

Slough Borough Council

Report To:	Council
Date:	24 th April 2025
Subject:	Recommendations of the Cabinet from its meeting held on 17 th March 2025: Improvement and Recovery Action Plan – full two years 2024 –2026
Chief Officer:	Sonia Khan, Director of Strategy, Change and Resident Engagement
Contact Officer:	Roland John, Recovery PMO Officer
Ward(s):	All
Exempt:	NO
Appendices:	Appendix 1 – Improvement and Recovery Plan (Executive Summary and full plan)

1. Summary and Recommendations

1.1 This report presents an updated full two-year action plan showing how the Council will take action to become a Best Value Council by November 2026. The report was considered by the Cabinet at its meeting held on 17th March 2025 and it was agreed to recommend endorsement of the action plan to full Council.

1.2 Slough Borough Council was placed under intervention by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and 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 1999. The Council's Children Social Care Services and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities service are also under intervention of the Department for Education and have an appointed DfE Commissioner.

1.3 Since then the Council has been under Directions issued in December 2021 and updated in September 2022. On 22nd October 2024, the Council was advised that the Secretary of State was minded to issue new Directions to extend the intervention until November 2026 and a further set of Directions were proposed. The extension of the intervention and new directions were confirmed on 20th November 2024.

1.4 The Action Plan presented in this report sets out how the Council will take action to become a Best Value Council and respond to these specific directions, over the next two years. The Action is informed by:

- The initial refresh of actions published in July 2024 in response to the Commissioners' fourth letter published in February 2024
- The detailed Improvement and Recovery Progress Update submitted to Cabinet on 18th November 2024
- The 6-month action plan milestones published in January 2025 in response to the Commissioners' fifth letter. This required an action plan to be prepared and approved as soon as possible with a focus on six months deliverable milestones

Detailed programmes and projects, including the Financial Improvement Plan are a key part of the improvement and recovery action plan.

Recommendations:

Council is recommended to:

- (a) Endorse the action plan that is provided in Appendix 1.
- (b) Approve those aspects that relate to non-executive functions.
- (c) Note that regular updates, at least every 6 months, will be presented to Cabinet and Full Council on progress against this plan.

Reason for recommendation

It is necessary to have an action plan that sets out actions required, incrementally, to become a Best Value Council and to meet the directions.

Putting in place an improvement and recovery plan is also a direction, and the specifics of what is required to be included in this plan have been detailed in the most recent letter from MHCLG to the Chief Executive, dated 20th November 2024

[Slough Borough Council: Letter to the Managing Director Commissioner \(20 November 2024\) - GOV.UK](#)

Commissioner Review

"Commissioners are commenting upon a travelling draft of the report not the final version. The paper sets out a plan with some milestones and costings to help the authority fulfil its best value duties and discharge the directions made by the Secretary of State. The milestones are intended to allow the public, Members and officers to know whether Slough is ahead or behind schedule on the key projects of the improvement journey. The costings are intended to give some reassurance that finance will not be a reason for delaying or obstructing progress.

In considering the intended outcomes over the two-year period Members will wish to consider whether the funding will be adequate to achieve the stated objectives. They will also wish to review whether the planned outcomes meet members ambitions over that period.

It is usual for such plans to be a work-in-progress when first produced. They improve if regularly used and updated and councillors will wish to have the plan regularly reported to them so that they can see that evolution. It will need to be a living document as things will change regularly both positively and negatively."

1. Report

Introductory paragraph

This report presents at Appendix 1, an Improvement and Recovery Action Plan, showing the action that will be delivered over the next two years towards the Council becoming a Best Value Council by November 2026.

This Action Plan responds to the Secretary of State Directions issued in December 2021 and updated in September 2022 and the most recent Directions received on 20th November 2024.

Options considered

1. Publish a comprehensive two-year action plan that:

- Responds to what is required to be included in an Improvement and Recovery Action Plan, as set out in the November 2024 Directions
- Responds to the unmet Directions from 2021 and 2022
- Sets out wider actions to become a Best Value Council
- Makes sense of other review and audit recommendations

Recommended – as this will ensure we can take a co-ordinated approach to actions required to improve and recovery that proactively addresses what is needed to become a Best Value Council rather than reactively responding to different drivers for change.

2. Publish a two-year action plan that sets out the minimal requirements in the November 2024 Direction

Not recommended - as it is important meaningfully to take ownership of all improvements needed and not be reactive

3. Continue to use the Recovery Plan proposed to July 2024 Cabinet

Not recommended - as this was not a comprehensive action plan and would not take account of the November Directions.

Background

2.1 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 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.

2.2 The Council was subsequently placed under intervention by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and 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 1999. The Council's children social care services and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities service are also under intervention of the Department for Education and have an appointed DfE Commissioner.

2.3 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.

2.4 The last full update was taken to Cabinet in November 2024. This followed a refresh of the recovery programme in response to the Commissioners' fourth letter published in February 2024. This refresh was published in July 2024, with a quarterly progress report. Progress is reported under three "pillars"- Financial Improvement, Transformation and Children's Improvement.

2.5 The Council is now establishing a more comprehensive programme office and transformation function that drives continuous improvement, keeping both corporate and improvement plans under review, under one permanent Head of Service for Change and Programmes (which is about to be recruited to). The functions will support all the associated programmes of change, transformation and re-organisation that will enable the Council to achieve sustained financial stability and improved public services and to adopt a new operating model

2.6 On 22nd October 2024, the Council was advised that the Secretary of State was minded to issue new Directions to extend the intervention until 30th November 2026, with an opportunity for the Council to respond in writing. This was accompanied by the Commissioners' fifth report, dated 30th April 2024 and update letter, dated 9th September 2024. The Leader formally responded to confirm that the extension of the intervention is welcomed.

2.7 The November 2024 Directions sets out that the Council is required to:

- Prepare, agree and implement an Improvement and Recovery Plan to the satisfaction of the Commissioners, with resource allocated accordingly.
- This may include or draw upon improvement or action plans prepared before the date of these Directions.
- The plan is to set out measures to be undertaken, together with milestones and delivery targets against which to measure performance, to deliver rapid and sustainable improvements in governance, finance and commercial functions, thereby securing compliance with the best value duty. There must be a focus on deliverable milestones within six months and the Plan should include at a minimum:

a) A new Target Operating Model (TOM) that enables both financial stability and the delivery of core services and priorities.

b) A refreshed rolling Medium-Term Financial Strategy, Capital Strategy, and Treasury Management Strategy, aligned with the new TOM and transformation plan and

demonstrating the Authority's financial sustainability and resilience, over the period of the strategies.

c) A review of the Authority against the CIPFA Financial Management Code to demonstrate its compliance, with recommendations to Commissioners to improve this activity within the first six months and implementation of improvements thereafter.

d) A high-performance culture programme to rebuild trust between staff and the Authority, to include the development of a comprehensive workforce strategy focused on development, retention, and permanent recruitment.

e) A review of the Authority's progress to risk maturity and how well its functions and processes enable risk-aware decisions that support the achievement of strategic objectives.

f) Re-examining the review by the Authority of their companies that considered the roles and case for continuing with each subsidiary company of the Authority (except Slough Children First), to make proposals in relation to financial viability and improving company governance.

g) Improving the systems and processes to enable better and evidence-based decision-making, including enhancing the data and insight functions, undertaking benchmarking.

h) An appropriately resourced digital strategy that supports effective business operations and links to the Authority's future operating model.

i) Improving resident and public engagement.

2.8 Being a Best Value Council means having regard to economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in the way that a Council exercises its functions, underpinned by a commitment to continuous improvement. This improvement and recovery plan sets out the Council's absolute commitment at political and officer level to focus on improvements needed. The plan sets out how the council will work towards better governance, leadership and a positive organisational culture, financial improvements, and effective risk management. The plan will be a dynamic plan that will be formally updated every six months. Progress updates will be provided to Cabinet and to Council on a six-monthly basis.

2.9 For Slough Borough Council to be sustainable, it must do more than improve - the Council is struggling to meet statutory requirements and deliver on its priorities within its budgets. A new operating model, that is aligned to medium term financial plans is needed. Alongside service improvements, the operating model will identify changes to the way the Council operates internally and in partnership with others.

2.10 A series of external, internal and peer reviews and audits have been undertaken since the Council has been under intervention. This Action Plan seeks to make sense of all the recommended improvements identified in one place, whilst not substituting for any separate reporting and accountability required. The Council is also preparing for a series of inspections over the next few months, and it will be important that responses form part of ongoing corporate and service improvement plans.

2.11 The Council wants to, and is required to, consult and engage residents and partners on how they achieve Best Value, for example through consulting on the budget or on strategic priorities. This plan sets out the key consultation and engagement opportunities that will seek feedback on progress against this plan and invite views on future priorities, the budget, and the operating model. There is a clear opportunity to change, improve and deliver more effective service by listening and building on resident ideas and insight.

2.12 In the next few years there will be re-organisation in local government. Slough Borough Council will be expected to join a larger strategic authority that would be able to deliver functions that might otherwise be led by national government – such as transport, housing, and economic growth. It is also expected that the Council will need to merge with other Councils, as it is a small unitary authority. It is important that the focus remains on improvement and recovery and on a sustainable operating model for Slough, to ensure that moving into any re-organisation, the Council knows its residents needs and is already delivering well for them.

2.13 In this plan are a bold set of success measures that help keep the political and corporate leadership focused on where the Council is trying to get to. These measures will be reviewed periodically, to ensure the detailed actions in the plan are enabling the Council to improve in the timescales needed. The ultimate test will be if resident views and service performance improves.

2.14 The Improvement and Recovery Plan will help the Council sustainably make progress against the Council's priorities as set out in the Corporate Plan:

Our Purpose: Closing the healthy life expectancy gap, by focusing on children

A borough for children and young people to thrive

- Providing quality services for vulnerable children and those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)
- Improving outcomes for disadvantaged children and young people
- Tackling high rates of child obesity
- Increasing children and young people's participation in decisions and in shaping the future of Slough

A town where residents can live healthier, safer and more independent live

- Working with partners to target health inequalities and promote wellbeing

- Supporting residents to be as independent as possible, whilst providing quality services for the most vulnerable adults
- Improving community safety and tackling anti-social behaviour

A cleaner, healthier, and more prosperous Slough

- Affordable, safe, and healthy homes – improving the quality of council housing stock and the private rented sector
- Improving air quality, promoting active travel and sustainable forms of transport, and taking action to prevent or minimise the impact of climate change
- Providing clean, quality public spaces and working with developers to deliver a modern town centre
- Engaging with businesses to create new employment opportunities

2.15 The Action Plan is mapped against the Best Value Framework:

- Continuous improvement
- Leadership
- Governance
- Culture
- Use of resources
- Service delivery
- Partnerships and community engagement

2.16 Communications and engagement with residents about the improvement and recovery action plan:

The Council is committed to improving the way it communicates and engages with residents. As part of this work, the Council is putting actions in place to improve the way residents and partners are engaged in the improvement and recovery action plan:

- March 2025- Create a landing page for the intervention, improvement, and recovery, with links to latest plans and updates
- April 2025-Resident Survey- will provide an update on resident views of the Council that will provide feedback on the Council's work to improve and recovery
- June 2025 -State of the borough panel debate will invite community views on key issues and on what the Council should be doing differently to tackle these, with residents and partners
- July 2025 – resident newsletter launched that will be informed by a refreshed and more open approach to communications and to communicating the improvement actions we are taking
- Autumn 2025 - Resident feedback panel – the Council will invite views and challenge on the progress the Council is making
- Autumn 2025- key changes relating to services that are needed because of the budget and operating model will be consulted on

2.17 Governance

Governance arrangements are being refreshed in line with the new Improvement and Recovery Action plan to ensure that there are appropriate mechanisms for governance, programme controls, appropriate member officer roles and resident feedback.

2.18 Summary of Plan

2.18.1 Headings in Plan

Measures of success

A New Operating Model and Financial Sustainability

Main Programmes:

- Vision and Evidence-Based Decision-Making
- Political Leadership and Governance
- A High Performing Workforce and Culture
- Financial Improvement
- Communications, Partnerships and Engagement

Supporting programmes

- Complaints Handling
- Improving the Digital and Technical Capacity
- Strategic Commissioning
- Risk Maturity

Underpinning the objectives and high-level actions, detailed in this report and Appendix 1, are detailed action plans. These are live interactive planning tools, and progress against these will be provided every six months.

2.18.2 Key measures of success for improvement and recovery

1. Slough Borough Council is committed to becoming a Best Value Council

Within the timeframe of this improvement and recovery plan, the Council expects to have made progress towards embedding its long-term vision, delivery of its corporate priorities and to be meeting its statutory obligations as well as sustaining continuous improvement and transformation and improvement. Priorities will set out how the Council meets the diverse and intersectional needs of Slough's community. This is all reflected in a corporate delivery plan, transformation plan and medium-term financial plan that is tied to service planning and delivery, creating a golden thread between strategic priorities and delivery. The Council wants to have satisfied government that everything possible has been done to develop a sustainable operating model. This will identify, if needed, a credible case for further investment or for alternative options for the future of the Council.

Leaders, both political and officers, should be operating as confident leaders of place - and progressing delivery with partners across sectors and across the system, and working together to build prosperity. The leadership is starting to focus on tackling root causes to support prevention and early intervention and encouraging behaviour change. The Council will have demonstrated a track record of sustained capacity and capability to continue to improve and become a best value council. Leadership is clear about journey and direction of travel, and capacity and capability required.

The Council leadership (Members and senior officers) will be confident engaging with the community and can engage with diverse communities in open and targeted ways to ensure good reach (eg young people, private renters).

How this will be measured:

This view is shared by senior officers, Members, and commissioners. It is validated by an LGA Peer Review and external auditors. It is reflected in inspections and will also be seen in:

- An increase in residents who strongly agree or tend to agree that the Slough Borough Council provides value for money – baseline –21%, benchmark- 46%
- An increase in views that respondents understand the Council's vision and plans for the future, and how they contribute to them (staff, residents, partners, businesses) - Staff: 2024/25-70.57%
- Members views and staff views of senior officers and senior officers' views of Members are becoming more positive
- Key corporate performance indicators show a positive upward trend
- Views in residents survey – show a positive move upwards, including for specific groups including children and young people

2. The Council sets out and proactively progresses a clear vision and priorities for how it meets the diverse and intersectional needs of Slough's community.

This vision and priorities can be seen in the delivery of the corporate plan, transformation plan and medium-term financial plan and in service planning and delivery, creating a golden thread between strategic priorities and delivery. This is also reflected in partnership plans as leaders, both political and officers, are confident leaders of place.

The Council uses credible benchmarked data – business analytics, predictive data, insight and contextual data to improve services, performance manage, set priorities, target resources against need, and make decisions in short, medium- and long-term time frames.

Decision-making documents use credible Council data to support decision-making and this is evident in documents such as Cabinet reports and supporting documentation such as equality impact assessments. This helps create greater transparency in decision-making. The corporate performance management framework is well understood and owned by senior officers and Members. It has embedded key measures of success for improvement and recovery and resident views of council and satisfaction and helps the Council be transparent about its approach to service improvement and performance management. Members are well positioned to initiate drive and lead policy – whether as cabinet members, members of scrutiny or as backbench Members. There is an annual cycle of executive decision-making that is underpinned by statutory and regulatory framework and corporate priorities.

How this will be measured:

That view is shared by senior officers, Members, commissioners and is validated by an LGA Peer Review and external auditors. It is reflected in inspections and benchmarked performance data shows good value for money and it is also seen in:

- Executive Decision-making Forward plan
- Members and Staff saying they understand the reason for decisions that the Council has had to take.

3. The Council has made progress towards building an inclusive high performance and resident focused leadership culture that invites continuous feedback, learning, and improvement.

This has been successfully integrated into the heart of the Council's operating model. There is more evidence of a learning culture and of staff at all levels being inspired to do their best to continuously improve, in a more agile and adaptive way, maximising their impact, even with reduced resource. Members behaviour is constructive and focused on becoming a best value Council and on the long-term vision.

How this will be measured:

- Staff work to objectives which link to the corporate performance framework and service plans, and this is reviewed periodically and annually in appraisals.
- Leadership is stable, staff retention is good and vacancies are filled in reasonable timescales, and there is a strategy for hard to fill roles.
- Through the delivery of a workforce strategy that focuses on organisational health and creates a stable and resilient workforce.
- Residents are starting to find it easier to navigate Council systems – with fewer and more consistent points of access, and those able to use digital and self-serve having options to do so, freeing up more time for those who need focused attention
- More evidence of getting things right first time
- % increase in Members and in senior managers' views that there is a healthy culture and good ways of working overall between members and officers (Current Members survey: 2023/24 -38% 2024/25 - 40%)

2.18.3 A new operating model and sustainability

The ultimate test of whether the Council can satisfy central government that sufficient progress is being made towards being a Best Value Council is set out in the 2026 Directions.

At the core of what Slough Borough Council is trying to achieve is working more closely with its residents and local communities to ensure it enables and empowers service users, families, and communities to live better and more independent lives.

The Council needs to work at pace to develop:

- A new Target Operating Model (TOM) that enables both financial stability and the delivery of core services and priorities.
- A refreshed rolling Medium-Term Financial Strategy, Capital Strategy, and Treasury Management Strategy, aligned with the new TOM and transformation plan and demonstrating the Authority's financial sustainability and resilience, over the period of the strategies.

In November 2024, the Cabinet approved the key defining features of Slough's new operating model.

Overall shape and feel of the Council

- Be smaller and more flexible – operating out of fewer buildings;
- Offer fewer and more consistent points of access and more transparent ways to track progress and responses, getting things right first time;

- Take a resident first approach in how it works, and understand how residents interact with services, freeing up time for those who need it;
- Focus on doing the basics well and consistently right across all services;
- Use Council resources appropriately – funding what it should be funding and ensuring partners play their part;
- Take a commercial and value-for-money mindset, to successfully navigate the financial and social challenges all councils face;
- Be more inclusive, with a thriving workforce who are once again proud to be able to say they work for Slough Borough Council.

Council services

- Ensure a tight grip over statutory duties, roles, and regulatory frameworks, but not restricted by them;
- Be better able to understand, manage and prevent resident demand for services – addressing root causes to support preventable and early intervention responses that are appropriate to need;
- Prioritise what it delivers – ensuring universal services such as waste are provided to a consistent standard whilst ensuring specialist support is targeted to help and protect the most vulnerable.

Place leadership

- Enable and/or commission work through partners and communities
- Focus the Council on shaping Slough as a place, to build sustainable prosperity for all, help make Slough a better place to live and provide opportunity for everyone.

Financial and corporate measures

Alongside the implementation of the Operating Model, which is set out below, achieving future sustainability is contingent on the following actions which were also set out in the Section 115 officer's Section 25 report provided with the 2025/26 Budget papers.

- The budget setting process is proactively driven early in 2025/26, with a base budget review is undertaken for 26/27 and to guide future years.
- Reserves are tightly controlled - new requests to draw on existing reserves should be considered in the context of the financial sustainability of the council.
- Exceptional financial support – government continues to support the council as presented within the main body of the 2025/26 budget report.
- The council needs to be back working within the usual legislative timelines for audited accounts; it has achieved approval of four sets of backstop accounts although it is important to note that these have a disclaimed audit opinion. It will be essential that there is a focus on the final approval of 2023/24 account.
- The Council puts the basics in place to become a Best Value Council as defined in the Improvement and Recovery Action Plan, including the Finance Improvement Programme, and that resources required to deliver the programme continue to be funded as a priority.

- The Council adopts high level directorate story boards and service plans that create the golden thread between strategic priorities, resources, and delivery, to enable resources to align with corporate priorities.
- Change is overseen by a Design Authority –to ensure alignment with growth and savings and change programmes and the corporate plan, operating model, and medium-term financial plan.
- Financial controls are tight, and service pressures are proactively managed

Asset disposal

A Phase 1 Estates Strategy was approved by Cabinet in December 2023. A subsequent review has concluded that this strategy did not take fully into consideration the impairments against the assets. There is a need to reset the principles and approach to ensure that the new Asset Management Strategy does not have a negative impact on the Councils finances. This revised Asset Management Strategy complements the development of the Target Operating Model.

Implementing the Operating Model

Front Door Service Review / Service Redesign

Utilising the Systems Thinking methodology, work has already commenced of the development of a new Front Door Programme for Slough Borough Council:

- Physical front door;
- Digital front door;
- Complaints; and
- Workflows – focusing more on the back-office processes and streamlining how we handle enquiries

The purpose of this work is to initiate a new style, more forensic two-part service review and redesign process and doing so provide the evidence base for the principles and practices of the new operating model for the council, from 2025/26 and beyond:

Part 1 – understanding current perspectives on service challenges and opportunities

- Individual interviews to understand current perceptions of issues and opportunities
- Conventional Activity Analysis
- Conventional Financial Analysis
- Documentary Analysis

Part 2 – understanding the empirical problems – combining data and demand analysis – studying the work to better understand from the resident point of view

The phases consist of:

Review Phase

Applying a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques to forensically understand resident/service user demand and review current system responses as the means to

inform intelligent system and service redesign solutions. Analyse and synthesise what residents who use services need and design customised responses to meet these needs.

Redesign Phase

Emerging from the Review phase, nimble ‘proof of concepts’ allows the designated service/system to test new operating principles and ways of working (data; work design and processes; performance metrics; budgets; technology; workforce) with small cohorts of residents/service users to learn to improve and improve to learn before seeking to embed and mainstream the approach. Service leaders and staff see performance issues more clearly, learn new approaches to change and build internal capabilities to achieve improved performance.

Rollout Phase

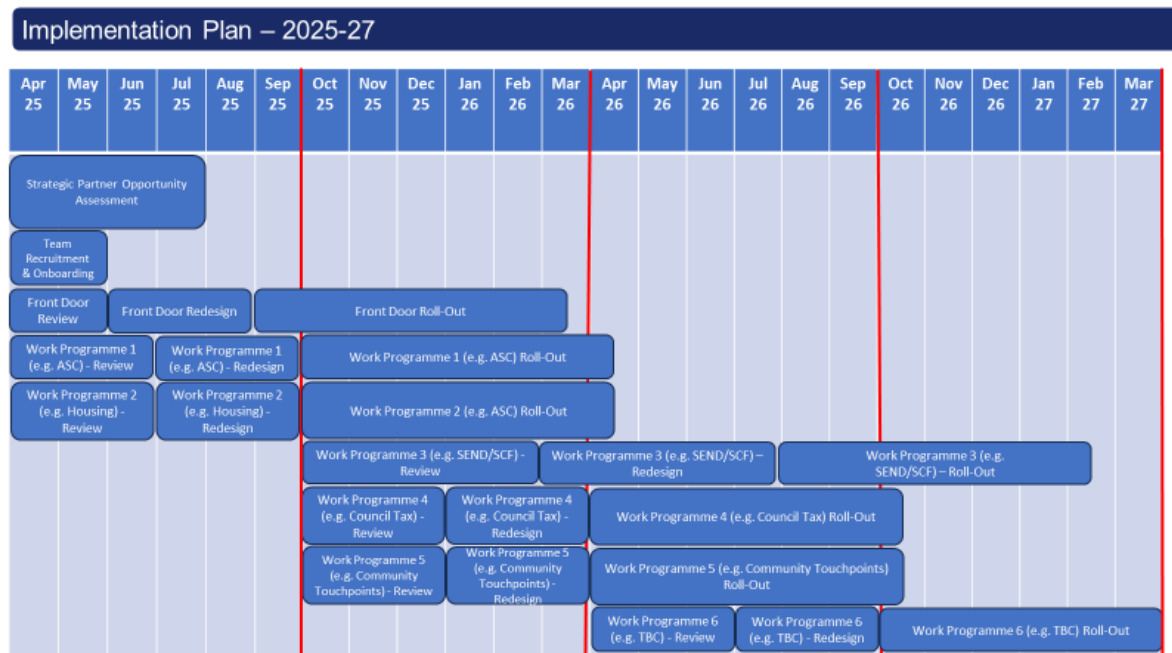
Iterative improvements are expanded and sustained to embed the new ways and operating models (data; service design; performance measures; financial accounting; technology and workforce) that are more effective, responsive, integrated, preventative and efficient. Capacity and savings emerge from eliminating system and service waste – work we create that does not serve original resident needs.

Beyond the front door work, the Operating Model team have set out an ambitious timetable to look at wider service redesign, utilising the operation of the front door as the first point of entry.

Iterative improvements are expanded and sustained to embed the new ways and operating models (data; service design; performance measures; financial accounting; technology and workforce) that are more effective, responsive, integrated, preventative and efficient. Capacity and savings emerge from eliminating system and service waste – work generated by the Council that does not serve original resident needs.

Redesigns of services will focus primarily on resident outcomes/outputs, failure demand management, prevention/early intervention, and developing strength-based models and community partnerships. The service reviews will be phased and will focus initially on those areas where there are the biggest opportunities to improve resident experience and where the greatest financial challenges exist for the Council. These service reviews will be more than just reviewing how we do things, but be fundamental root and branch examinations to look at what we want to achieve with our residents and communities, and address how we do it through, where possible, co-design, co-creation and collaboration with service users and community groups.

Beyond the front door work, the Operating Model team have set out an ambitious timetable to look at wider service redesign work, utilising the work of the front door as the first point of entry. The table below illustration captures the proposed implementation plan for 2025-26 and 2026-27:



Appointing a Strategic Partner

Alongside the in-house Transformation Programme, an initial high-level diagnostic will take an evidence-based approach to identify the specific levers the Council needs to affect to deliver transformational change, at pace, and develop a delivery plan. The Partner will quantify the size of the opportunities and prioritise accordingly. They will also evidence the key levers to effect positive change moving forwards. This phase focuses on quantifying the size of the opportunities and effectively prioritising them by scale of impact on corporate plan delivery and the Medium-Term Financial Plan.

Initial work has revealed that there is a lot of opportunity for reform and transformation across frontline, corporate support and front door, through working on understanding demand, redesigning services and income generation. How we adopt more transformational ways of operating will also need to consider the Council's role in place and system leadership and place shaping and economic growth.

Digitally enabled change

Service redesign work will create a pipeline of digital projects, the delivery of which will form an intrinsic element of service change. Considering the findings summarised above, alongside previous analysis, that digital change is expected to have four areas of focus:

- Joined-up view of the customer
- Accessibility and clarity
- Process improvement
- Data quality and availability

2.18.4 Main programmes for Improvement and Recovery:

Vision and evidence-based decision-making

Effective leaders should have a clear vision and set of priorities for their area and play a key role in building local economic growth, social cohesion, and a healthy local democracy.

Service plans should be clearly linked to a local authority's priorities, strategic plans, and longer-term planning – a golden thread that runs through to individual objectives and accountability. Service delivery should be evidence-based, customer and citizen focused and meet the needs of diverse groups within the community.

Objectives:

- Enhance data and insight functions to support evidence-based decision-making
- Develop shared evidence base and story of place and Council to support policy and decision-making
- Embed Corporate Plan, corporate performance framework and service planning and strategy development, taking on board Leaders' Vision
- Establish approach to regular review and reset of long-term vision and medium-term plans

Strengthening political leadership and governance

The following sets out the standards that we need to achieve. Strengthening political leadership is a fundamental requirement of any local authority. There needs to be clear and robust governance and scrutiny arrangements in place in line with the Executive Decision-making structure of the Council. This needs to be understood by members and officers alike.

There should be confidence in decision-making and in the scrutiny of decisions. Decisions should follow good public law decision-making principles. Poor individual services can often be an indication of broader governance and financial weaknesses within an authority. Equally, corporate governance failure almost certainly will at some point negatively impact how services are delivered locally, in terms of missed opportunities or silo working and a failure to make strategic connections.

There needs to be effective political leadership, appropriate behaviours and effective relations between officers and Members. This influences the culture of the whole organisation and how effective it can be. As such, we have set out following objectives which are included in the action plan for this part of the programme:

Objectives:

1. Build a strong, self-sustaining culture of good governance by focusing on high-quality councillor leadership, and governance behaviours (across all councillor groups and roles).

2. Build a strong, self-sustaining culture of good governance amongst members and officers, by focusing on high quality officer-member relationships and behaviours.
3. Build a strong, self-sustaining culture of good governance by focusing on high quality officer governance behaviours.
4. Develop fit for purpose governance-systems and processes.

Developing a High Performing Workforce and Culture

Modelling positive and effective leadership behaviours at all levels has an impact on the Council's overall culture and governance. Statutory officers working together to contribute their perspective will improve the Council's stability.

A council where there is a high turnover in these roles and the wider leadership group may indicate wider issues of concern in the leadership culture. Continuing to focus on the culture of the Council to support stability and create the environment for leaders to act in a unified and cohesive way, rather than in siloes, will be key. Alongside this the Council will need to enable leaders to thrive and contribute to creating a high performance culture. Capacity constraints should be identified and recruitment to fill key posts prioritised. Succession planning should be considered, with a longer-term view as to when there might be a gap in experienced senior officers. Special severance payments should only be considered in exceptional cases.

Objectives:

- **Building brilliant basics:** this includes developing tools so our managers can be data driven and evidence led when supporting their teams.
- **Empowering Leadership:** this includes equipping managers with the key skills to lead their teams through change, to include coaching skills.
- **Foster a healthy and inclusive workplace:** this includes working with our employee networks and forums, to understand their views and respond in a timely and tangible way, ensuring staff feel respected and heard.
- **Build a positive and transformative culture:** this includes identifying current culture and providing tools to equip leaders to build high performing teams where their people thrive.

Financial Improvement

An effective internal control environment needs to be in place to safeguard the use of resources, and clear and effective processes to secure value for money. It must have appropriate financial management, reporting and regulation arrangements in place, in accordance with CIPFA's Financial Management Code, to govern the strategic and operational management of its investments, funding, assets and companies. Compliance with the Prudential Framework is needed in making investment and borrowing decisions and not take on excessive risk. Investment decisions must have a commensurate level of scrutiny, transparency, and approval to make sure that officers and members fully understand the risks.

Financial management and reporting should be supported by robust financial systems, record keeping and quality assurance, with appropriate use of specialist expertise and independent assurance when needed.

Authorities should respond to audit recommendations and address issues identified in a timely way.

Objectives:

- Address items raised within the Finance Improvement action plan
- Implement a robust system of financial controls and reporting
- Compliance with the prudential framework
- Review key finance strategies and policies (Investment Strategy, Capital Strategy and Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) policy)
- Undertake a review of the governance arrangements of all Council-owned companies (excluding SCF) to assure compliance, and secretarial functions are being delivered appropriately

Communications, Partnerships and Engagement

Collaboration across institutions and communities is fundamental to enable places and institutions to be sustainable and thrive. Partnerships can maximise opportunities for sharing resources, achieving outcomes, and creating a more joined-up offer that meets the needs of residents and local service users. Stronger and more effective partnerships can also lead to better community engagement, for example working with partners to engage more effectively. This needs to be approached openly and transparently and invite continuous learning, as well as in line with statutory requirements for partnership working and consultation.

Slough Borough Council has an ambition to build on the strengths of communities and partnerships. This will require place leadership and stronger more impactful partnership working, and more detailed considerations of other partners' operating models and strategic plans so we take a consistent approach across the system, as 'One Slough.' At the heart of this ambition is to build a very different relationship with residents, their networks, and communities. This means the Council will look to make its community engagement activity more systematic.

Objectives of programme:

- Use resident engagement insights to inform decision-making
- Bring partners together to work on long term outcomes and place shaping.
- Rebuild trust and confidence in the Council, at a time of further change that will affect residents' experiences of the Council and services.
- Build stronger more cohesive communities through systematic consultation and engagement and partnerships with residents and community partners.

2.18.5 Supporting Programmes

Improve Complaint handling

The authority must have an effective and accessible complaints process and provides appropriate redress to help build trust in the Council and improve Council services. The council is currently non-compliant with the Ombudsman's code or practice and plans are in place to address this. This has been identified in the Annual Governance Statement. Improving how the Council takes on board feedback is a key issue identified by commissioners that needs to be addressed and complaint handling is a key part of this. Customer access is a core part of the operating model and complaints is an integral part of this so that the Council becomes better at tackling root causes. This plan sets out the more immediate and practical steps need to improve complaint handling.

Objectives of programme:

- Review the current complaint handling process to identify inefficiencies, gaps, and areas for improvement.
- Develop a standardised, customer-focused complaint handling process.
- Ensure compliance with relevant regulations and Council policies.
- Improve how we manage feedback and resolve issues in a timely fashion

Digital and Technology

The effective use of digital and information technologies underpins Best Value and is a critical element of the Target Operating Model.

Objectives:

- Digital & Information Technology Modernisation – a programme launched in 2022 with the objective of remediating and modernising the Council's ICT service
- Digital Transformation – work to use digital capabilities as an enabler of wider organisational transformation. This workstream has delivered a set of Digital, Data and Strategic Principles. These are now being applied to the digital aspects of transformation being delivered through implementation of the Target Operating Model. Those digital aspects of transformation are being reported as an integral part of the Target Operating Model work rather than separately.

Strategic Commissioning

To be a best value Council, the approach to commissioning, contracting and contract management needs to be strong to ensure we are able to achieve quality public services that represent value for money. A Strategic Commissioning approach is therefore key to the Council's improvement and recovery and operating model. The Council is under Direction to produce an action plan to achieve improvements in relation to the proper functioning of the procurement and contract management function.

Objectives:

- Understand the as-is process to commissioning across the council and SCF
- Embed the new to-be commissioning process across the council and SCF

Risk Maturity

Robust systems need to be in place and owned by members for identifying, reporting, mitigating and regularly reviewing risk. Internal audit functions need to be challenging, robust, valued and contribute to the efficient delivery of public services. Public reporting on value for money, performance and the stewardship of resources is completed in a timely and understandable way, with transparent responses to recommendations from internal and external audit, and regulators.

Objectives:

- A well-resourced, independent internal audit function that is planning and delivering audits that provide risk-based assurance, insights, and value in accordance with the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards
- Review of the Authority's Corporate Risk Dashboard to make it fit for purpose.

3. Implications of the Recommendation**3.1 Financial implications**

- 3.1.1. The report sets out the direction for the Council to take to implement its Improvement and Recovery plan and establish itself as a Best Value authority. Within this context there must be regard to the fact that the council remains in intervention until 30 November 2026 with new Directions issued.
- 3.1.2. Within these directions are included the presumption of the delivery of a number of milestones that are relevant to this report including the implementation of a new Target Operating Model (TOM) and a refreshed rolling Medium Term Financial Strategy, Capital Strategy, and Treasury Management Strategy, which are aligned to the Corporate Plan, as well as a resourced transformation plan.
- 3.1.3. Achieving these will help demonstrate the Council's ability to reform and to achieve financial sustainability and resilience, over the period of the strategies. This resilience would be informed by a review of the Authority against the CIPFA Financial Management Code to demonstrate its compliance,
- 3.1.4. The recommendation of the report is to implement the Action Plan that has a series of objectives that map the progress of the Council's improvement. Whilst there is no specific relationship between the objectives and financial implications, to achieve them will require the alignment of the council's financial resources to its objectives. This will be achieved by ensuring that the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy is aligned to and informed by the corporate plan.

- 3.1.5. £6.7m has already been identified in total, to support transformation. £4.7m has already been approved in budgets and a further £2m is earmarked for 2025/26. This funding is from the budget smoothing reserve.
- 3.1.6. In monitoring its progress, the Council will need to have regard to the level of financial investment required to support the programme. As there is no additional investment being made by central government as a result of being under intervention, all funding must be provided from within the Council's own finances. A phased implementation of a revised Target Operating Model will help prioritise the available resources.

3.2 *Legal implications*

- 3.2.1 On 1 December 2021 the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities made statutory directions requiring the Council to take prescribed actions and that certain functions be exercised from this date by appointed Commissioners, acting jointly or severally. The directions were extended on 1 September 2022 and on 20 November 2024. The directions are made under Part 1 of the Local Government Act 1999 due to the Council having failed to comply with its best value duty. The general duty of best value is set out in section 3 of the Local Government Act 1999 and requires local authorities to “make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness”. This requires consideration of overall value, including economic, environmental, and social value, when reviewing service provision. There is also a duty to consult when deciding how to fulfil the best value duty.

Annex A of the directions set out the action the Council is required to take. Annex B sets out the functions to be exercised by the Commissioners. This includes functions associated with governance and scrutiny of strategic decisions, requirements for the proper administration of financial affairs, functions associated with appointment of the three statutory governance officers and the scrutiny officer, as well as functions to define the officer structure at a senior level, determine recruitment processes and recruit relevant staff to these positions, functions relating to the appointment of persons to senior roles in council companies (except Slough Children First), functions associated with the Council's operating model and redesign of services to achieve value for money and financial sustainability and functions relating to the development, oversight and operation of an enhanced performance management framework for officers holding senior positions.

3.3 *Risk management implications*

The following is a risk on the corporate risk register: Risk 13 - Improvement and Recovery Planning Failure to deliver on the wide range of improvement and recovery actions specified in the Directions and various Government reports leads to further intervention.

Undertaking a review of progress against Best Value and the Directions is an essential part of assessing if the wide range of improvement and recovery actions are supporting the Council to become a Best Value Council.

3.4 *Environmental implications*

3.4.1 There are no direct Environmental implications from this report.

3.5 *Equality implications*

Earlier in 2024, the Council adopted new Equality Objectives, following consultation. These objectives cover both community facing and workforce diversity. They set out the long-term goals that will enable the Council to meet the Public Sector Equality Duty and community needs. They consider how the Council needs to proactively promote equality and tackle inequality, tackle discrimination and foster good relations. Becoming a Best Value Council is a key part of being able to deliver the Council's Equality Objectives, as foundational work is needed to be able to sustain work that progresses Equality Objectives.

In September 2024, the Council participated in an LGA Peer Review looking at Equality. The Peer Review highlighted the importance of centring equality considerations in the Improvement and Recovery Plan. This is reflected in the focus on evidence-based decision-making and community engagement.

4. **Background Papers**

None