

# Slough Borough Council Best Value Commissioners

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Dear Minister,

In our fifth report (published October 2024), Commissioners reviewed the Council's progress against the seven Best Value themes, to assess what progress the Council was making towards achieving its best value duty. With the initial intervention period due to expire at the end of November 2024, Commissioners were asked to provide recommendations as to whether a new period of intervention was required and if so, what the Council should particularly focus on to achieve its best value duty. Following publication of the Commissioners' report and recommendations, the Secretary of State took the view that the Council was not achieving its best value duty, and a decision was taken to initiate a new 24 month period of intervention for the Council, with a new set of directions and associated powers for Commissioners. The model of intervention was also amended to include a Managing Director Commissioner role. This is the first report that Commissioners have written since the new set of directions came into effect.

## Executive Summary

Since the beginning of Government intervention in 2021, Slough Council has struggled to progress its recovery at speed. There have been several contributing factors; difficulty in recruiting and retaining senior staff, a long period of financial discovery that has set the Council back on more than one occasion, and a degree of political instability. Furthermore, (and prior to Government intervention), the level of organisational disruption to the Council following a flawed restructure, led to a major loss of corporate memory and resulted in many broken service delivery systems.

However, it is pleasing to report, that with the new leadership team beginning to have a positive impact, combined with an increasingly confident Cabinet, progress has improved.

There is still much to do. Service delivery standards are variable across the Council and in some cases fall significantly short of resident expectations.

Whilst acknowledging that progress is now being made, this remains fragile. The financial position, a degree of political instability, poor or absent data and a still developing culture change programme, all pose risks to Slough's continued recovery. In addition, organisational effort is still heavily focussed on tactical issues, where a better balance of focus is needed on medium/longer term strategic change, to secure sustainability.

During 2024/25, much senior capacity was focussed on budget setting for the 25/26 financial year and on regulatory inspections. Whilst this is understandable, it is vital that the leadership team creates suitable strategic capacity to tackle broader strategic issues, particularly in developing a new Target Operating Model (TOM) and transformation plan.

Under the leadership of the Managing Director Commissioner (MDC), there is a greater sense of shared endeavour, and the senior team are generally working well with

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Commissioners, in a space that is more collaborative and co-productive. There are opportunities in the coming months to further integrate the MDC model within the Council and ensure the benefits of this approach are further realised.

A recent staff survey suggested that there is increased confidence in the Council's leadership, although there is no room for complacency here and it is important that the senior team continue to work hard collectively, to earn and retain the confidence of both staff and members.

The LGA continues to offer support for member development through a combination of peer mentors. However, take up of their support offer is variable at best, which itself poses a risk to longer term sustainable progress.

The administration continues to work well with officers and is demonstrating that it is prepared to make some difficult decisions to address the financial issues and to focus its efforts on much needed service improvement. There is some variability between portfolio holders in terms of their availability and time spent with their senior officers.

Council committees are showing signs of improvement with evidence of some highly effective scrutiny. The standards panel has also demonstrated that it takes the standards and behaviours of members seriously. Moving forward, it is important that officers continue to support this improvement by ensuring reports are well written and presented in a timely manner. Attendance of members on committees needs to improve and more need to take up opportunities for further training and development.

At the most recent budget setting meeting, members from across the Council contributed to a positive and constructive meeting. However, there are still too many occasions when full Council meetings do not meet the expected standards for a meeting held in public.

The Council's finances continue to be a significant concern. The targeted net income generated from the asset disposal programme will not deliver the expected value to finance the capitalisation direction and thereafter repay existing external debt. Whilst some progress is being made in defining the Council's new TOM, it is not yet, combined with an embryonic strategic transformation plan, enabling the Council to reduce its operating spend to fall in line with its available revenue resources. A budget for the financial year 2025/26 was set but the Council relied on Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) to balance the finances, therefore increasing the longer-term debt. The Finance team has worked very hard to resolve gaps in previous years' accounts and addressed many financial control issues. However, the Council is still exposed to significant financial risk and capacity is severely constrained.

Driving improvement in a Council in intervention, set against a backdrop of severe financial strain, is extremely challenging for both members and officers. Generating capacity for strategic change whilst simultaneously addressing more immediate service-related issues is problematic. Commissioners note the current procurement for external capacity to help it develop further its TOM work. This will require strong specification and client skills from the Council to secure best value from a provider. It is also critically important that the Council can resource the capacity to deliver the recommendations

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made by the partner. This will require some difficult decisions, a change in mindset from growth request to productivity and a more targeted use of the EFS that the Council has received, with carefully focussed investment.

Ultimately a positive and sustainable organisational culture, where members and officers work together on a basis of mutual trust and respect will provide the foundation for sustainable improvement. Without this, it will be easy for the Council to slip back and undermine its improvement efforts.

## Overall assessment against the Best Value themes

### Leadership

The Council's Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) now consists entirely of permanent appointments being led by the MDC. The wider senior leadership team is also largely in place with some additional recruitment underway. There is still a considerable reliance on interim staff but this is gradually being addressed.

The Leadership team has taken shared ownership of the Council's Improvement and Recovery plan, and this is reflected in a more joined up approach to Council recovery. However, there are still elements missing or underdeveloped in the plan, regarding strategic transformation and the implementation of a sustainable TOM. The new board governance arrangements place more control in the Council's hands. It will be important for the Council to make full use of this opportunity and to engage effectively with Commissioners whilst doing so.

Investment in the development of managers is taking place and is being well received by participants. Working with a team coach, the CLT is aiming to maximise its own effectiveness and improve cross-council working.

There is evidence of closer working relationships between the Cabinet and the CLT and the two teams are beginning to spend more time working together. A forum has been established to help political group leaders meet more informally. This could facilitate a more mature dialogue between the parties and improve collective action to help tackle Slough's challenges.

While politics in Slough can at times be volatile, the minority administration has proved broadly stable. The quality of discourse in Council meetings is variable, with a very poor meeting in February followed by a calmer and well-ordered Budget meeting in March. At the April Full Council meeting, members unanimously approved a motion relating to upholding good standards. Council committees continue to improve, with effective member leadership resulting in some progress for Scrutiny, Audit and Corporate Governance, and Standards. However, all council committees remain over-reliant on a relatively small number of active members.

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## Governance

Since our last report, both the Scrutiny Committee and the Audit and Corporate Governance Committees have improved and Commissioners are grateful for the work undertaken by officers, with support from the Local Government Association (LGA), in helping both officers and members develop their skills.

Less positively, not all members have made use of the development opportunities. Much of the good work has relied on a smaller group of councillors. There is a risk therefore, that too many members stick to a very narrow ward focus and do not engage with the more strategic work of improving the Council. This risk will increase as the next election in May 2027 draws closer. The way in which some officers engage with the democratic nature of the Council also requires further work. Members report a mixed experience when dealing with officers and the quality of the reports produced for their meetings is variable.

The absence of accurate and complete data, or the failure to use the data that is available, also impacts on the ability of members and officers to govern well as in some cases, they lack the information to make evidence-based decisions. Responsibility for the oversight of most reports to councillors has been transferred back to the Council. Officers will need to work diligently to ensure that reports meet the Best Value standard.

Senior leaders and management are taking a more determined approach to addressing the outstanding management actions attributed to internal audits and the external audit statutory, key and improvement recommendations. Improved reporting is in place in this regard and there is more effective engagement with the Council's auditors.

A particular problem for Slough has been resolving the governance arrangements for its local authority companies. Whilst the problem is recognised, the Council is taking too long to regularise the way they run and to tackle the underlying financial issues.

A new risk methodology has been developed and strategic risk registers refreshed. Having an overarching risk management strategy remains critical to dealing with the many types of strategic and operational risk that the Council could face. Much more should be done to report on, and manage risk consistently from the corporate centre and across its key partners and subsidiaries. The Council should establish a centralised approach to risk management, ensuring a consistent and coordinated process, with a culture of open communication. They should collaborate on risk management activities and ensure alignment and shared responsibility on common risks across subsidiaries including operational, financial, health & safety, reputational, and regulatory risks, as well as risks related to compliance, legal, fraud and cybersecurity.

## Culture

An all-staff survey undertaken in the winter of 2024 reflected an increase in staff morale and a growing trust in the Council's leadership, albeit from a relatively low base. Staff feedback reported a positive view of line managers and equalities, diversity and inclusion. The survey also showed more work is needed on learning and development

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for staff and on the articulation of the future vision for the organisation. In contrast to previous years, the results were cascaded through much of the organisation and staff engaged in feedback and formulating actions to address points raised. It is important that the CLT ensures that this happens across all departments.

The Council has made good progress on ensuring that all staff can and should have an annual appraisal.

The draft workforce plan that aims to embed the approach to organisational culture is currently being made available for staff comments, having already been considered at the 'Our People Forum'. The plan also sets out workforce equalities objectives, which complement the approach to equalities in service delivery, both of which are encapsulated in the Council's equality action plan agreed by Cabinet in April. This draws on the LGA equalities peer review from 2024, and sets out actions already taken, such as the new Corporate Equalities Board led by the MDC, and aspirations for the next two years. It is accepted that considerable work remains to be done to achieve a high performance culture in Slough.

Communication and engagement have improved but are not yet at the level that is required. A successful series of in-person and bite sized 'Talk-about' sessions for staff featuring a range of senior leaders have received positive feedback and good attendance, and the vlogs, newsletters and bulletins are now more comprehensive and regular. Communication with the public is more planned and systematic but remains at a relatively low level. The planned email newsletter should mark an important milestone in increasing dialogue with residents. With this addition the Council will be closer to delivering the recommendations of the LGA Communications Peer review from 2023, and the recent recruitment of an officer to lead resident engagement has the potential to lead further positive improvements in this area. The impact of all these changes will need to be evaluated, including through the residents' survey.

The Council's Whistleblowing Code Annual Report does not yet allow any intelligence, trends or issues to be considered. The number of concerns raised each year remains low with 3 complaints raised in the last two years. As such it is difficult to draw conclusions; a very low number may indicate a lack of confidence in whistleblowing arrangements or a low number of problems.

Similarly, an annual update on the members' declarations of gifts & hospitality is provided, with only one declaration over the same reporting period.

The Council will take steps to remind members and officers of their responsibilities but should also seek assurance that the current whistleblowing code and procedures and the Council's Code of Conduct are effective, consider local circumstances, and are robust in maintaining the highest standards of openness, honesty and integrity. They should proactively prevent and detect fraud, bribery, corruption and non-compliance with legislation, and maintain public confidence in the Council's adopted procedures and the public's trust in the role of officers and members in Slough.



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## Use of Resources

The direction of travel is positive, but significant challenges remain. The Council's improvement journey started from a low base. Therefore, despite the progress made to date, there is still much work to do before strong financial management in compliance with the CIPFA Financial Management Code and financial sustainability is achieved, and residents feel a tangible difference in the services the Council provides.

The preparation, publication and conclusion of audits for 4 years of accounts, 2019/20 to 2022/23, is a significant step forward for the Council, whilst accepting that a disclaimer of opinion on the financial statements was issued by the auditors. The preparation of the 2023/24 accounts is in the pipeline and at the time of writing, the draft unaudited 2024/25 accounts is planned to be prepared and published within the standard accounts 2024/25 deadline. Commissioners await the final balance sheet review report that provides some additional risk-based assurance over the integrity of material balance sheet items during the previous 4-year reporting period.

The budget cycle is in a far better place than it has been in previous years and the Council is looking forward to the next financial year with a much more organised and rigorous approach. As outlined earlier in the report the Council passed its annual budget for 2025/26, balanced with exceptional financial support. There remains fragility to the financial position and significant risk exposure, particularly relating to needs-led services such as homelessness, adult social care and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), and the Council's exposure to financial and legal liabilities through loans and underwritten liabilities of subsidiary companies.

Following further due diligence, the asset disposal programme has been refreshed and a downward revision made to the forecasted net income to be generated from asset disposals. This reduces the ability to fully finance the capitalisation directions received from the Government and continue with the strategy of reducing external debt to an appropriate level for an authority of its size. This is increasing the level of indebtedness, increasing future revenue costs and further impacting on the Council's long term financial sustainability.

The Council has made efforts to improve financial governance by initiating a new Capital Board to provide strategic planning, robust budgeting, and efficient project delivery. A Design Authority has been established that aims to track and monitor savings identification, business case development and delivery. It is too soon to judge the success of this, as a culture of systemically achieving financial savings and effective project delivery is not yet evident.

To build and maintain positive relationships with partners, the Council will need to better demonstrate that it can successfully deliver capital projects to time and budget. The Council acknowledges issues relating to current capital projects including significant slippage and the profiling of finances and we look forward to these being addressed.

In delivering the approved in-year financial position, the Council will need to ensure that risks and reserves are effectively managed and the improved financial control processes are integrated into daily workflows and systems across the Council, rather

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than treating them as separate tasks enhancing efficiency and compliance. Crucially, budget holders across the Council must feel accountable for their budgets and spend, and manage variances appropriately and with transparency.

Strong focus will now be required to develop a range of medium-term financial strategies that plan robust revenue and capital budgets for future years. These must be aligned to resources and delivery capacity, underpinned by clear debt repayment and reserves strategies, and a TOM that describes how the Council of the future will look and operate. In enabling comprehensive change, a fully funded transformation program is crucial for delivering a TOM and ensuring the necessary resources, including personnel, technology, and expertise, are available to implement the changes effectively, minimising the risks and maximising the chances of success.

## *Procurement and Contract Management*

The pace of improvements in procurement and contract management has slowed and even fallen back a little following changes to key personnel, demonstrating the danger of an over reliance on a small number of people. The planned development of a commercial strategy which expands on the strategy developed in 2021, to include commercialisation and contract management, and implementing an effective corporate contract management toolkit has not been delivered. The agreed reporting rhythm throughout the year attributed to procurement activity and compliance faltered. The lack of progress could impact on the Council's ability to embrace the opportunities afforded by the Procurement Act 2023, whilst implementing robust safeguards to ensure accountability and compliance. As such the Commissioners will want to see evidence that the improvement trajectory is well set and the improvements once implemented are sustained.

## **Service delivery**

This is an area of significant challenge for the Council. The patchy availability of good data and the absence of a culture that promotes gathering and using it undermines the ability of the Council to fulfil its ambitions. There are plans to improve this, but they are in their infancy and progress is intimately linked to both positive culture change in terms of using data, and developing appropriate IT infrastructure and skilled officers to gather, clean and analyse relevant data.

The links between service-based plans and strategic plans continue to be fragile. A golden thread from corporately set and agreed strategic priorities and their implementation through local plans is currently inconsistent.

The Council has struggled to produce a meaningful TOM and this has led to fragmentation in the overall approach to improving services and the Council. It is only at the beginning of a process to procure external capacity to help them with this after which the Council will need to prioritise funding to deliver the change.

Resident surveys show a low level of satisfaction with the Council. Satisfaction levels among recipients of adult social care, tenants and of residents overall, are below many

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comparable councils. The Council is working on its complaints processes and seeking to improve the ways in which the public can engage with it.

Continued improvement in children's social care has been reported on by the Department for Education's Commissioner, although SEND performance continues to be a concern.

The IT team is also making good progress with improvements in IT security and resilience.

Overall, improvement in services remains patchy.

## Partnerships

The Council understands the benefits that can be gained by effective collaborative working with local partners and communities and is looking at ways to improve resident engagement.

Slough has been proactive in responding to the local government devolution White Paper and engaging with other councils in discussions over appropriate future arrangements. A report agreed by the Slough Cabinet welcomed the opportunity this provided, and there is cross party interest in this issue. The monthly Group Leaders meeting has been extended to address devolution matters.

The Council has improved its relationship with the Berkshire Prosperity Board and other key partners in the region, and this provides a much firmer foundation for future collaboration and co-production. The positive relationship with Frimley Integrated Care Board has recently been demonstrated in the joint review of the Better Care Fund, while the Council has collaborated closely with Thames Valley Police and residents in the only example of 'Clear, Hold, Build' in the force's area, based in Langley. Another of the neighbourhoods in Slough, Britwell, is the focus of a key partnership initiative between the community, council and Sport England designed to address fundamental barriers to wellbeing, and the partnership with SEGRO has resulted in the refreshed simplified planning zone, now unique in England.

The Council has a vision for housing and business growth and, subject to resource availability, a favourable geographical position (land, trade, and transport) that could provide an opportunity to boost investment, new businesses, local jobs, more housing, and core funding for public services. However, this is not yet articulated or understood as a common goal with a sense of purpose and direction, and there is not yet clarity about how a variety of contributions could fit into the larger picture. A strategic roadmap would be beneficial in turning this vision to action, providing a structured approach that facilitates internal communication and external engagement with partners and stakeholders, and allows the Council to focus on what's most important.



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## Continuous Improvement

There has been some progress in this area, although much of the approach is still in development rather than embedded in the fabric of the Council. The Council acknowledges that the Improvement and Recovery Plan requires refinement and iteration before it can be a fully effective tool to aid the Council's transformation. The Scrutiny Committee has benefited from effective chairing and the hard work of a small group of councillors. The appraisal system is evolving and a workforce strategy is due shortly. The Council seeks to learn from others and is an active member of an LGA transformation group.

The recent commissioning of the leadership of the internal audit service is helping improve delivery within the audit function. Strong chairing has helped the Audit and Corporate Governance Committee start to improve its contribution to Slough.

Human Resources (HR) leadership is working hard to address the inherited deficiencies in the HR function, although there is still much to do. Staff appraisals are more prevalent, and the emerging learning and development offer is to be welcomed, despite take up and impact being variable across the organisation.

There is a process for producing the Annual Governance Statement and the Council is trying to improve the production of this.

The Council does not have an organisation-wide approach to continuous improvement. Whilst there are examples of good practice, it is not systemic. Much organisational energy is spent on trying to bring service delivery up to acceptable standards, therefore not creating the environment for a focus on continuous improvement

The Council acknowledges that there is some significant way to go to meet the best value duty.

## Conclusion

Commissioners are pleased to be able to report positive progress since our last report, published in October 2024. The benefits of a capable senior team under the strong leadership of the MDC are being felt by the organisation. Although still under strength in terms of resources and much more work to do, the finance team has also brought much welcomed grip to the fiscal position of the Council.

Moving forward, Commissioners would like to see more organisational energy on pursuing a strategic transformation agenda and the success of this will in part be based on how the Council identifies its areas of strategic focus and creates the capacity for delivery. This will also require targeted use of EFS to fund the financial change capacity the Council needs.

Creating the potential for strategic change will also require the Council retaining a tight grip on its finances and this will require politicians to work together to make the difficult decisions they still need to make, to constrain expenditure and manage demand.

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Service standards in many cases are still below what should be expected, and the Council will also need to maintain its focus here too.

Maintaining progress against a backdrop of rising demand and constrained resources will be very challenging for both members and officers and it is important that the improving relationship here is maintained and develop further, by taking advantage of training and learning opportunities.

There is still a lot of work to be done in the months and years ahead for Slough Borough Council to achieve its best value duty and the fragility of progress remains a concern to Commissioners. Of vital importance now is the rapid development of the TOM to facilitate achievable transformation and digital plans and sustainable medium term financial strategies.

Over the next 6 months it is important that the Council focuses its organisational energy on:

- Identifying and securing change and delivery capacity and capability
- Completing the design of the TOM and developing an achievable transformation plan
- Enhancing financial management and planning to enable the delivery of a balanced position over the medium term
- Increasing member engagement in training and development
- Developing a more complete and coherent approach to resident engagement
- Delivering priority service level improvement where resources allow, including more effective delivery of the capital programme.

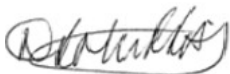
Yours sincerely,



Gavin Jones, Lead Commissioner



Will Tuckley, Managing Director  
Commissioner



Denise Murray, Finance Commissioner



Gerard Curran, Commissioner

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## Annex – assessment against current Directions (refreshed in November 2024)

Direction number	Direction	Status	Assessment
1	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, in order 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 elements listed below (1a-1i)	In progress	An initial improvement and recovery plan, focused on the first 6 months, was considered by Cabinet in January 2024. A further iteration, covering the full 2 years of the intervention, was endorsed by Cabinet in March 2024. Work is still in progress on the content and presentation of the plan and how progress will be monitored and reported. The Council acknowledges that further iterations are needed. The Council plans to publish a version of the plan which is written with residents in mind. The plan does not fully articulate the activities and resources needed for strategic transformation as this is not yet clear. As a result, it remains a work in progress.
1a	The plan should include a new Target Operating Model (TOM) that enables both financial stability and the delivery of core services and priorities.	Slow progress	The TOM is still under development, and this work is taking longer than expected. The Council is currently procuring a provider to speed up the development of the TOM.
1b	The plan should include a refreshed rolling Medium-Term Financial Strategy, Capital Strategy, and Treasury Management Strategy, aligned with the new TOM and transformation plan and demonstrating the	In progress	Work is underway to develop the range of financial strategies, although there is a degree of dependency on development of the TOM and transformation plan.

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Direction number	Direction	Status	Assessment
	Authority's financial sustainability and resilience, over the period of the strategies.		
1c	The plan should include 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.	In progress	Work has started on a self-assessment against the standards within the Code and will then align with the Finance Improvement Plan.
1d	The plan should include 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.	In progress	The culture programme within the Council has been expanded and a workforce strategy is currently with staff for consultation. More focus is needed on building and embedding a 'high performance' culture and the benefits this will bring.
1e	The plan should include 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.	In progress	A new risk methodology has been developed and strategic risk registers refreshed although there is no comprehensive risk strategy. The proactive and strategic management of risk remains to be embedded within the culture and ways of working within the Council.
1f	The plan should include 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.	Slow progress	An outline plan is in place. However the pace of delivery and the capacity to undertake independent reviews, effectively manage risk and embed appropriate governance arrangements are not yet evident.

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Direction number	Direction	Status	Assessment
1g	The plan should include improving the systems and processes to enable better and evidence-based decision making, including enhancing the data and insight functions, undertaking benchmarking.	In progress	The absence of accurate and complete data , or the failure to use the data that is available, continues to impact on the ability of members and officers to govern well as in some cases, they lack the information to make evidence-based decisions. Work is underway to improve systems and processes but is in its infancy.
1h	The plan should include an appropriately resourced digital strategy that supports effective business operations and links to the Authority's future operating model.	In progress	A set of Digital, Data and Technology strategic principles was agreed at Cabinet in November 2024, including how these principles will translate into tangible action. The link between the digital strategy and the future operating model remains unclear until the TOM is defined.
1i	The plan should include improving resident and public engagement.	In progress	The plan outlines steps to build resident and public engagement and some elements of the plan are being implemented. A resident engagement officer has been recruited to lead the work.
2	To secure as soon as practicable that all the Authority's functions are exercised in conformity with the best value duty thereby delivering improvements in services and outcomes for the people of Slough, focussing in the first six months on an effective internal audit function, with organisational independence, objectivity, separate administrative reporting and a strong	In progress	As outlined in the report above, the Council continues to work towards meeting its best value duty and there has been progress in some areas since Commissioners' previous report.



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Direction number	Direction	Status	Assessment
	functional reporting relationship to the Audit and Corporate Governance Committee, and a review of the action plan for the scrutiny function and Audit and Corporate Governance Committee to accelerate any improvements required in these areas.		