

Recovery Board Minutes

Friday 16th January 2026

15.00 to 16.30

<p>1.</p>	<p>Minutes and actions update</p> <p>No comments were raised on the minutes of the previous Recovery Board held on 19th December 2025.</p>
<p>2.</p>	<p>Introduction: James Blythe, Deputy Director, Local Government Stewardship and Interventions, MHCLG</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity for the Council to share their reflections on their experience of the current intervention so far. <p>The Executive Mayor said that his priority has been to put residents first and to tackle the many issues Croydon faces as a borough. He had opposed commissioners being imposed on Croydon as not appropriate.</p> <p>But the Council had worked well with commissioners – officers had worked hard with commissioners and the work had been constructive and collaborative. This had brought benefits to the Council. The commissioners’ London experience has been particularly valuable. This was something that the Improvement and Assurance Panel (IAP) did not have and didn't always bring much to the table.</p> <p>The commissioners had brought a fresh pair of eyes to the transformation programme, giving an opportunity to look again and prioritise to make sure it will deliver what the Council think it will as well as to consider everyday efficiencies we need to deliver as a Local Authority.</p> <p>So from a negative starting point, we are now working positively. It had been frustrating to be told by the IAP that we need to do more, but not told what - there is a more constructive dialogue with commissioners asking have you considered this, with a proper process of pushing, challenging, bringing ideas to the table - so I think it’s working reasonably well.</p> <p>Councillor Jason Cummings (JC) said that we bear scars from the past but now have a very positive constructive relationship with the commissioners, and a real sense of shared endeavour to solve the problems that Croydon faces. Commissioners have given us specific feedback that we can respond to, which has been brilliant and really helpful in getting us towards a point in the future</p>

	<p>where as much as can be done has been done, and that such an end goal can be reached – although we are not there yet, there is much more we can do. Councillor Stuart King (SK) said that he was not going to disagree with the previous 2 speakers, but his response to commissioners coming was more muted.</p> <p>His involvement had been since 2020, firstly with the IAP and then commissioners. He had always seen this as part of Croydon continuing its improvement journey</p> <p>Broadly Croydon is going in the right direction, commissioners are helping us, and notwithstanding the outcome of the election, we will keep going in that direction.</p> <p>Ged Curran (GC) reflected on the Executive Mayor’s comments – he too would be deeply resentful of having commissioners if he were a serving CEO. He observed that there are lots of things Croydon needs to do, but the calibre of leading members across parties has helped the commissioners. There is a palpable sense throughout the chamber of a commitment to Croydon the place, its recovery and that it has a very bright future ahead. People had worked effectively with us.</p> <p>James Blythe thanked the speakers for their remarks, commenting that this had been a really positive visit. He observed that the collaborative approach stands the Council in good stead to tackle the challenges it faces, based on his observations of many interventions.</p> <p>A sense of working together to produce a clear shared plan and milestones was the critical foundation. James was looking forward to the report and hearing the Council talk publicly about the hard work it had done.</p> <p>JC commented that it was fantastic to see MHCLG here in the room with us.</p> <p>James expressed the wish to be invited back – he would be happy to come again.</p>
3.	<p>Updates on the Council’s response to the Secretary of State’s directions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion of the Council’s draft reporting for the Secretary of State, to be submitted by 20th January. <p>GC commented that commissioners had not had a chance to read the latest versions of the letter and the report, so their comments would not reflect any recent changes that had been made.</p>

The Executive Mayor said that he hoped the draft letter was reflective and self reflective, showing where we have made changes and hopefully giving confidence that we can deliver, almost treating it as an Ofsted self assessment form. He noted that this had been an iterative process. He was not expecting commissioners to agree totally with the content, although that would be nice.

JC said that the last time the Council wrote to MHCLG there was a perception that we believed we had had done everything we could - we hope to put this to bed. There is a lot that we can do, and we hope that we can make this clear.

Conrad Hall (CH) said that the latest draft had not fundamentally rewritten the whole thing – commissioners should see an evolution, which also made the report shorter and to the point, with detail taken out of the main body and moved to the appendices to focus on the points we really want to make. The latest draft also sought to amend the language to address the commissioners’ comment on optimism bias – it would be useful to know whether we have achieved that.

The draft maintains a focus on the Transformation programme, but we also want to be clear that more is needed on the BAU programme.

Work on adults and on children’s is up-played- the Adults Living Independently (ALI) programme is the most advanced of the programmes. Susmita Sen (SS) (Housing) and Stuart Collins (SC) (Children’s) will also want to talk about the work being done in their areas.

CH said that he thought the draft responded to the commissioners’ feedback – he hoped this was an easier read and a fair reflection of the Council’s progress.

He asked for commissioners’ comments to focus on substantive concerns rather than wordsmithing, A general assessment would be useful. The Council wanted to finalise this sooner rather than later.

GC said that commissioners wanted to use this meeting to share their comments.

He stressed that this was the Council’s letter. Commissioners were not expecting to see another draft, and that the Council would send this off next week.

The commissioners would then report following the Council’s submission.

Finance

Debbie Warren (DW) then provided feedback on the finance aspects of the report.

DW noted that it was only the 2nd week for CH at Croydon, and that she was grateful for the work that he had been able to do already.

She noted that the draft period 8 finance report showed an £8 million underspend, which was a real positive.

The numbers in the draft budget report will change before it is published – there is a question about how much more this can be reduced.

2026/27 will be viewed as a transition year, which gives us a period of time to work on this. She expected the Council to represent their financial plan in spring/early summer.

DW said that Croydon's financial systems are strong and good, audit is working well – the first proper audit for a number of years is well underway.

There had also been a positive change in narrative which the Mayor reflected on – this allows us to focus on solving the problem rather than arguing about the cause.

DW said that she could see the end of the Stabilisation Plan soon – this had been a distraction.

However, there were negatives – the balance of the place of transformation plans alongside other sources of savings, for example efficiency savings in Housing and Children's services, and bread and butter work to raise fees and charges was not right.

Aims to transform the operational model for financial management and BAU needed to rely on these levers, not just transformation.

Savings were on track to deliver £48 million, through the Stabilisation Plan and the underspend shown in the period 8 monitor - but £18 million of these savings were growth that hadn't materialised. The Council is building too much growth into its budget plans. This is not transparent or good financial management, and the monitoring report tells you that this is what's happened.

When you do that, you signal that you need to borrow more than you really do.

Benchmarking savings amounts against other councils is not helpful - your message should be that you are doing what this Council needs to do.

Commissioners agree on getting rid of the Stabilisation Plan.

The Council has underplayed risks to delivery in its draft report, for example the capacity needed to deliver change, the use of interims who stay for a short time.

The draft report says 'Delivery plans with supporting milestones will be developed' – DW wanted to understand what they Council has done, what is it planning to do, when is it going to do it - is it in the bag or not, what is being done to secure the outcome?

There also needed to be transparency about the savings the Council is making.

Transformation

Jackie Belton (JB) then gave feedback on the transformation aspects of the report.

JB said she supported the approach of not dwelling on the past but thought the Council should set out why the transformation programme has been delayed in their letter. There should be assurance that the Council has put plans in place to secure delivery.

The Council are required to write again in 6 months' time, so it is important to set targets to deliver on. She understood that the Corporate Management Team (CMT) were working on this, but that this has not yet been agreed.

JB also thought that the letter should also be clear about the Council's view on whether the right resources are in place to deliver transformation in HR, procurement, and digital.

The Corporate Programme Management Office had improved and the monitoring now in place was more realistic, but more work needs to be done to develop a plan the Council can be confident it can deliver on.

In areas like digital the Council faces a single point of failure with knowledge and expertise concentrated in a few individuals – when these people leave, the organisational learning is lost.

The Council also needs to strengthen its understanding of benefits realisation.

The pace of delivery has been too slow - pace has been an issue, decision making can be an issue.

The Council should think about including in its letter thinking about where it gets assurance that these things are on track.

There is optimism bias in the Council's report – project delivery can slip from month to month – it would be helpful for the Council to recognise this and set out how it could mitigate this.

JB thought that the Council were still progressing projects that won't deliver savings and are using up resources.

She had seen progress in the Council understanding where it was.

She noted that there were opportunities going forward - there had been improvement in the CPMO's monitoring of the transformation programme, but the Council also needs to monitor BAU savings. It would probably want to use 1 set of CPMO monitoring across these programmes.

There was already a recognition of the Council's current position, but there are risks to delivery that are not adequately managed. The Council should think about addressing this in their letter.

JC picked up the point JB had made about the Council progressing projects that won't make savings and wondered if he asked officers, would they know what they are – does the Council know? Annette McPartland (AM) and SS said yes.

Overview

GC noted that KPMG have changed their reporting approach over the last few weeks, which had made it much clearer how projects are progressing, and as a result officers now have better information about this.

The Executive Mayor pointed out that the commissioners challenged the Council to challenge KPMG to do what they were being paid for, so the Council had done that.

GC had thought that the Council's draft covering letter was really good, so the detail of his comments would focus on the report. The review of Best Value is the benchmark the Council will be measured by so this needs to be balanced - if you mark yourselves down unnecessarily you will be expected to do something to address areas which are not a priority for you. The Council might wish to consider whether the current assessment is right and whether to share the detail of this.

The Secretary of State had asked Croydon to write their report first – this is a compliment to Croydon, showing trust in you to write a dispassionate assessment of your position.

The tone of the Council's draft report lacks the objectivity that a report written by commissioners would have.

The Council will need to report again in 6 months. The starting point will be this report - the Council will have to report on what you have delivered. There is a danger of overoptimism.

The Council may want to articulate why you may not deliver, and GC thought the Council and Commissioners had talked about what those risks were.

GC gave the spans and layers work as an example – this is challenging and complex, and Croydon has a problem of 'followership' = people don't always do what leaders ask them to do.

GC did not doubt the Council's ambition, but he was not sure the draft report has captured the challenges that the Council faces to realising those ambitions.

He also pointed to environmental challenges outside the Council’s control, for example the result of the forthcoming election, which could make progressing the planned work more difficult.

He also flagged the use of interim staff, who had real talent, but could make it challenging to deliver real long term change.

A reader wouldn't get that assessment of risk from the draft report.

SK commented that it sounded reasonable to him not to set a benchmark that is not fully achievable.

He asked whether the commissioners and the Council had confidence that the content of the report is what MHCLG expected and wanted. Did they know what more MHCLG wanted, and whether the report would please them?

JB highlighted that James Blythe had said there was an opportunity to reset the relationship between Croydon and MHCLG on both sides.

The last things written by the Council to MHCLG were not the most positive but this was a chance to move the relationship to a new setting and to look forward with a plan in place

DW said that she regularly meets with the MHCLG finance team without Croydon’s s151 officer. This meeting will now include CH, which is a real step forward and a real step change.

JC said that the relationship with MHCLG took a nosedive – the Council wasn’t getting accurate feedback. Officers and members didn't think they knew what MHCLG were thinking, but just heard that they had done something wrong. It doesn't feel like that now.

DW said that she and the previous s151 were not on the same page. It had made it difficult to present a plan to MHCLG when they couldn’t agree. But she is now on the same page as CH which really helps. This makes things much easier – things have shifted.

JC added that lead members were also in the same place as CH.

The Executive Mayor agreed that he was very much on the same page. He felt like the Council was now having a grown up conversation with commissioners. With the Improvement and Assurance Panel (IAP), the conversation had been ‘You have got to do more’ but with a lack of clarity about

what more was expected. The Council is having a much richer conversation with commissioners now.

Collectively the Council thinks it is doing what MHCLG wants, and giving the answers they are looking for. At the end of the day, the Council wants the Commissioners to leave Croydon and go and look after some other Council.

JC said that he had a good relationship with the IAP, but that he wanted Council officers to be in the room with MHCLG, so they can have a dialogue. It is good CH is there.

GC reported that MHCLG had learnt from that, recognising that an improvement plan must be internalised and owned, otherwise it doesn't go anywhere.

CH said that commissioners had made good points about risks on resourcing, the use of interims and followership, and that he would reflect on the helpful feedback.

SK asked whether the report would be made public.

The Executive Mayor confirmed that the report would be published when there is a response from the minister.

GC said that MHCLG aimed to publish a response before the pre-election period begins in late March.

- Council roundup

GC thanked the Corporate Management Team (CMT) for the slides and invited CMT members to speak to these, covering the key points.

Finance

CH noted that pretty much all the content of the slides had been covered already.

The Council is in the process of concluding its 24/25 audit of accounts – there is an issue with the Special Educational Needs accounts.

This will feed into the annual governance statement

In the 2026 statement, there was a risk of including everything that was not quite right, rather than focusing on the priority issues.

On transformation, there was nothing here that hadn't been discussed already. Validation of the figures was needed. There had been a slightly spiky but helpful meeting with directors on Wednesday – it was good for strongly disagreeing views to be expressed.

Adults

AM reported that the Council had spent a huge amount of time challenging itself on these programmes. Officers do know where there are areas that don't deliver savings. They need to focus on big hitters. There was a need to look at Adults, Children and Housing - over the last few weeks the issues were really coming out. She noted a need to deliver quickly.

AM also reported on the results of a health check of the Adults Living Independently (ALI) programme. There had been no surprises – there had been an expected spike in spending due to pre-Christmas hospital discharges. She was not concerned but expected others to be, as this hadn't been so visible in the past.

She noted a risk from the spans and layers work – the Council would need to make sure it does not destabilise the organisation. It will reduce staff numbers but the organisation needs to keep key areas delivering.

Housing

SS reported that the lead in housing was now in place, who will focus on homelessness. They will act as the glue between directorates and will focus on care leavers.

SS also wanted to think about how to report more clearly.

She wanted to focus on getting the basics right, starting from a low base of data and skills.

Transformation work would focus on homelessness and on the coherence of the digital piece. She had heard the Commissioners' message about over optimism.

There would be workshops in January and February which would clarify milestones. This would make it clear to her team what will actually be delivered in 6 month's time.

Work on the Stabilisation plan was moving in the right direction but there was a challenge to manage voids. Croydon was doing well at managing demand considering what is happening in London at the moment, and had much improved the management of its front door.

SS also said that she had reflected on a spike in expenditure on homelessness in 2024. Housing needed to be able to be more proactive, and to get its modelling right – at the moment there was too much manual intervention.

She was also planning a workshop on digital approaches and how can Housing make best use of them. This would give the directorate a chance to hear how people have used this effectively in Croydon and other organisations.

The Housing Assurance Board had met and have brought a huge amount of rigour to the directorate’s work.

There had also been a meeting with the Regulator of Social Housing. It is not clear when they will come to inspect the service in Croydon, but this helped ensure that the directorate is looking in the right areas.

JB remarked that there was a great opportunity here for housing – Adults was using data well – there is a lot to do, but lots of opportunities. The pace needed to be lifted on this.

GC suggested that this was somewhere the commissioners could spend more time to create pace.

CH observed that there was a tricky balance to strike between addressing today’s problems and prevention - clever analytics may not be right, but the Council will want to return to this – it should not miss out on the benefits of having a long term preventative strategy

JB agreed that prevention is important-but the Council shouldn’t put all its eggs in 1 basket, e.g. prediction of long term future rent arrears.

DW suggested that SS could benefit from engaging with the London Housing Directors group – talking to her peer group would be really valuable.

AM noted that the arrival of Ruth Hutchinson as the Director of Public Health would give a new opportunity to look at the data and what it is telling us. There was an opportunity to understand the demographics and work with health to consider how people can be kept well and prevented from needing the Council’s services.

JB agreed that data is enormously helpful. The Council needed to know what its baseline is. It needed to know what data it had and how best to use it.

GC said that he was still interested in prioritisation - of course we should learn and plan for the future, but the Council need to get the basics right first.

	<p><u>Sustainable Communities, Regeneration & Economic Recovery (SCRER)</u></p> <p>Venetia Reid Baptiste (VRB) reported a focus on recruitment, getting people into posts.</p> <p>She also reported that since November, SCRER had identified further savings. £1.5 million could be saved on Business As Usual through better negotiation on contracts.</p> <p>A £2 million saving through transformation had also been identified by driving further on digital approaches. For example, the system for parking had been bought in 2010, and things have changed so much since then. She was looking at off the shelf offers. This would need to go through a business case and demonstrate that this will deliver savings and that it can be operable. SCRER service leads agreed with this approach.</p> <p><u>Children, Young People and Education (CYPE)</u></p> <p>SC reported that the local transformation management group had assessed that the Helping Families Thrive programme was on track for year 1. Ofsted would visit Precious House children’s home in the 1st week in March. The Council were also planning to open another children’s home in South Norwood as soon as possible.</p> <p>Spans and layers work was going ahead - prioritisation and sequencing are absolutely key to the success of this work.</p> <p>GC noted that Councillor Abi Brown (AB) is the lead and has been impressed by the recent work.</p>
<p>4.</p>	<p>Updates from Commissioners</p> <p>JB mentioned the appointment of a ‘sickness czar’. She cautioned that addressing staff sickness could not be done alone by HR. The Council needed to think about what the milestones might be and how resources will be used.</p> <p>VRB said there was a plan to look at staff who are absent due to sickness but whose roles are being covered by agency staff to reduce that agency cover. This will drive costs down in this financial year.</p> <p>SS said that a pilot will begin in housing. The Tzar would make a tangible difference, in particular to drive the training of officers to effectively deal with sickness absence.</p>

5.	<p>AOB and date of next meeting</p> <p>Next Recovery Board: 27th February 2026, 14:00</p>
<p>Apologies: Councillor Lynne Hale, Elaine Jackson</p>	
<p>Invitees and Circulation List:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ged Curran – Lead Commissioner (chair) • Debbie Warren – Commissioner (Finance) • Jackie Belton – Commissioner (Transformation) • Abi Brown – Commissioner (Political Adviser) • Jason Perry – Executive Mayor • Councillor Lynne Hale - Deputy Mayor • Councillor Jason Cummings -Cabinet Member for Finance • Councillor Stuart King – Leader of the Opposition • Elaine Jackson – Acting Chief Executive • Conrad Hall - Corporate Director, Resources (S151) • Venetia Reid Baptiste - Corporate Director, Sustainable Communities, Regeneration and Economic Recovery • Annette McPartland - Corporate Director, Adult Social Care & Health (DASS) • Stuart Collins - Corporate Director, Children, Young People and Education (DCS) • Susmita Sen - Corporate Director, Housing • Kevin Kewin – Local Government Association • Lindsey Lewis – Chief of Staff to the Commissioners • James Blythe – Deputy Director, Local Government Stewardship and Interventions, MHCLG 	