



Department for Levelling Up,
Housing & Communities

Stephen Brown
Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service
Slough Borough Council

Max Soule
*Deputy Director, Local Government
Stewardship*

**Department for Levelling Up,
Housing and Communities**
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

By email only

16 March 2023

Dear Stephen,

SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL – COMMISSIONERS SECOND REPORT

I am writing to inform you that the Best Value Commissioners wrote to Minister Lee Rowley on 22 December 2022 with their second report on the progress of the intervention in Slough, as required by the Directions issued to the Council on 1 December 2021.

The Commissioners report sets out the significant challenges still to be tackled in Slough, and it is concerning that the pace of change remains insufficient. This is reflected in the Minister's written ministerial statement on local government and his response to Commissioners. The ongoing issues with scrutiny, an absence of ownership of the improvement journey within the Council and that the Commissioners do not consider the Council to have yet achieved the critical mass of good officers required to drive change forward, alongside the absence of long-term planning, are of note. Despite this, the diligent work of some of Slough's officers is what may make a recovery possible. A key focus for the Council in the coming months will be the development and implementation of the new operating model for the Council and the work on cultural change, which is integral to ensuring improvement. I urge you to work to ensure that these vital workstreams are progressed.

While Commissioners are clear that there have been some positive changes in the Council's financial situation with reduced borrowing costs due to the asset disposal programme, the Commissioners note that the Council's financial position remains fragile. The report details the recent successful sale of the Azko Nobel Site but notes that the Commissioners consider the original purchase of this site to represent a significant failure by the then Head of Paid Service, Section 151 and Monitoring Officer. They also note that, had the Council committed to the project, its borrowing would have risen to over £1bn, leaving no route back to financial stability.

Commissioners also note that the challenge of delivering the savings required by the Improvement Plan, which is exacerbated by the situation with Slough Children First, who may require an increase in funding.

Commissioners' comments about Slough's viability as a unitary authority are a serious reflection of the circumstances that the authority finds itself in. Ministers have been

clear that it is vital that Slough residents have an effective and functioning Council, and that work continues to make Slough a viable authority.

As you are aware, on 1 March Max Caller CBE retired as Lead Commissioner. Max has provided an invaluable contribution to the work at Slough, particularly in providing leadership and guidance around the improvement work. You will also be aware that Margaret Lee provided her resignation on 12 March. In her time in Slough Margaret was instrumental in taking key steps to tackling the major financial challenges of the Council. The Minister is confident that there is now a stronger senior leadership team in place within the Council to navigate this transitional period, alongside Gavin Jones. The work of the intervention will continue, but with it moving into its second year, Ministers will now consider what skills and experience are required with the Commissioner team to meet the challenges of the intervention and will confirm appointments in the coming weeks.

Your Authority remains under intervention for children's social care functions, under section 497(A) and (4B) of the Education Act 1996. It is important that statutory services for vulnerable children and families continue to be delivered to an acceptable standard, with the aim of achieving an Ofsted rating of 'Good'. The Department for Education's Children's Services Commissioner and officials will continue to liaise with you, through established arrangements, on improvements to children's social care functions.

Separate to DfE's intervention for children's social care functions, your Authority will remain monitored with regards to its Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND) statutory services. Following the visit from Ofsted and Care Quality Commission, your authority produced a Written Statement of Action which is now being implemented, as inspectors identified significant concerns in relation to failure to meet the duties under the Children and Families Act 2014. DfE will monitor progress and provide support and challenge through a SEND adviser, and the Children's Services Commissioner. The Children's Services Commissioner will work collaboratively with DLUHC's Best Value Commissioners to make sure that vital services continue to be delivered effectively and efficiently in line with the Authority's statutory duties. The Children's Services Commissioner will continue to support the Slough Children First company and Slough Borough Council in their important work to continue to improve children's services.

I am copying this letter to the Authority's Section 151 Officer, Monitoring Officer, and the Commissioners.

Yours Sincerely,

Max Soule
Deputy Director, Local Government Stewardship