

## **Slough Borough Council**

**Report to:** Council

**Date:** 25<sup>th</sup> September 2025

**Subject:** Recommendations of Cabinet from its meeting held on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2025: Improvement and Recovery Action Plan Update

**Chief Officer:** Sonia Khan, Director of Strategy, Change and Resident Engagement

**Contact officer:** David Mead, Head of Programmes and Change

**Ward(s):** All

**Exempt:** No

**Appendices:** Appendix 1 -Appendix one review against Measures of Success

### **1. Summary and Recommendations**

- 1.1 This report provides the 6 monthly update on the mobilisation and delivery of the Improvement and Recovery Action Plan which seeks to support the Council to become a Best Value Council by November 2026. The report was considered by the Cabinet at its meeting held on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2025 and it was agreed to refer the report to full Council for all members to be updated and given the opportunity to debate the progress made.
- 1.2 At Cabinet in March 2025 the Improvement and Recovery action plan was endorsed, and it was noted that regular updates, at least every 6 months, will be presented to Cabinet and Full Council on progress against this plan, of which this is the first update.

### **Recommendations**

That Council resolves to:

- (a) Note the update across all aspects of the Improvement and Recovery Action Plan.
- (b) Note that a further update will be provided in January 2026 that will also set out progress towards the current November 2026 intervention end date and the proposed 26/27 plan building on current delivery.

## **Reasons for Recommendations**

This report is necessary to provide reassurance that the action plan is being delivered incrementally to become a Best Value Council.

### **Commissioner's Review**

The report provides an update on each of the programmes that constitute the refreshed improvement and recovery plan. It usefully details the many actions that have taken place and sets out some forthcoming considerations for Members and Officers. While there is an appendix that includes measures that are in place to determine progress and success, the report does not yet fully enable the programmes, metrics and feedback to be drawn together to make an overall assessment of the degree to which the Council is moving towards achieving best value. Commissioners will want to see a composite picture in the next update report that more clearly evidences the impact of the steps taken, especially for residents, and sets out where the Council has reached overall in the journey towards meeting the best value requirements.

### **Options considered**

#### **1. Publish a 6 monthly progress update**

**Recommended** – this is what was committed to by Cabinet. It provides an update in the public domain drawn from the programme management documentation.

#### **2. Publish updates alongside performance framework updates**

Not recommended - a more granular account of progress is advised to enable Members and the public to have a better understanding of progress. Commissioners have also previously required this more granular request in their comments in March 2025.

#### **3. Not publish updates**

Not recommended - as this would mean there was no public updates on progress to becoming a Best Value Council. Given the impact on residents of the Council not being a Best Value Council this is not recommended.

## **Report**

### **Introduction**

- 2.1 This report provides an update on the delivery of the Improvement and Recovery Action Plan that is designed to support the Council's journey to becoming a Best Value Council.

- 2.2 The Action Plan covers a range of workstreams that are delivering in areas that have been identified as critical and touch on all areas of the Council.
- 2.3 The workstreams cover 6 main programmes and a further 4 support programmes, these are:

### **Main Programmes**

- Target Operating Model (TOM)
- Communication, partnerships, and engagement
- Vision and Evidence based decision making
- Political Leadership and Governance
- High performing workforce and culture
- Financial Improvement

### **Support Programmes**

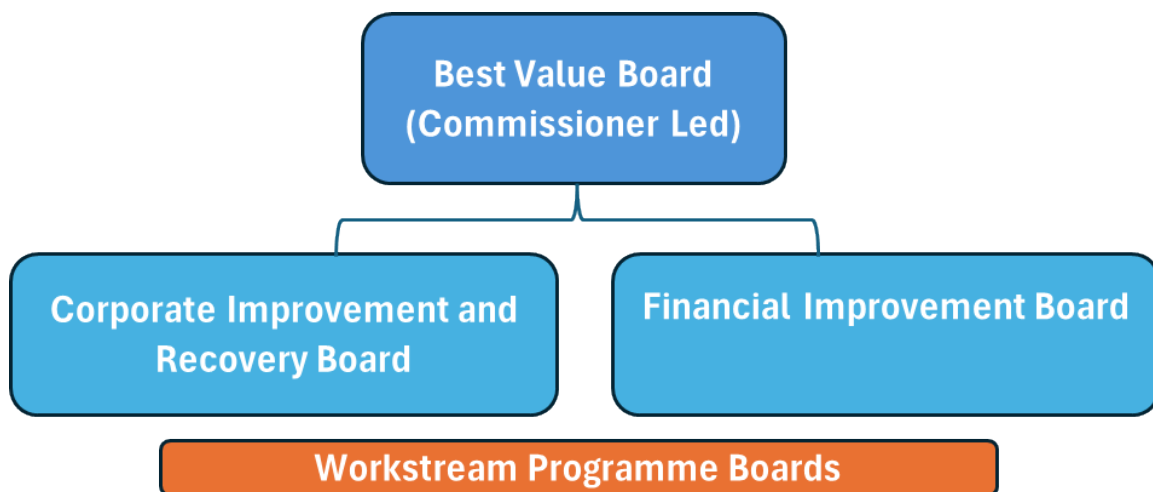
- Improve Complaint handling
  - Digital and Technology
  - Strategic Commissioning
  - Risk Maturity and Internal Audit
- 2.4. The measures of success for the Action Plan were also agreed by Cabinet in March 2025 and reflect the directions provided by Commissioners, the defined Best Value domains as well as the local aspirations set by Cabinet.
- 2.4.1 Appendix one sets out measures of success accompanied by a commentary on how we are progressing against each, based on the delivery of the 10 Improvement and Recovery programmes.

**Diagram One: The Best Value Components**



## **2.5. Governance**

2.5.1 The Diagram below illustrates the governance for oversight of the workstreams and is designed to ensure that both Members and Officers have sufficient input on the development, direction and delivery of the Corporate Improvement and Recovery Plan.



**Diagram Two: The Corporate Improvement Governance**

2.5.2 The Council now has set up a Programme Office under the leadership of a newly appointed Head of Service for Programmes and Change. The Programme Office will ensure that the workstreams are able to move at an appropriate pace and deliver effectively, making opportunity of any

synergies and ensuring the conditions for success are being embedded across the whole Council.

- 2.5.3 The full Action Plan was agreed by Cabinet in March 2025 and in response to the extension of the intervention in November 2024, and the existing and new directions set by Best Value commissioners.
- 2.5.4 Highlight Reports are produced by Workstream Leads on a monthly basis and are reviewed by the PMO before being presented at the six weekly Corporate and Service Improvement Board. In addition, a Scrutiny Task Group has been set up to review the progress of key Improvement & Recovery workstreams, assess risks, ensure cost–benefit balance, compare performance against other councils, and understand the impact on residents. The findings will be used to make recommendations to Cabinet. Some workstreams are reporting updates to formal member bodies, for instance updates on the finance improvement plan and governance workstream are reported to Audit and Corporate Governance Committee. The above boards are not decision-making bodies and therefore any decision which should be made at a member level, will be taken to the appropriate formal member forum.

### **3.0 Workstream Updates**

- 3.1 The following pages set out a summary of each workstream, its purpose and what has been delivered so far since the new action plan was adopted. There is also a short commentary on each workstream to give a view of what might need to be considered by Members and Officers over the next few months and particularly within the refresh of the Improvement and Recovery Plan in January 2026. This is to ensure that the workstreams can further develop to maximize the opportunities available.

### **3.2 Main Programmes**

#### **3.2.1 Target Operating Model (TOM)**

- 3.2.2 Purpose:** To set up a new sustainable operating model that achieves financial stability, improves the residents' experience of interacting with the Council whilst still enabling the Council to meet needs and deliver corporate priorities.

#### **3.2.3 Delivery 2025**

A paper is due to Cabinet in October 2025 to set out the next stage of developing the Council's Target Operating Model (TOM) within a comprehensive Transformation Plan. The paper will bring together the analysis and discovery work that has been completed and will recommend a clear delivery plan. The Operating Model set out will recognise the diverse services provided and phased implementation, as opposed to a top down, one size fits all approach.

The Council has engaged Boston Consulting Group to develop the operating model picture and supporting analysis. They have synthesised data on the “as is” position of the Council with resident insight, including from polling, outreach and focus groups with staff and Member perspectives and benchmarked data. Their work will be integrated into the overall Transformation Plan. The recommendations is for an operating model based on an enabling Council.

**Service Improvement and Transformation Opportunities** – Alongside the above work there has also been activity undertaken by the Transformation Team to analyse data, processes and user journeys across multiple service areas to identify opportunities that can be prioritised and initiated as improvement projects to deliver cost savings, process efficiencies and improvements to resident experience:

- The work to analyse data, processes and user journeys has initially focussed on the areas of largest spend across the Council; Adults Social Care, Children’s Services and Housing in addition to focussing on the front door for residents into the Council. This work has been progressing at pace since the current Transformation Team was established in early July 2025. This builds on an earlier phase of work following the adoption of the design principles for a transformed organisation, agreed by Cabinet in November 2024. This started work in Adults, Housing and the front door.
- The analysis of 529 Customer Services calls from residents identified that;
  - 71% of calls did not provide residents with what they needed or did not deliver the correct result first time.
  - there were a significant number of calls that were transactional that could have been dealt with through an online channel (recognising there would be residents who would still need support with these transactions).
  - call demand was relatively stable (between 55 and 65 thousand Customer Services calls per quarter over the past 18 months) and represented a relatively low proportion of residents.
  - there were a core group of residents who needed help and could be more effectively engaged in a different way to meet their needs and reduce repeat contacts – this 5% of callers were responsible for over 30% of all Customer Services calls received.
  - there were missed opportunities to provide additional preventative support, because only the presenting need was being dealt with rather than considering the wider context of the resident’s historic and future needs.
- Adult Social Care, Housing and Revenue Benefit calls make up the vast majority of the resident enquiries coming through Customer Services of the calls that were analysed (over 85% of the 529 call analysed). This suggests that there are opportunities to redesign the way residents access these services focussing on how the Council can ensure residents get what they require in the first instance to drive down repeat calls in future.

- Based on the findings to date from analysis of calls and other contact methods, a plan is now being developed with Customer Services to focus on a longer-term redesign of SBC's front door that will involve complex cross-cutting work in partnership with each Service Area, identifying early opportunities to improve the digital front door to drive down repeat call contacts, designing a proof of concept for how face to face support can be offered to provide a more effective physical front door..
- A cost-to-serve model has been developed which will enable Services to estimate the time and cost spent on individual contacts and services provided to individual residents. This can then be used to quantify potential time and cost savings based on changes to user journeys when redesigning service delivery.
- An opportunities log has been established to capture identified opportunities from Adult Social Care, Children's Services, Housing and Customer Services, that could deliver service improvements, improve resident experience, and/or contribute to financial / efficiency savings. These opportunities will be prioritised and analysed further before selecting which to initiate as change/improvement projects. These will consist of projects that deliver improvements for each Service area as well as large scale cross cutting projects that will impact multiple services e.g. redesign of digital and physical "front door."
- All of this work is being brought together into one Transformation Plan for October 2025.

### **3.2.4 Considerations moving forward:**

3.2.5 The Transformation Plan due in October presents the opportunity to look at the detail of the proposed programmes and changes and provides a clear gateway into the next stage of delivery.

3.2.6 This is a broad and complex programme, and Members will want to be able to understand and be comfortable with the direction it takes, having confidence that its proposed delivery phase is realistic and focused on the right scope.

## **Communication, Partnerships and Engagement**

**3.3.1 Purpose:** To use resident engagement insights to inform decision-making, bringing partners together to work on long term outcomes and place shaping. To rebuild trust and confidence in the Council, at a time of further change that will affect residents' experiences of the Council and services. To build stronger more cohesive communities through systematic consultation and engagement and partnerships with residents and community partners.

### **3.3.2 Delivery in 2025:**

- A Resident Engagement Framework and communication strategy is being developed for Cabinet in October to propose a structured approach to involving residents in decisions about their community and to enabling their active engagement and participation in communities. This will ensure we have the right process in place to reach a wide range of residents and to effectively analyse and embed their insight fully into the work of the Council.
- Alongside this, a refreshed approach to cohesion and community tensions has been developed and tested with key officers and community partners in a planning session and key priorities are being firmed up for autumn 2025.
- New resident communication channels include a resident's newsletter that launched 22 May 2025 and so far, has over 750 subscribers and is growing. A Social Media management platform has also been procured for targeted and effective council communications.
- The first State of the Borough' event took place on 17<sup>th</sup> July 2025 that facilitated a debate between Members, community partners and residents on three key themes (Young People, the Council's finances and Slough Town Centre). The event had over 100 participants. The outcomes from the event will inform the final stages of the development of the Resident Engagement Framework and a programme of strategic engagement from autumn 2025. This will focus on topics and localities that are emerging as priorities from engagement work and from resident surveys /polling. The State of the Borough debate therefore launches a programme of work underway to improve resident engagement and develop community relations.
- A resident survey of 500 residents has been launched to help the Council better understand residents' current concerns and needs. Results are expected in September. This builds on polling with 250 residents, immersive sessions around Slough and focus groups undertaken as part of the operating model diagnostic work.

### **3.3.3 Considerations moving forward**

3.3.4 As the Resident engagement framework further develops it will be important that feedback from residents (via surveys, events, and social media) is turned into a repository of insight that actively informs policy and service design and this, in turn, shared back with residents.

3.3.5 Ensuring that the engagement successfully continues to have participation by underrepresented groups through having targeted engagement and working with the voluntary sector and faith groups.

3.3.6 Being able to measure the impact of new channels (e-newsletter, Borough event) with metrics for reach and influence on decisions and being prepared to change our approach accordingly to reflect what works best.



3.3.7 Resource has been identified to develop the Council's place leadership and enabling role and its approach to partnership working so that priorities can be progressed more effectively with residents and across the system.

### **3.4. Vision and Evidence Based Decision Making:**

**3.4.1 Purpose:** Improving the systems and processes to enable better and evidence-based decision making within a Corporate Performance framework, including enhancing the data and insight functions, and using / undertaking benchmarking with relevant comparators.

### **3.4.2 Delivery in 2025**

- Story boards have been developed for service areas ensuring that the development of service plans is properly linked to the Council's strategic aims and informs the budget setting process for 26/27. Storyboards and Service Plans are being reviewed to ensure alignment with all service areas
- Service plans are being aligned to measurable KPIs and corporate outcomes. Work has commenced benchmarking activity against CIPFA nearest neighbours.
- There will be a roll out of a new quarterly performance reporting cycle to directorates and Members, as well as the delivery of decision-making training for senior officers and Members.
- Strategy & Insight Officers are working closely with ICT to support with the development of the new data strategy and ensure input from an evidenced based decision-making standpoint
- Following a LGA Peer Review looking at equalities an Equalities Board has been established to; monitor progress towards the objectives and recommendations made and ensure equalities objectives are aligned to the Improvement & Recovery work and Service Planning.

### **3.4.3 Considerations moving forward:**

3.4.4 Improving data quality and consistency across systems is an ongoing activity that will need constant attention but will give us the opportunity to extend benchmarking and predictive modelling to support forward planning.

3.4.5 The Council will need to ensure that we continue to increase accessibility, transparency and understanding of performance information across the council to properly inform Members and give them what they need in decision making. Members should see better use of data in Cabinet and Committee reports, Scrutiny and Audit.

3.4.6 Furthermore, improved data should better inform officer level decisions and provide increased transparency for the public, ensuring that decisions support corporate priorities with risks and issues properly identified.

3.4.7 Each directorate is also working on alignment of strategic priorities, change and improvement plans and 2026/27 budget plans, so that there is a more dynamic link between corporate planning, transformation and medium-term financial planning.

3.4.8 The Corporate Leadership is establishing focused sessions on performance and service improvement, that will draw on corporate performance indicators, complaints data, resident insight and service improvement plans- beginning in September 2025.

### **3.5 Political Leadership and Governance:**

**3.5.1 Purpose:** To 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), high quality officer-member relationships and behaviours, governance behaviours and to develop a fit for purpose governance-systems and processes.

#### **3.5.2 Delivery in 2025**

There has been progress in this work stream, which is highlighted below.

A Member Development Programme has been developed and is currently being delivered. Officers are working with Members to ensure the sessions are relevant and attendance maximised, with a target of 80% attendance required. Progress, in terms of attendance, has been steadily improving. In May, June and July attendance was 66.5%, 73.5 and 93.5% respectively. The sessions held during this time frame covered, Planning, Licensing, Code of Conduct as well as Public Health. Monitoring of feedback will be used to inform future sessions as well as to help evidence changes in approach and behaviours.

The Local Government Association (LGA) has supported the Council on this workstream which has created connections between Members from other Councils who act as “LGA Member Peers.” A session on Transformation was held with Cllrs Abi Brown and Jason Perry acting as critical friends and attended by 50% of Members. A session on chairing was run by Cllrs Sara Butikofer and Adam Brown.

A similar approach is being undertaken for officers, with governance support being provided across the organisation. This has been supported by the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT). Again, the purpose is to help increase the level of understanding of good governance principles. This will not only cover our governance arrangements such as the constitution but working in a political environment – jointly with members - and report writing. As well as a programme of activity, Democratic Services colleagues will be visiting Senior Leadership Teams (SLT) for the respective Council departments, offering lunchtime sessions for queries as well as day to day support upon request.

The third strand relates to officer and member relations. A specific session to promote good member and officer relations is scheduled to be held on 9 September. This will be delivered internally. In order to demonstrate a commitment to improvement, it is worth highlighting the 'Elected Members' Pledge – Inclusive Leadership' that was approved by Council on 15 May 2025.

The LGA have also provided dedicated support for Cabinet and committees. The Leader and Deputy Leader have completed the LGA's flagship development programme for Members. Mentoring arrangements continue with cabinet members and committee chairs, including the new scrutiny chair.

### **3.5.3 Considerations moving forward:**

3.5.4 As advised above, the key challenge is to monitor and highlight progress. Whilst targets have been implemented to assist, feedback will be sort not only to help inform future sessions – the Member Development Programme is business as usual – but also to tease out what difference the sessions have made to those individuals who attend those sessions, both members and officers.

3.5.5 There is a clear overlap with all of the workstreams. The Improvement and Recovery and Action Plan is being used to inform the support as well as the change and improvements required, as evidenced by the programmes referred to above in 3.

3.5.6 Briefings on transformation have been provided to Members, along with the Targeted Operating Model. We will also look to embed evidenced based decision making, use of data and listening to our residents with training and support where required.

3.5.7 The LGA continues to support the development of Cabinet and it is important that corporate leadership continues to work closely to support this. By way of example, sessions have been identified to support Cabinet to develop their leadership around transformation, housing needs and their overall leadership.

## **3.6.Workforce and Culture**

**3.6.1 Purpose:** Building brilliant basics: developing tools so our managers can be data driven and evidence led when supporting their teams. Empowering Leadership, equipping managers with the key skills to lead their teams through change. Fostering a healthy and inclusive workplace, working with our employee networks and forums, ensuring staff feel respected and heard. Building a positive and transformative culture, providing tools to equip leaders to build high performing teams where their people thrive.

### **3.6.2 Delivery in 2025-26**

In May 2025, in collaboration with staff, networks and a working group the Workforce Strategy was published. This strategy sets out our commitment to

creating a high-performing, inclusive culture where all staff can thrive. Informed by staff feedback, it focuses on four key **People Priorities** that require action and ownership across every level of the organisation:

- **Getting the basics right** – Equipping staff with the tools, information and support they need to do their jobs effectively.
  - -Data has been 90% cleansed and reconciled with budget allowing for more accurate understanding of position managers
  - Improved HR policies: Changes to Sickness Policy: Separated process on managing short-term absences vs long-term. Triggers have changed to a rolling 12 months, and medical suspension is now included in the policy.
  - Improved 1:1 forms on Learning Management system supporting managers to hold and record meaningful conversations.
- **Building trust and empowering our people** – Creating a culture of transparency, learning and shared leadership.
  - Learning management system contract has been renewed to include functionality for a Talent tool and 360s: currently being tested for Q4 launch as part of the 25/26 End of Year Review.
  - Line Manager development programme (LEAD) relaunched via Bucks Academy. 54% of managers have engaged or completed all the modules with a further 17% having done at least 1. Currently drafting internally developed modules to support managers on using Unit 4 ERP system and new HR policies.
- **Fostering a healthy and inclusive environment** – Promoting wellbeing and belonging for all staff.
  - Mini people poll launched for all staff in July/August to test staff sentiments against the 4 lowest performing areas from the annual staff survey [results to be presented at next Employment Committee].
  - Additional Inclusivity training internally drafted and currently being tested with pilot group, to be delivered via online module; supporting improved recruitment practices.
- **Building a positive and transformative culture** – Enabling our people to grow, lead and deliver the best outcomes for Slough residents.
  - Onboarding now includes a buddy and welcome letter for all new starters.
  - HR continues to broker connections with schools for work experience programmes and university placements. 2 graduates join us in September, alongside 5 additional apprenticeships.
  - Introduction of thank you cards that have been distributed across the organisation, supporting EDs, Ds and HoSs to recognise staff who work to offer excellence, expertise or improvements to Slough residents.

Engaging with staff has been led through the Our People Forum (OPF) which is a solutions-focused group to pilot new initiatives that will deliver on the workforce strategy and findings from the annual staff survey. The OPF provides an opportunity for staff from across the council, including those in front -line roles - to hear about current issues, discuss and give feedback.

Recent topics for discussion at the Our People Forum have included updates on Devolution, Recruitment and Workforce Strategy, Equalities and Trauma Informed practice, as well as Question and Answer sessions with a commissioner and with the Leader.

Staff Networks also continue to mature and provide an opportunity for staff to engage in dialogue both in specific equality areas, but also more generally they work collaboratively to promote wider inclusion in the organisation. They are also regularly involved in reviewing employee policies and training (Workforce Strategy, Unconscious Bias, Recruitment and Organisational Development plans).

In addition to the Women's Network, REACH Network and Employees with Disabilities Forum, we now have Slough Pride Network (LGBTQ+) and ND Slough (supporting neuro diverse employees), and each network has a CLT sponsor.

The Slough Menopause Cafe meets regularly to provide peer to peer support for employees dealing with menopause. In May a webinar led by a leading menopause clinician was organised for employees which was really positively received. A similar webinar around helping managers support employees going through menopause is being planned for October.

Last October 2024, a new staff survey supplier was commissioned and successfully launched a revised and engaging survey called the Our People Poll, producing scorecards down to HoS level that allowed teams to discuss taking forward actions. The response rate exceeded previous years and results have informed a focus on the following areas:

- **Leadership** – embedding a golden thread to connect our corporate vision to service delivery. Working with the leadership cohort on different practice models.
- **Staff recognition** – building on established programmes and embedding new initiatives to give timely recognition and thanks to colleagues
- **Learning and development** – providing a new line management training programme with multiple modules focusing on managing through change and other key topics. Growing apprenticeship opportunities. Launching career pathways across all directorates.
- **Speaking up and EDI** – establishing, in liaison with staff networks, an EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion) calendar of events. Reviewing recruitment end to end to ensure we are an inclusive employer. Maintain an inclusive staff survey process with interim check-in surveys.

In addition, a positive trend has been observed in employee turnover now in line with the wider public sector average of 7.51% (voluntary).

HR management information (MI) dashboards are now being produced for each ED area and reported through to CLT and the Council's Employment Committee. There is a strong signal/evidence that the organisation is responding to HR support in the areas of Learning and Development – for example there has been 60% engagement with the relaunched line management training) Completion of end of year reviews (appraisals) has been a key focus. In 2023 only 17% of end of year reviews were complete and this has increased from 70% in 2024 to 90% in 2025.

There has also been an improvement in the turnaround of HR casework and a reduction in employment tribunals.

### **3.6.3 Considerations moving forward**

3.6.4 It is recognised that cultural change will also require consistent behaviours across the Council. To this end, we are developing the recruitment framework to include an assessment of behaviours. In addition, we are developing career pathways for all grades, aligned to the newly established behavioural expectations.

3.6.5 Further approaches to drive improved performance will be through embedding strategic thinking into decision-making processes and focusing on Best Value practice.

3.6.6 It will be important for Slough to prioritise recruitment in hard-to-fill posts and reduce agency dependency; we are seeking innovative ways to address this and have already trialled LGA graduates and university placements for Q1 and Q2 of 25/26.

3.6.7 Whilst there is strong evidence that the organisation is responding positively and there are improvements in culture as outlined above, we recognise the impact is not consistent and the HR offer is not yet fully understood. In addition, we know we are tackling a perception of HR being a blocker vs. a partner. The recent approval of our Workforce Strategy will be key to reassuring our stakeholders of our offer, accountabilities and being measured against these.

3.6.8 As we strengthen the golden thread between corporate priorities and delivery on the ground, we need to ensure that individual objective setting which is done as part of end of year reviews is aligned to service plan priorities and that there is a cascade from service plans to the objectives for directors and on to teams.

## **3.7 Financial Improvement**

**3.7.1 Purpose:** To improve financial management, accountability and reporting across the council to improve financial resilience and work towards becoming a financially sustainable council ensuring full compliance with the CIPFA financial management code.

### **3.7.2 Delivery in 2025**

- Completed final accounts for 2018/19 to 2022/23 and submitted the provisional outturn for 2023/24 to Cabinet in July 2025.
- Presented the Annual Governance Statement 2024/25, 2023/24 Provisional Statement of Accounts, and the Treasury Management Outturn to the Audit and Corporate Governance Committee.
- Completion of a CIPFA FM Code self-assessment, a requirement under the November 2024 Directions.
- Successfully migrated the HR and Finance system (Unit4) to the cloud.
- Within the finance system, strengthened the internal controls for budget management accountability including procurement rules.
- Rolled out new budget holder reports and compliance dashboards to improve financial visibility and accountability with procurement and employee forecasting in the final testing stage.
- Submitted evidence to the external auditors against outstanding 17 of the 21 outstanding audit recommendations and continue to submit evidence to legacy internal audit recommendation to Internal Audit.
- Strengthened debt management through standardised reporting templates and development of a “single view of debt;” incorporated Propensity to Pay modelling and launched the Missing Rateable Value project.
- Continued to recruit to key finance senior roles and initiated consultation on the restructuring of Revenue and Welfare services, due to go live in September 2025.
- Maintained progress on procurement compliance, with development of a contract management toolkit, enhanced CLT reporting, and validation of the contracts register.

### **3.7.3 Considerations moving forward:**

- Delivery of the action plan relating to the CIPFA FM code.
- Embed a culture of financial sustainability and accountability across all services.
- Continue closure of the audit backlog and implementation of internal audit recommendations.
- Ensure the Reserves Strategy is aligned to MTFS recovery objectives.
- Maintain momentum on delivery of projects within the programme.

## **3.8 Support Programmes**

### **3.8.1 Improve Complaints Handling**

**3.8.2 Purpose:** To review the current complaint handling process to identify inefficiencies, gaps, and areas for improvement. To develop a standardised, customer-focused complaint handling process and ensure compliance with relevant regulations and Council policies. To improve how we manage feedback and resolve issues in a timely fashion.

### **3.8.3 Delivery in 2025:**

- Complaints Programme Board has been established focused on four themes of work: Policy & Procedure, Customer Service Model, Digital and Continuous Improvement. These work themes are developing options to CLT for a new complaints service model and suggested business cases such as a new case management system for complaint handling by the end of 2025. Review of the complaints handling structure and systems linking opportunities across services and with Slough Children First
- Completion of statutory self-assessments for the Housing Ombudsman and Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman to ensure Slough is more compliant and has allowed the council to monitor performance. This includes recently completing the annual self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman Complaint handling code and was found over 90% compliant. This is compared to last year which showed 47% compliance.
- A requirement of the self-assessments is an Annual Report for complaints handling. For 2024/25 this has been submitted to the Audit and Corporate Governance Committee in September.
- Data shows an improvement in the timescales for complaint handling despite an increase in the volume of complaints which is a national trend due to Ombudsman requirements.
- There has been a 14% increase in total complaints received in 2024–25 compared to the previous year. However, even with the increased level of complaints the council improved response times compared to the previous year.
- This is a largely due to improved internal recording and reporting of complaints and reflective of a national upward housing complaint trend due to Housing Ombudsman (HO) and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) requirements
- First Quarterly reporting of complaints submitted to CLT that provided an analysis of Stage 1 and 2 complaint volumes and their resolution times. Data used within the quarterly report provides the basis for root cause analysis of issues captured and feeds into a continual improvement approach as well as the development of the Target Operational Model.



### **3.8.4 Considerations moving forward**

**3.8.5** We need to move into a rhythm of linking complaints insight directly into service improvement planning cycles. It will be important for Members to have sight of this to feel assured that there is evidence of service improvement driven by the intel of the complaints process.

**3.8.6** As part of the engagement with residents we need to ensure that we are using their voice to compliment the complaint feedback to ensure that improvements made to service meet the expectations of residents.

### **3.9. Digital, Data and Technology (DDaT)**

**3.9.1 Purpose:** To improve the security, reliability, and usage of ICT services to enable effective business operations and to develop digital capabilities as an enabler of wider organisational transformation, supporting the future operating model.

#### **3.9.2 Delivery in 2025:**

Major achievements within the Digital & ICT Modernisation Programme have been as follows:

- Following a successful pilot, the Council have put in place a contract for 24x7 cyber security incident detection and response. This has already proved its value in response to significant targeted attacks this year.
- The Council has procured and is implementing cloud-based backup and disaster recovery, replacing outdated disk/tape arrangements. The first stage - cloud backup of Microsoft 365 – is now live, already providing greater resilience.
- Migration of applications to cloud-based software-as-a-service arrangements has continued, with the Unit 4 (Agresso) ERP system and Civica Pay systems both being migrated providing greater resilience.
- Infrastructure modernisation works this year have so far saved £250k.

With the Modernisation Programme forecast to complete this year, focus has now moved to the role that DDaT will play in enabling the Council's transformation and target operating model. Alongside strategic work (covered below), substantive progress has been made on the following proof-of-concept projects:

- **Data** – A critical need of the Council is for a data infrastructure that will enable data from various sources to be combined so that it can be analysed to inform decision making. A proof of concept of the Council's proposed data infrastructure (Microsoft Fabric) is in progress with Slough Children First

(SCF). In parallel, proof-of-concept applications of the Council's preferred analysis tool (Microsoft Power BI) are in progress with Housing and Adult Social Care.

- **Generative Artificial Intelligence** – This technology has potential to save significant effort on knowledge-based tasks, but a controlled approach of experimentation is necessary to ensure that we effectively manage its security, privacy, ethical and safety risks. Three pilots, involving two different suppliers, are in progress. One of these is focused on the drafting of Education, Health and Care Plans while the other two – in Adult Social Care and SCF – are focused on social care notetaking.

### **3.9.3 Considerations moving forward:**

Two major elements of the modernisation programme remain to be completed: the migration of the Liquid Logic social care casework system and the full migration towards the use of Microsoft 365 tools, notably SharePoint. The former involves a significant procurement which will be the subject of a forthcoming Cabinet report. The latter is not just a technical project but has significant business change implications, requiring adoption and effective use of these collaborative technologies if they are to improve day-to-day efficiency. This will require a communications and training programme, building on existing work such as the network of digital champions (Astro Allies) established last year.

DDaT is a key enabler of the Council's transformation. This will require DDaT professionals to be part of each transformation project, identifying, building the investment case for, and delivering digital aspects of end-to-end service change. It will also require the building of strategic responses to three challenges:

- **Data** – Joining up and exploiting the Council's data will require - alongside the development of data infrastructure that is in proof of concept now – strategic decisions on and investment in data-related governance, organisation and skills across the whole of the organisation.
- **Joined-up Architecture** – Addressing the legacy of fragmented systems will require us to determine a roadmap for the replacement and/or integration of system that is both value for money and deliverable, and to put in place measures to prevent future fragmentation.
- **User/Resident Experience of Digital** – As we seek to become a “digital first” organization, we need to understand and address the causes of digital exclusion (while also remaining equipped to serve those who will never use digital channels), and to make our digital services as accessible, in all senses of the term, as possible.

### **3.10. Strategic Commissioning:**

**3.10.1 Purpose** To ensure an approach to commissioning, contracting and contract management that is strong, enabling the Council to achieve quality public services that represent value for money. To understand the as-is process to commissioning across the council and Slough Children First. To embed the new to-be commissioning process across the council and SCF.

#### **3.10.2 Delivery 2025**

- Commissioning Forward Plans collated across the Council and SCF.
- Triangulation of Commissioning Forward Plans from each directorate with contracts pipeline and contracts register to identify opportunities for test-driving cross-council commissioning projects.
- Workshop undertaken to gather views on cross-council commissioning projects.
- Strategic Commissioning Board established with TOR and sub-Board to consider governance and links to Procurement Review Board.
- Business case produced for resource to test drive cross-council commissioning projects. Progressing through governance project.

#### **3.10.3 Considerations moving forward:**

We need to focus on outcomes-based commissioning and partnership models as well as strengthen provider market intelligence. Members should expect to be able to see that value for money is being achieved through a maturing strategic and cross council commissioning process.

### **3.11 Internal Audit and Risk Maturity:**

**3.11.1 Purpose** To enable risk aware decisions that support the achievement of strategic objectives through a review of the Authority's approach, functions and process risk. To have 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.

#### **3.11.2 Delivery in 2025**

- We have completed an independent review of our risk management framework and have refreshed our strategic risk register and aligned to corporate plan to ensure we are properly scanning the relevant risks to the Council's service deliver and forward planning appropriate mitigations.
- We are training senior officers on risk ownership and escalation protocols whilst implementing a new risk reporting cycle through CLT and Cabinet.
- We are developing directorate risk registers to integrate with performance framework and continuing internal audit work programme focusing on governance and financial controls.

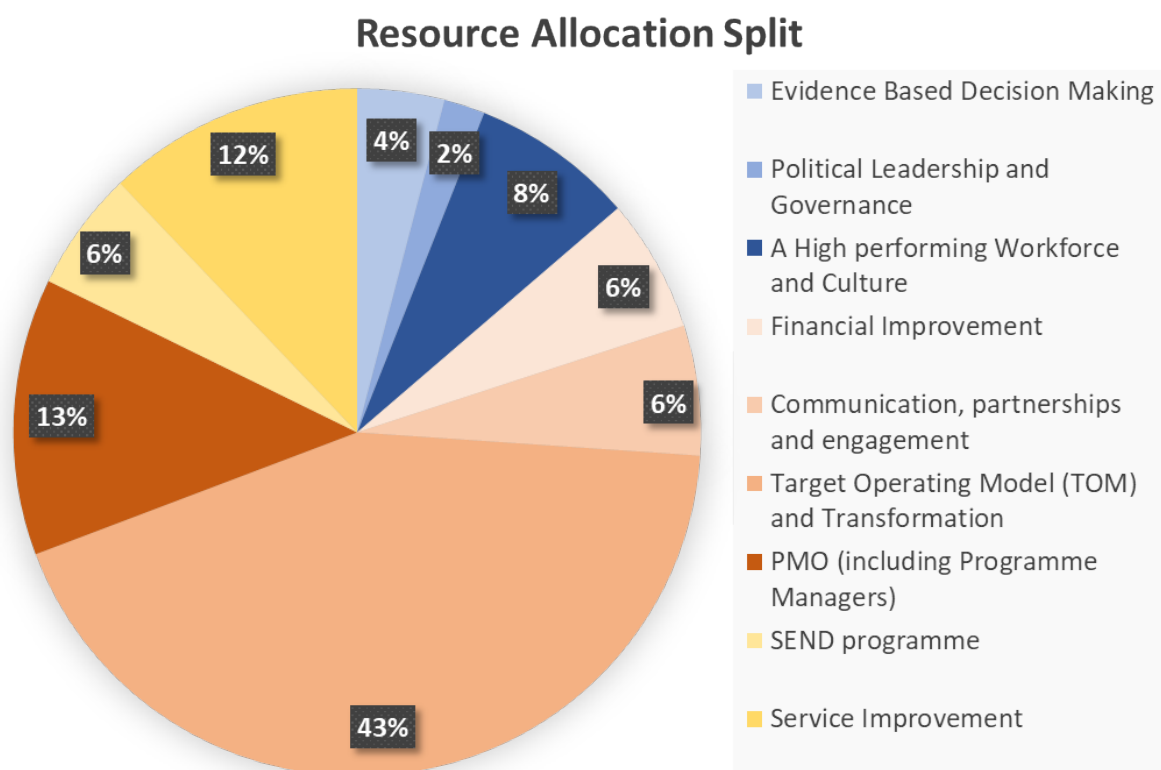
### 3.11.3 Considerations moving forward:

3.11.4 We will need to evidence that we are embedding a consistent risk culture across all tiers of the Council by demonstrating active risk management and cross-organisation discussion on appropriate mitigation.

3.11.5 Members will want to see and have chance to be involved in horizon scanning and risk anticipation, using data where possible and learning from the experience of other Councils and similar organisations.

### 3.12 Resourcing the Improvement and Recovery Plan:

Resourcing of the Improvement and Recovery Plan over the two years is shown by programme in the pie chart below.



## 4.0 Implications of the Recommendation

### 4.1. Financial implications

4.1.1 The approved budget to support the Improvement and Recovery plan is shown in the next table. This aligns to the proposed resource requirements shown earlier in this report and will be prioritised to ensure that the plan is resourced appropriately with any changes going through change control. This funding is one off in nature and does not include any resources that may be provided by existing operational capacity. The Financial Improvement programme only provides PMO resources with the programme being separately funded through the budget smoothing reserve.

	2024/25 £m	2025/26 £m	TOTAL £m
Evidence Based Decision Making	0.115	0.161	0.275
Political Leadership and Governance	0.080	0.050	0.130
A High performing Workforce and Culture	0.202	0.315	0.517
Financial Improvement	0.161	0.260	0.422
Communication, partnerships and engagement	0.016	0.396	0.411
Target Operating Model (TOM) and Transformation	0.516	2.389	2.905
PMO (including Programme Managers)	0.275	0.602	0.877
SEND programme	0.113	0.266	0.379
Service Improvement	0.300	0.515	0.815
<b>TOTAL £m</b>	<b>1.777</b>	<b>4.954</b>	<b>6.731</b>

Funding of the plan is through £2.731m of the transformation reserve and £4.000m flexible use of capital receipts, the latter being subject to qualifying criteria within the council's approved flexible use of capital receipts strategy in accordance with government's statutory guidance.

Regular monthly monitoring is in place to ensure that the plan can be met from relevant funding sources which will be reported through the quarterly reporting to Cabinet including any risks identified.

## 4.2 Legal implications

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.

#### **4.3 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.

#### **4.4 Environmental implications**

There are no direct Environmental implications from this report.

#### **4.5 Equality implications**

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.

#### **4.6 Background Papers**

None