forwards. What was the improvement journey for Scrutiny?

6.8 On Children's scrutiny Sue Butcher felt having it combined with adults was not giving Children's a significant enough focus. She reflected she was not being challenged enough in Scrutiny, and that needed to change. Corporate parenting is another way to be scrutinised. Members needed to take the corporate parent responsibilities more seriously. Children's Services would not improve in the way it needed to without this.

6.9 Where does the Council think it is on the Scrutiny journey - Alex Polak responded to all questions:

6.9.1 The quality of reports from officers remained a barrier to Scrutiny

6.9.2 Children's services having a separate Scrutiny Committee had been discussed, and it was decided to hold off for now until the new year. Gavin encouraged the Council to think about doing this. The Leader responded that the Board reports annually to the Scrutiny Committee. The model would need to be clarified in order for a second Children's Scrutiny committee to be enabled. Sue Butcher noted that the Company was only part of Children's Services overall.

6.9.3 Resources for Scrutiny support. Alex Polak was in post as an interim recruitment. Democratic and Scrutiny Services Manager started on Monday 24 April 2023. There was one more junior role within the team to fill and market uplifts were being looked into with a view to finding a candidate.

6.9.4 Members' skills set would be the priority, and not necessarily subject knowledge, which could be learnt.

6.9.5 Short term impact: at the annual meeting of the Council the structure will be decided. A scrutiny Chair will be appointed, and it was hoped that the candidate would be a good quality one.

6.9.6 Audit Committee: Steve Mair's team carried out a lot of work on this. The Leader reflected that Audit was detached from the Scrutiny Committee and therefore some integration work would be required.

6.9.7 It would be good for the new Leader of the Council to share with Commissioners their ideas on Scrutiny and Audit.

6.9.8 Stephen Brown said he was very determined that children were put at the centre of the forward plan.

Action: Gavin to meet with Paul Moffat to see what the options are to get a second Children's Scrutiny Committee.

6.9.9 Stephen Taylor said there was recognition that post-election, there would be a new Council for 4 years, giving continuity and allowing the work required to be done. Scrutiny Manager recruitment was also in progress. He was conscious there was a lot to do within Scrutiny, however felt that by having the right programme, more energy would be created.

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6.9.10 Gavin concluded that Scrutiny would need to come back to the Improvement and Recovery Board in six months' time in October 2023 for another deep dive.

7. Progress Report on Improvement (Sarah Hayward)

7.1 Review of Recovery Plan and Progress Against Directions

- **Positives:** The level of organisational self-awareness had improved with a greater recognition of the areas that required fixing, including customer experience and the SEND board. The SEND Board was now working much better, and the Council was much more aware of the problems and how to fix them. The more junior staff were also more aware of the issues within HR.
- **Negatives/challenges:** The scale of culture change required in key areas such as HR was revealing the extent of work still to do. CLT workshop scheduled for Tuesday 2 May. Needed to work out how to progress this more quickly within the organisation.
- There were big changes required e.g. Children's Centres closing and only using hubs, and CCTV operations.
- Corporate Report has come a long way since last summer 2022. Trends reporting is included. This includes a Review of the latest 2022/23 performance position and identify mitigating actions. These related to the four strategic priorities in the current Corporate Plan 'Doing Right by Slough'. A reminder that the Council was taking the opportunity to reset its key performance indicators as it refreshed the Corporate Plan The deadline for compiling a full draft set of KPIs was 19th May. Next steps for 2023/24 metrics and targets
- CLT had reviewed the draft refresh of the Corporate Plan, which included strategic objectives and priorities. This would be going to Cabinet on 24 May and then for public consultation.
- Aman Gill had contacted Executive Directors and Associate Directors to develop a provisional set of strategic KPIs for 2023/24.
- Executive Directors and Associate Directors needed to set metrics and targets by 19th May at the latest to fit with the Corporate Plan approval timeline.
- As per previous discussions at CLT quarterly performance reporting to Cabinet will then be reintroduced plus benchmarking against other authorities. Information from Doing Right by Slough will be compiled as an Appendix to set the context and foundation for a refreshed set of KPIs.
- The latest position of the Council's key performance indicators at the end of March 2023 continued to show a mixed picture, however there were key movements within indicator trends.
 - Of the 37 indicators reported:
 - 35% (13 indicators) were rated overall as Green,
 - 14% (5 indicators) rated as Amber,
 - 19% (7 indicators) rated overall as Red and
 - 32% (12 indicators) with no agreed target value assigned.
- Improvement was still in public reporting and CLT would need to use the corporate performance more proactively going forward.

7.2 On the performance piece Gavin Jones asked how sophisticated the Council was in Corporate Performance Management? Sarah Hayward responded that this was still a work in progress. Stephen Brown confirmed it remained a weakness; in appraisals and reporting for example and had some way to go yet. Gavin confirmed this was something that would be highlighted in the letter to the Minister and would have to be a big collective focus going forward.

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- Structural change was being planned by the Council. Commissioners wanted to be involved in this process, and in some of the recruitments. There was little to no confidence in the HR function at the Council. There was no confidence that the current HR function could deal with the new recruitments, so an external partnership will be brought in. Stephen Brown commented that management training would be part of the package as many managers in the Council have never been given any formal training on how to manage their teams. What would be helpful would be to set out intention going forward as much as possible. Sarah Hayward reported that the Council had engaged Human Engine to support this process with job evaluations etc. HR to contract manage that process. Sara Hayward and Gavin Jones would discuss this further offline.
- Gavin asked about the pace of change and wanted the CLT to think about this particular issue. Commissioners would be commenting on the pace of change in the letter to the Minister. This could impact the timeline the Council was using.
- There did not appear to be a clear process or system of how Member casework was monitored. If a member received a resident query, what happened to it? Currently there was no clear way to see how this performance was measured.

Action: Stephen Taylor to look into how performance was measured for Members and their caseloads and report back at the next May IRB.

8. IT Update (Simon Sharkey Woods)

8.1 Assessment of Scale & Depth of Issues

- Commissioners wanted to know how the Council was building resilience. Now needed to formally confirm that the council was remaining at Observatory House. This would help with commitment to the IT and investment in the building itself.
- Hybrid working: There needed to be a clearer expectation for staff as to what to expect in terms of IT when working remotely. Needed to have a much more standard offer, one that was more stabilised.
- Mobile signal had been poor. Will be looking to changing the mobile network for Observatory House. That said, there will be fewer staff with work mobiles going forward. Will also use two-factor authentication on personal mobiles.
- **Stability of the IT for key services, such as Children's:** The issue experienced recently was due to an existing problem. Was planned to be replaced mid-June but this has been brought forward to this weekend. Simon Sharkey-Woods thanked Children's Services for their cooperation on this.
- Have a number of known risks, file storage units which were migrating off.
- **Overall Strategy:** The Cloud has taken on board housing management system. Have done this with Revs and Bens already.
- **Agresso Platform:** Hosting provider moved from Capita to Quick Think Cloud, however had issues that were being resolved. Savings have been around 60% so worthwhile to do.
- Fire safety – significant issue with the door systems. They locked and there was no escape route for staff, which was a very big concern as the windows are all sealed. Pat Hayes was looking into this.

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- **IT Strategy:** Simon Sharkey Woods took an IT strategy report to Cabinet in March and would send this to Gavin and Sean. Outage was a known risk and was on the improvement plan. There were a huge number of known risks, around 53 in total.
- **Investment:** what is the governance route on any major investments? Additional investment for modernisation. Improvement plan is being taken through the governance route.
 - Total money for investment for modernisation was unknown. No formal plan for refreshing the equipment existed. Sean Nolan reported he was looking for good logic that would stand up to scrutiny for any future investment.
 - Pat Hayes confirmed data on the first review of the council's estate had now been collated. Pat Hayes confirmed Observatory House had little market value as a vacant building.
 - The scale of the investment and timeframe needed to be made clear for Commissioners to understand and written up formally.
- Simon Sharkey Woods reported there was no documentation for the IT team to rely on, so the issues or potential issues are unknown.
- Cllr Anderson felt the key was to get the processes right before purchasing new equipment.

Action: IT Strategy: Simon Sharkey-Woods to send Gavin Jones and Sean Nolan a copy of the IT Strategy Report that was sent to Cabinet in March 2023.

8.2 Timeline for Improvements and Mitigations

- Commissioners would want to see the timeline for improvements and mitigations. Sean Nolan would take ownership of this and would cover it in the meeting with that was scheduled with Simon Sharkey Woods and Sarah Hayward later the same day.

9. AOB

None.

The meeting closed at 12.40