

Best Value Board Minutes
Thursday 27 March 2025

Minutes of the Best Value Board

Thursday 27 March 2025

2-3.30

Council Chambers, Observatory House

Attendees:

Gavin Jones, Chair and Lead Commissioner
Ged Curran, Commissioner
Will Tuckley, Managing Director Commissioner and Head of Paid Services

Members

Cllr Dexter Smith, Leader, with responsibility for Improvement and Recovery
Cllr Wal Chahal, Deputy Leader and Lead for Financial Oversight & Council Assets
Cllr Robert Stedmond

Officers

Alix Macfarlane Programme Director - Communications and Engagement
Annabel Scholes, Executive Director Corporate Resources (s151)
Bal Toor, Director of HR and OD
Christopher Holme, Interim Director Corporate Finance
David Coleman-Groom Interim Executive Director Adults' Services
Hamish Dibley Programme Director - Transformation
Jane Senior, Director Commissioning
Lisa Keating, Director of Housing
Martin Chalmers, Director Digital, Data & Technology
Patrick Hayes, Executive Director Regeneration, Housing & Environment
Peter Hopkins, Director Property and Assets
Tessa Lindfield, Director of Public Health & Health Protection
Sarah Wilson Assistant Director of Legal and Governance (HB Law)
Sonia Khan, Director of Strategy, Change and Resident Engagement
Sue Butcher, Executive Director Children's Services and Chief Executive Slough Children's Services
Sukdave Ghuman, Monitoring Officer

Secretariat

Jaspal Tank
Nasreen Brittain [minutes]

Best Value Board Minutes – 27 March 2025

Also Present

Helen Barugh, Chief of Staff to Commissioners
Stephanie Clark, Recovery Programme Manager
Roland John Recovery PMO Lead

Apologies for Absence

Denise Murray, Finance Commissioner

Minutes

1. *Welcome and Introductions (Gavin Jones)*

Completed.

Minutes and actions from previous Improvement and Recovery Board (Gavin Jones)

- 1.1 The minutes and actions of the previous meeting held on 25 July 2024 were approved. Actions noted to be updated offline and closed off where completed.

2. *Overview of new governance arrangements and the role of this Board*

- 2.1 Terms of Reference approved.
- 2.2 SEND is covered by the DfE Commissioner, Paul Moffat so it is intended to have a lighter touch in these Boards. SB responded that there are many cross-cutting issues and SEND sits squarely within the Council so need to look at those as a whole. WT said an aspiration is that this Board encompasses all the improvement journey the Council needs to take, although there are different Directions in place. Discussions have taken place with the DfE Commissioner as to whether the entire recovery journey.
- 2.3 Measuring against progress: important to evidence how to service across the council how the Service areas are functioning. Important to evidence where the organisation is in relation to the service standard.
- 2.4 Delivering a Best Value Council remains the overall and the main goal and Commissioners will be reporting back to the Minister on that framework.
- 2.5 WT said Commissioners are preparing their next letter to the Minister. DfE Commissioner has already submitted his letter to the Minister. We are also halfway through the Political Leadership's term. Important to take stock of where we are. Aim to take a balanced view of the progress made to date. Also looking at the formal KPIs we currently have and how these can be improved for

Best Value Board Minutes – 27 March 2025

the future. Need to remain clear about the challenges as well as the real progress the organisation has made.

- 2.6 GJ said Commissioners will increasingly be thinking about sustainability in the progress the organisation is making. What is the risk of the Council reverting to how it was before Commissioners arrived.

3. Progress Overview (Sonia Khan)

- 3.1 The question on the assessment of progress and impact to date was, what gives confidence in the continued improvement? The measures outlined in the detailed report covered this. Service improvement builds on discussions at CLT about where we are in relation to different services.
- 3.2 **Positive Direction:** Proud of the direction being taken in children's social care, schools and social mobility potential, early years, good support for carers, personal budgets, healthy weight-systems, and food recycling.
- 3.3 **Improvements:** Starting to build emergency planning and developing a more resilient approach. EHC plans are above target for new plans. Youth Justice Improvement Plan well received by MOJ. Reduction in voids in housing, and customer services improved response times and rate.
- 3.4 **Challenges:** temporary accommodation – only beginning to get to grips with agreements and data. Tenant satisfaction remains low. Difficult for residents to navigate Council systems and resolve issues. NEETS are higher than national average including those not known. Recycling remains below target and national rates. Satisfaction with street cleansing and ensuring primary focus on residents across all services (culture change).
- 3.5 GJ asked for a headline on the effective management of this area. Pat Hayes responded to the issue related back to Covid and lack of good record-keeping. Are close to bottoming out the totality of the number of people in temporary accommodation. There is a lot of good work in gatekeeping and procuring new supply. Slough remains the 5th highest Borough for homelessness. This area was of particular interest to Commissioners and agreed it would be discussed further offline. GC reflected that a great deal would depend on the rigor of management to ensure these quarterly Boards are effective. GC was struggling to understand the difference between the three areas outlined on slide two. What are the key things that we've learned over the past 3 months, needed to be drawn out more clearly in the slides.
- 3.6 **Financial Management:**

Best Value Board Minutes – 27 March 2025

- a) Positive Direction: better financial management and control, near the end of financial discovery.
- b) FIP well established and mapped to CIPFA code
- c) Greater grip on statutory requirements and executive decisions.
- d) Asset disposal – based on realistic assessment.
- e) Balanced budget for 25/26
- f) Lower Council Tax increase than in 24/25.

- 3.7 Political Feedback:** GJ wanted to know whether the politicians understood what the target operating model (TOM) was. Cllr Stedmond responded that the Scrutiny members did understand it, but did not think the broader group of Cllrs did. Cllr Chahal responded that transformation and TOM has not been bottomed out yet, so no complete clarity from Leadership or Councillors. Backbenchers had even less clarity and did not understand why the organisation is doing this work. He hoped it would become clearer over the coming months with the work that was going on currently.

The Leader thought the organisation would have been further down the line that it currently was. Have conducted briefings and the attendance had not been very high. Members would take it more seriously if residents had more visibility of this work, and had hoped more resident engagement would have happened by now.

Concerned about whether there was scope to do that now. GJ agreed with the Leader that progress was not where it had been expected to be. GJ reiterated that focus on the Target Operating Model was key.

- 3.8** SK reported they have started to use data to map and track. The data maturity was not where it needed to be at this stage, however. Having a performance framework that allowed us to be fully integrated with the improvement and recovery plan and how that converts into objectives. Alongside the regular cycle of appraisals, need to connect them to the wider piece. GJ reflected that the Council was performance monitoring currently and want to move to performance management over time. SK responded that the organisation needed to understand what was feeding into the data.

3.9 Vision and Priorities:

- a) Positive Direction: expanding special educational needs capacity.
- b) Simplified planning zone
- c) Destination Farnham Road levelling-up project
- d) Cabinet and CLT starting to come together
- e) Partnerships: there was a lot of potential, needed to be built upon, however. Look at the whole system approach. This was a core element of the operating model.

Best Value Board Minutes – 27 March 2025

Commissioners were keen to see evidence of the work being done in the culture piece. Changes to personnel need to survive for culture to succeed.

- f) Covered Comms, Equality plan, underpinning workforce strategy and service planning.

3.10 Best Value: Leadership Culture

- a) **Positive:** growing confidence in political leadership. GJ reflected that the broader leadership culture remained variable, and Commissioners will be keen to see how this improves. They were also engaging more closely with the political leadership overall. SG responded that there are some green shoots appearing. There was real positive engagement across the Groups that previously was missing. This was a good sign. The overall direction of travel was that all Members needed to come together and work towards the shared vision.

Commissioners expected training to be taken up more when offered. Cllrs and Members needed to be good representatives to their communities. GC felt that 20% of the Member culture sits with them, and 80% with the Officers. Therefore, it was incumbent on the Officers to have the right culture. Do Officers genuinely respect Members and help those Members who perhaps are less experienced and need it. Felt the culture within the Council would currently struggle with this.

SW responded that there was a big improvement in the cross-party meetings. She thanked Cllr Stedmond for the hard work he had done to achieve this progress. Were seeing the same with the Audit Committee under Cllr O'Kelly, as well as the Standards Committee. She thanked all the Members of these committees for working together collaboratively.

- b) SK reported that the workforce strategy was currently being developed. Corporate Leadership was improving. Had a better environment to have these conversations. DCG's feedback was that staff were seeing and feeling a tide change and have felt the leadership was engaging more with them from the bottom up.
- c) Stable corporate leadership and staff confidence improving.
- d) HR – established basic tools and processes to underpin good management.
- e) Challenges were that service improvement and corporate performance needed to be further embedded into the performance framework.
- f) Ensuring consistency of the application of the tools in the management structure.
- g) Create space for decision making.

Best Value Board Minutes – 27 March 2025

GJ felt there had been progress made compared to previous years.

HB reflected on behalf of MHCLG and recognised the amount of work that had been undertaken. It was very good that the report was rag rating the progress as well as the impact. Emphasis previously had been around making progress only.

There was more to do to bring out the impact, however. Need to measure and quantify the rag ratings within the report. This would be a useful area of focus for the future.

SK reflected there were unfinished elements still within the progress update report.

GC felt the Council had put in a huge amount of work and was more willing to recognise its weaknesses and do something about improving them.

Commissioners wanted to encourage the organisation to focus on the impact as well.

WT responded that the organisation has tended to put together a basket for each year, having considered the impacts of previous years. Views from a variety of sources have been included. Now it needed to be focused on coming up with the right set.

Alix M said the Council needed to be telling the story in a way to bring it to life. The 'So What' was key. The Leader agreed that we needed the human-interest story for Slough.

Cllr Stedmond reflected on Scrutiny and valuable feedback on Member engagement. He had met with both Will and Ged to discuss the scrutiny committee. Some on the committee remained uninvolved and this was going to be addressed. For Cllr Stedmond it was very important that Members were engaged. How information was asked for was key to good outcomes from both Members and Officers. He had wanted to change the culture in this area and had worked hard to improve this.

AS reflected on Helen Barugh's engagement with the Council which had been beneficial, and the relationship building had been very welcomed.

BT said there was a lack of trust within the organisation and staff still did not trust the leadership. End of year reviews were over 70% last year with good support from HR. This year Bal wanted to improve on that. However, trust will be the key to future success.

GC felt the overall picture presented showed improvement from 12 months ago. There had also been a realistic recognition of the progress made. Need to guard against the desire to feel good,

Best Value Board Minutes – 27 March 2025

rather than to objectively be good, however. Need to be open to challenges that come forward.

4. **AOB**

SK updated that she was working with the LGA who are helping to find good Members to help with training and learning. The relationship was moving into a more productive space as the organisation was clearer about what it wants. There was also some funding being dedicated to this.

Meeting closed at 3.22pm

Next meeting: Thursday 10 July 2025 at 10am

Best Value Board Minutes
Thursday 27 March 2025

Action log:

Reference	Description of Action	Date raised	Raised by	Owner	Progress	Date last updated	Target date