

## Slough Borough Council

<b>Report To:</b>	Audit and Corporate Governance Committee
<b>Date:</b>	30 April 2025
<b>Subject:</b>	Improvement & Recovery Plan - Update on Governance Programme (Phase 4)
<b>Chief Officer:</b>	Sukdave Ghuman - Monitoring Officer
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Dave Burn – Democratic Services SME
<b>Ward(s):</b>	All
<b>Exempt:</b>	NO
<b>Appendices:</b>	None

### 1. Summary and Recommendations

- 1.1 This report provides an update on progress with the Political Leadership and Governance workstream, as it relates to the Council's Improvement and Recovery Plan.

#### **Recommendation:**

To consider the report and to provide comments as the Committee sees fit.

#### **Reason:**

Members will recall that at their meeting held on 10 December 2024, it was agreed that progress with the programme be provided on a regular basis. This is the first update since that meeting.

#### **Commissioner Review**

This report is outside the scope for pre-publication commissioner review; please check the [Commissioners' instruction 5 to CLT to sign off papers](#) for further details.

### 2. Report

#### **Introductory paragraph**

- 2.1 This report provides an update on progress with the delivery of the Council's recovery plan, as it relates to the Political Leadership and Governance workstream. Additionally, the report provides members with the revised two-year action plan showing how the Council will take action to become a Best Value Council by November 2026.
- 2.2 By way of context, 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.

- 2.3 Since then, the Council has been under Directions issued in December 2021, September 2022 and 20th November 2024.
- 2.4 As can be seen from the report, a number of activities have been put in place to assist the Council in its recovery journey and these are ongoing. It is important that progress as well as impact is continually measured. The Committee has a key role to play in that activity both in terms of challenge and through validation. Other member bodies also have a role to play and will receive reports and updates that contribute to delivery of the programme, however this Committee should be seen as the member body with overall oversight of the programme given its key remit in terms of corporate governance. Whilst the activities are presented as a programme, in reality these activities should be seen as business as usual and ongoing to embed a system of continuous improvement and they have been developed with that in that context.

### **Options considered**

- 2.5 Since the directions, the Council has been involved in a number of activities to help with its recovery. A variety of reports have been provided on improvement activities. The Improvement and Recovery Plan was reported to Cabinet on 17 March 2025 and will be considered by Full Council on 24 April 2025. This is an improvement as it provides Full Council the opportunity to monitor, review and debate progress, bearing in mind some of the improvement activities relate to non-executive matters. Given the intervention has been extended to 2026, the remedial actions have been developed with that in mind. In terms of improvement activities in relation to governance, the Council will continually review and update these to take account of the political and officer leadership requirements and will learn from best practice elsewhere. The new Member Development Programme for 2025-26 has been designed around Member roles and was presented to the Standards Committee in March 2025. This will be shaped and developed by the Member Development Working Group.

### **Progress to date**

- 2.6 The Political Leadership and Governance objectives are as follows:
- 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).
  - Build a strong, self-sustaining culture of good governance amongst members and officers, by focusing on high quality officer-member relationships and behaviours.
  - Build a strong, self-sustaining culture of good governance amongst by focusing on high quality officer governance behaviours.
  - Develop fit for purpose governance-systems and processes.

2.7 The purpose of these objectives is to deliver the following benefits:

- Increased level of understanding of good governance principles amongst members and officers and a culture that encourages review and improvement.
- Improved decision-making arrangements to encourage and promote good governance.
- Strengthened officer and member relations with a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities.
- An organisation that is committed to the highest standards of conduct and behaviour.

2.8 Since the last report to this Committee and having had the opportunity to review progress to date, it was felt that the activities in the action plan needed to be consolidated, as a number were operational in content and not sufficiently strategic for inclusion. They have not been lost and will be used in the delivery. As such, a revised Two-Year Action Plan for the Political Leadership and Governance workstream was reported to Cabinet on 17 March 2025 and is set out below. Members may note that there is less detail on future actions. This is partly due to the annual governance assessment that is carried out each year, which should lead to an action plan to improve governance. The 2024/25 Annual Governance Statement assessment is in the process of being undertaken and will be reported to Committee in the summer. The action plan will be updated once this process is completed.

Objectives	Task	Start	Finish
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	• Review support to Members including mentoring provided by the Local Government Association (LGA) to ensure effectiveness and to ascertain the need for follow up	Feb 25	Apr 26
	• Review Member Development programme for 2025-26 to ensure good governance practices are covered and reinforced	Feb 25	Apr 25
	• Design Member Development Programme for all out elections in 2027 whilst being mindful of potential LG re-organisation	Sep 26	Apr 27
	• Consider applying for Member Development Charter/Charter Plus	Sep 26	Apr 27
2. Build a strong, self-sustaining culture of good governance amongst members and officers, by focusing on high quality officer-member relationships and behaviours	• Build on Lead Member and Director meetings and monitor outcomes – are they enhancing strategic planning, early oversight of key issues, information sharing	Jan 25	Jun 25
	• Embed close working by promoting close collaboration through improved decision-making arrangements, such as ensuring consistency in the provision of Lead Member briefings	Jan 25	Apr 27

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review briefing arrangements and the provision of information to members generally</li> </ul>	Mar 25	Apr 25
3. Build a strong, self-sustaining culture of good governance amongst by focusing on high quality officer governance behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide governance support to officers with training on procedures, expectations and best practice (ongoing)</li> </ul>	Mar 25	Mar 27
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review effectiveness of governance training content in the officer induction programme</li> </ul>	Mar 25	Apr 25
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide dedicated training for officers on scrutiny arrangements and expectations</li> </ul>	Feb 25	Jun 25
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide support to officers on working in a political environment, with CLT and Director attendance</li> </ul>	Feb 25	May 25
4. Develop fit for purpose governance-systems and processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review structure of Democratic Services Team</li> </ul>	Nov 24	Apr 25
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review sign-off arrangements for committees including Cabinet</li> </ul>	Mar 25	Jun 25
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review scrutiny changes as per Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) findings to ensure continued prioritisation and focus around work programming</li> </ul>	Mar 25	Apr 25
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conduct an assessment of whether the information listed in the Improvement and Assurance framework is being received by the appropriate people and bodies in the organisation, and address weaknesses</li> </ul>	May 25	Jul 25
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Implement a Management Assessment process to inform the Annual Governance Statement (AGS) assurance process</li> </ul>	Mar 25	Apr 25
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support Audit Committee to undertake a self-assessment to inform the annual report</li> </ul>	Apr 25	Jun 25
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review governance arrangements for companies associated with Slough Borough Council (SBC)</li> </ul>	Mar 25	Sep 25
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Be ready to provide proactive input to discussions on LG re-organisation and consider governance arrangements including transition</li> </ul>	Mar 25	Apr 27

2.9 **So what does this mean?** As will be appreciated a lot of the activity that falls within the Political Leadership and Governance workstream relates to culture. Whilst work has commenced there is still more to be done and this should be seen as a continuing programme of activity, which is cyclical in nature based on the election cycle. Considerable work has been undertaken on ensuring that systems and procedures are fit for purpose, including regular review of the constitution, and systems for report clearance. However, the systems and processes alone will not improve governance. It is therefore necessary to ensure that officers and members understand the processes and adhere to them.

- 2.10 A particular area of focus in the new municipal year will be improving officer governance. Since 2021 training and support has been put in place, including:
- In person mandatory half day training sessions for top three tiers on local authority decision-making in 2022.
  - Governance learning programme run on weekly basis in 2023.
  - Internal Audit on record keeping for officer decision-making.
  - Updated templates and guidance for report authors.
  - Weekly review of corporate schedule of member decisions at Corporate Leadership Team (CLT).
- 2.11 However, the relatively high turnover of staff means a new, intensive programme for senior officers to share best practice will need to be run, to allow open discussion and ensure full understanding of rules and principles of local authority decision-making. The initial programme will have an emphasis on officer and member level decision making, including effective report writing and significant officer decisions, understanding processes and procedures – including the constitution - working in a political environment and understanding members' roles and supporting effective scrutiny.
- 2.12 As advised, work to embed improvement has been ongoing. Progress to date under the four objectives listed in paragraph 2.6 above, is listed below.
- 2.13 **Build a strong self-sustaining culture of good governance by focusing on high-quality councillor leadership and governance behaviours across all groups and roles**
- Regular meetings are being held with group leaders both collectively and individually to discuss issues.
  - Standards Committee met on 11 March 2025 to determine formal member complaint resulting in censure to be announced at Full Council.
  - A Member survey was conducted in December 2024 and results fed back to Standards Committee on 20 March 2025.
  - The draft Member development programme for 2025-26 was presented to Standards Committee, feedback has also been provided by LGA on the support to date and the Member Development Working Group has been set up to work informally with officers on the implementation of the programme.
  - The schedule of the Code of Conduct complaints has been reported to Standards Committee, including feedback from LGA on proposed changes to standards regime.
  - The annual update on member register of interests and gifts and hospitalities for 2024/25 was reported to Standards Committee in March 2025.
  - The Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee and Audit and Corporate Governance Committee operating on a more cross-party basis, as acknowledged by the Commissioners.
- 2.14 **Build a strong, self-sustaining culture of good governance amongst members and officers by focusing on high quality officer-member relations and behaviours**
- The Member officer relations protocol was updated, based on a good practice model code, and approved by Full Council in January 2024. A member officer

relations event was run in December 2024 involving case study discussions with cross party members and CLT officers and will be re-run in 2025.

- Lead Members have been given access to dashboards to support oversight of performance of services. Regular portfolio meetings between Cabinet members and their respective lead officers covering, amongst other things, performance, recovery strategic planning and upcoming decisions. These will be reviewed to maximise their effectiveness.
- Meetings between officers and members led to a positive budget setting process and Budget Council.
- Lead member and directors' meetings are being resulting in more strategic discussions and updates.

#### **2.15 Build a strong self-sustaining culture of good governance by focusing on high quality officer governance behaviours**

- Further work is being planned to help embed close collaboration between the officer and political leadership.
- Director leadership forums have been held, including a session with a focus on governance at December 2024 meeting.
- A new package of sessions is being planned for officers regarding governance including working in a political environment to help embed collaboration and understanding. There will also be a focus on scrutiny to assist officers and to help maximise the effectiveness of scrutiny.
- This is a key area of activity given the potential risks associated with staff turnover and, more importantly, the impact poor governance can have on the organisation. Whilst support needs to be provided, conversely where procedures are not followed sanctions need to be put in place.

#### **2.16 Develop fit for purpose governance systems and processes**

- A Member panel met to review parts of the constitution, namely the terms of reference for Audit and Corporate Governance Committee, treasury management rules, rules on political motions, benefits and disbenefits of independent co-opted chairs, and review of council procedure rules, picking up on issues arising in previous council meetings. Future meetings will focus on company and connected entities governance and budget and policy framework.
- The restructure of democratic services is underway and is due to be concluded imminently.
- A new management assurance process has been implemented to inform the Annual Governance Statement assessment.

2.17 As advised, this is not a standstill process. As well as providing support and implementing the changes highlighted above, the Council needs to have systems in place to review its effectiveness. Officers are working on devising a set of measures and milestones. These will be based on the best value guidance and in particular the characteristics of a well-functioning authority and where possible these should be outcome focused.

2.18 Additionally, the support and training provided internally as well as externally by providers such as the LGA and CfGS are also being reviewed. This will not only allow the Council to assess what has worked but will be used to help shape future activities.

### **3. Implications of the Recommendations**

#### **3.1 Financial implications**

- 3.1.1 There are no specific financial implications relating to the recommendations of the report which is simply to consider the report and to provide comments as the Committee sees fit. However relevant financial implications relate to the Member Development Programme and training and support. The current budget to support this programme is £0.020m.
- 3.1.2 Support for officers will be provided internally. Support is also available through the intervention, and discussions are ongoing with the LGA to ensure the support provided meets the Council's needs and compliments the activities being arranged internally.
- 3.1.3 In monitoring its progress in delivering the action plan, the Council will need to have regard to the level of financial investment required to support the Governance Programme. 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. Pressure on budgets to deliver the programme need to be closely monitored and reported on a monthly basis. Should it be determined that delivery of the Governance Programme require additional resources during 2025/26, that cannot be contained within the department's budgets, a request to draw down funding from the council's contingency will need to be submitted.
- 3.1.4 As part of the council's Medium Term Financial Strategy, consideration will need to be given to any ongoing financial pressures in delivering the Governance Programme that relate to 2026/27 and future years.
- 3.1.5 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.
- 3.1.6 Members' views are being sought in terms of content and to help shape the sessions.

#### **3.2 Legal implications**

- 3.2.1 The Council has many different statutory functions and duties. When making decisions members must comply with these legal duties, including making decisions in a fair, lawful and transparent manner. Members must comply with the Member Code of Conduct and understand their obligations to register and declare interests and the sanctions regime for failing to comply with the Code of Conduct. The purpose of the recovery plan is to ensure that we enhance our governance arrangements. This will ensure the Council is effective and complies with its legal obligations as well as its duty under best value and compliance with the best value guidance.

### 3.3 Risk management implications

3.3.1 Similarly with the legal comments, the purpose of the activities highlighted in this report will not only help ensure legal compliance but mitigate against the risk of poor decision making through enhanced governance practices.

### 3.4 Environmental implications

3.4.1 There are no specific environmental implications arising from this report.

### 3.5 Equality implications

3.5.1 The Council has a duty under the Equality Act 2010, to have due regard to the need to advance equality of opportunity for those with a protected characteristic and those without. The member development programme, and the way it is delivered, will take account of members' protected characteristics and consider any adjustments needed. This will be undertaken on a session-by-session basis. Additionally, the requirements of the Equality Act will be included in the Member Development programme.

## 4. **Background Papers**

None