

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Thursday, 16th April, 2009.

Present:- Councillors Grewal (Chair), Basharat, Coad, Davis, Haines, Matloob, Munkley and Walsh (from 6.50 p.m.).

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Maclsaac, Parmar, Plimmer and Swindlehurst.

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Dodds.

PART I

82. Declarations of Interest

None were declared.

83. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 26th February, 2009 were approved as a correct record.

84. Art at the Centre - Update

The Assistant Director, Transport and Planning and the Special Projects Planner introduced Mr David Welsh and Mr Peter Mace from Enterprise, the contractors undertaking the Art at the Centre project in the High Street, who made a presentation to the Committee. The presentation outlined the background to the project setting out some of the particular challenges and constraints involved, including the need to cater for a large number of pedestrians, liaison with local retailers and the need to minimise disruption as far as possible in what was an extremely complex scheme. Particular difficulties had arisen due to the number of underground structures and other hazards encountered as the scheme progressed and there had also been difficulties around drainage and problems with the cold weather earlier in the year. However, he paid tribute to the teamwork between the contractors, the Council and other parties in overcoming the difficulties and it was anticipated that traffic would be able to return to both ends of the High Street by mid May with completion of the scheme by the end of the Spring period. The contractors had been working at the weekends and at night with a view to finishing the project as quickly as possible.

On completion of the presentation, the following issues were raised by Members:-

- Whether the seats to be included within the scheme were sufficiently vandal-resistant. Officers explained that there were three types of design, all of which met the appropriate British Standard as regards their robustness. However, their durability would be monitored on site.
- A Member queried why it had been necessary to import the trees for the scheme from Germany rather than from a British stockist. Officers

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explained that the best deal had been from a German supplier both in terms of the standard of the product and the delivery times. With regard to the shipment of the granite blocks from China, a Member commented that, given the long lead-in time to the contract, there should not have been any difficulty in ensuring that materials were delivered on time. The contractors confirmed that they planned well ahead and long lead-in times were built into the project plan. Another Member queried why it had been necessary to source the granite blocks from China. He was advised that this had been the cheapest source for the material.

- Reference was made to the current state of cleanliness of the newly installed paving and whether it would be kept clean. Officers commented that an additional bid had been included with the budget for an enhanced cleaning regime of the High Street area to ensure that the surface was kept in good condition. However, due to the ongoing works and the amount of dust created, it had not yet been possible to utilise the new cleaning machines satisfactorily but Members should notice a large difference once the scheme was completed.
- There was particular concern from Members at the number of trip accidents in the newly paved area and Members queried whether the distinction between the pavement and the roadway areas was clear enough for elderly or poorly sighted people. Officers commented that work was not yet complete and that once it was, double yellow lines would be painted along the edge of the roadway which should help in the demarcation of the pedestrian and shared services. In addition, the pavement areas largely comprised white stone whilst the roadways were predominantly black. It was accepted that there had been some problems during the construction phase but it was anticipated that the difference between the pedestrian and shared surfaces would be much clearer when the work was completed.
- A Member referred to the areas of tarmac in various parts of the High Street and whether this was temporary. He was assured that these areas were temporary, due in some instances to electrical connections still being required, but that all of the tarmac would be removed on completion of the scheme.
- Particular reference was made to a number of trips that had occurred at the eastern end of the scheme near Wilkinsons and whether there was a particular problem there. Officers commented that at both the eastern and western ends of the scheme there was a flush pavement for shared use. However, where traffic was allowed, there had to be a kerb to ensure that the pavement area was clearly defined. It was not clear why there appeared to have been more accidents at the eastern end of the High Street but the comments made earlier in the meeting with regard to the distinction between the pavements and roadways was reiterated.
- A Member asked whether the contractor had made any claims for additional costs as a result of the delays and unforeseen circumstances during the construction phase. Officers responded that they were entitled to claim for unforeseen occurrences and any such claims would be considered and quantified. He added that, at the

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present time, the total cost of the scheme was within the allocated budget but he could not yet comment on what the final cost of the scheme would be until any outstanding claims had been settled. The priority at the present time was to complete the works and the claims would be settled afterwards.

- In response to a question, Officers confirmed that the works were currently on track to be completed by the end of May. However, there were likely to be a number of snagging items which the contractors would have one year to complete. They were keen to ensure that snagging was completed during the construction phase and that any snagging that became evident thereafter was rectified as quickly as possible and well within the twelve months.
- A Member sought clarification as to whether utility companies could dig up parts of the surface to undertake works and, if so, could Officers ensure that the surface was replaced to a high standard. Members were advised that the Council had no power to prevent utility companies undertaking emergency works in the area. However, a protection period would be put in place so that no routine work could take place for two years after completion of the works. In addition, if it did prove necessary to disturb the surface to undertake emergency repairs, then the surface would need to be replaced to the Council's specification with a two year guarantee.
- A Member asked whether there had been a breakdown in communication between the contractors and local retailers, some of whom had complained that they had not been kept properly informed of the dates when particular parts of the scheme were being undertaken. The contractors commented that the work on site needed to be scheduled on a day to day basis, particularly where problems or delivery issues were encountered and it was not always possible to meet the dates previously advised to local businesses. A good example of this was during January when it had not been possible to carry out work due to the low daytime temperatures. However, regular meetings had been held with the retailers group and a newsletter published to keep them advised of progress. Whilst the contractors had tried to keep retailers fully in the picture, this had not always been entirely possible.
- Officers were asked whether all of the art works had now been installed and whether the finished product would look cleaner and brighter than it did at present. The meeting was advised that most of the art works had now been installed although there were a number of 3D structures and certain lighting components that should be installed within the next month. The art work pieces were very durable and had been designed to minimise the possibility that they could be vandalised. Once the work was completed, they would be cleaned as part of the regular schedule and should prove very attractive.
- A Member was concerned that there appeared to be periods of time when little work was taking place on site and asked whether proper monitoring of the workforce took place. The contractors commented that they did have three full time supervisory staff on site, along with

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the Borough Council's own staff but there were inevitably periods whilst deliveries were being awaited, etc. when staff were not fully occupied.

- A Member asked whether it was likely that there would be any further delay beyond the end of May. The contractor commented that, other than some of the art work pieces, most of the materials were now on site and no further delays were anticipated. However, any time that excavations took place there was a risk of that unforeseen structures would be encountered but the likelihood of this was now quite small.
- Details were sought of any compensation claims received from members of public who had suffered accidents during the construction period. Officers commented that there had been some seven claims and all of the individuals had been spoken to individually and works undertaken to rectify any problems identified. Any such claims would be dealt with through the Council's insurance arrangements in the normal way.

On completion of the questioning, the Commissioner for Neighbourhoods and Renewal was given the opportunity to comment on the scheme. He thanked the contractors and the officers for the work which had taken place in sometimes difficult circumstances and assured Members that the finished project should provide a huge boost to the town centre area. He reiterated that a rigorous cleansing regime would be introduced to ensure that the surface was maintained to a high standard.

The Chair suggested that, given the difficulties which had arisen during the construction of this project, it would be helpful for a post-implementation scrutiny of the scheme to be undertaken to review those problems and to learn appropriate lessons and this was agreed. He thanked the contractors and the Officers for their presentation and for responding to Members' questions.

Resolved –

- (a) That the current position be noted.
- (b) That a post-implementation scrutiny of the scheme be undertaken on completion to review the problems that arose during the construction period and to learn appropriate lessons.

85. Strategic Plan

The Strategic Director of Improvement and Development introduced to the Committee the Council's Strategic Plan setting out the vision for Slough over the next 20 years. The Strategic Plan replaced the former Corporate Plan and was a high level document giving an overview of the Council's strategy and priorities. The version of the Plan before Members covered a two year period up until 2011 to bring it into line with the Local Area Agreement and the associated three year planning cycle. In future, it would cover a three year period and would be updated annually. The main audience for the Plan would be Slough's residents and other stakeholders such as businesses and

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partners and it would also be useful to staff as it brought together and linked key parts of the Council's strategic activity. Although not statutory, there was an expectation from external inspectors that the Council would have such a document. The document would be presented to the Cabinet on 20th April, following which it would be published and distributed to all interested parties as well as being made available on the Council's website.

Members welcomed what was considered to be an excellent and readable document. One Member referred to the reference made to work undertaken with the Muslim community and suggested that this section be reworded to include references to the work undertaken with other communities in the town. In addition, she suggested that the terminology used in respect of drugs misuse or abuse be reviewed and the officers undertook to take these comments on board.

Resolved – That the Council's Strategic Plan be noted and welcomed.

86. Presentation - Local Strategic Partnership

The LSP Manager made a presentation to the Committee on the LSP as well as overviewing the Local Area Agreement (LAA) and Slough's Sustainable Community Strategy. The presentation also commented upon how the LSP would be judged under the new Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) regime as well as referring to key initiatives that were currently being worked upon. Reference was also made as to how the scrutiny function could become further involved in this work. The Chair also welcomed to the meeting Mr Kevin Gordon, the newly appointed Assistant Director for Transformational Change, Policy and Performance.

Whilst welcoming the presentation and the information provided, Members had some concerns about how the Council could ensure wider community engagement in the LSP process, particularly at grass roots level, with certain Members referring to the fact that the same individuals inevitably seemed to engage with whatever processes the Council put in place whilst the vast majority of residents had no knowledge or understanding of the LSP's work. Allied to this, there were calls for further engagement with elected Members in the process as well as an increased role for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, for example in the annual refresh of the LAA targets. In addition, a Member raised a particular issue of concern about access to ward specific data which he had not been able to resolve. Also of concern was how the Council proposed to engage with the many emerging communities in Slough as well as with young people who were often extremely difficult to reach. There were also a number of cross-boundary issues of common interest with adjoining authorities which should be considered if at all possible.

Officers commented that achieving wider community engagement as highlighted by Members was a particularly difficult area which they themselves struggled with at times and it was accepted that this was a key area requiring a great deal more work by officers. It was suggested that the issues raised by Members be looked at in detail and a further report submitted

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to the Committee in the autumn responding to the very valid points made. It was accepted that, at the present time, Officers utilised the networks already in place via the Slough Council for Voluntary Service or through the Slough Forum that met twice yearly. However, it was more of a challenge to reach the true "grass roots" level. Members agreed that it would be useful for such a report to be presented to the Committee.

Resolved – That the presentation be noted and that a report be presented to the Committee later in the year addressing the issues raised by Members and referred to above around wider community engagement, particularly at grass roots level, and improved involvement of elected Members in the process.

87. Shared Services

The Strategic Director of Resources updated the Committee on progress following the Cabinet's decision in December, 2008 to approve the commencement of a joint procurement with Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire County Councils to select a private sector partner to enable the creation of a Local Government Shared Service joint venture arrangement for transactional services.

The three authorities had been working in partnership to develop the vision and evaluate a range of delivery options. The original business case was currently being revised and updated to reflect both the joint position of the partners and recent developments around the potential scope of services to be provided. Initial high level briefings had been held for internal staff and Officers had met with the Trade Unions to keep them updated. Workshops had been held in late March with the wider professional advice staff to consider the potential scope for this type of work being included within shared services. The notes of these workshops were presented and Members were advised that, although there were concerns and issues that needed greater understanding, there were no areas at this point that should be fully ruled out of scope, other perhaps than Democratic Services. It was therefore being recommended that all transactional and professional advice services were included within the scope of the work being undertaken, unless during the procurement process it was proven not to be suitable to include them.

The following issues were discussed by Members:-

- A Member sought further clarification of the role of the private provider within the arrangement. The Director commented that the vision of the partners was very much to provide services that were "by local government for local government" and, whilst the exact split as between the local authorities and the private provider was still under discussion, the local authorities would have the majority stake and would therefore direct the way in which the process went forward.
- In response to the question, the Director explained that the three local authorities including Slough would control the joint arrangement and, as one of the founders, Slough would be in a position to shape it to the

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benefit of the authority and the town's residents. Other local authorities could "buy in" to the arrangement but they would not have the controlling stake that the three founding authorities enjoyed.

- A Member asked whether, given that the transactional arrangements would be common to each authority, there were adequate protections in place to ensure that data specific to one authority was not shared inappropriately with the others. The Director confirmed that this was the case and that only that information appropriate to a particular authority would be seen by it.
- Members sought assurances that planning was in place to ensure that there was an appropriate exit strategy in place for the worst case scenario. The Director commented that at the present time there were no examples of a successful smaller shared service arrangement, that it may be easier to deliver such an arrangement on a larger scale as in this case. However, he accepted that it was an enormous project and the benefit of working with two other local authority partners was that they shared the cost as well as the risks. The potential rewards for the authorities were huge both in terms of instilling best practice and achieving economies of scale. He therefore considered that the project would prove ultimately successful whilst accepting that there were risks. As regards safeguards, the governance arrangements put in place were key and it was essential that appropriate exit strategies were in place if something went wrong. However, he considered that, provided the Council's invested the right people at the right level in ensuring that the project was successful, then there was a good chance that it would be.
- A Member asked why Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire had been chosen as partners. The Director explained that they had already been working on a shared services arrangement and had been seeking other partners. The work that they were doing was of considerable interest to Slough and they had a similar financial system to this authority's. There was a considerable level of synergy in the way the three authorities wished to take the matter forward, notwithstanding the differences between three Councils.
- A Member asked whether it was likely that other similar partnerships would be established and whether it was possible to estimate what level of savings might be achieved. The Director responded that there was certainly the potential for other shared service arrangements to be established around the country but he believed that this arrangement was the largest and most advanced at present. He reminded Members that government was increasingly pushing local authorities into considering such arrangements and there was a considerable advantage in entering into a voluntary arrangement such as this where the Council had a large measure of control, rather than being forced into a less satisfactory arrangement by government at a later date. It was not yet possible to give definitive figures on savings but the current business case envisaged a two year payback period and initial savings at some £500,000 a year. However, work was still taking place in respect of what those figures might look like should the scope of the arrangement be widened. Any profit arising from the joint venture

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would go back to the partners in the proportions agreed. The Officer was more than happy to bring that further information to a future meeting of the Committee on likely costs and savings as the position became clearer.

Resolved – That the current position be noted and that the Committee be kept updated on progress with the Shared Services project.

88. Member Call-in - The Council's IT Systems

Councillor Plimmer had submitted a call-in for the Committee's consideration in the following terms:-

“As the raft of ICT problems in the Council has not abated, with network failures and slow IT performance becoming a regular occurrence, this Council needs to take a long hard look at ICT in the Council.

With intermittent IT problems, our officers' time and Council resources are wasted, making it very difficult for the Council to perform at a high level. I would specifically like to examine what we can do to resolve this issue.

I do not blame IT because I believe blaming people is a 'mug's game' and I know they must meet a number of increasingly tough challenges in an increasingly challenging fiscal environment, including work around shared services.

It has been voiced before that a small council like Slough may not have sufficient resources or economies of scale to achieve the service levels that are now required in local government. I would like some thoughts from officers on whether IT itself might be better delivered as a shared service between neighbouring councils and public bodies (including People 1st). I am very open to any thoughts they might have.

I am not suggesting necessarily that any cost savings could be made, as we need to protect officers who actually back-up core services (although potentially this might reduce management levels and reduce the need for computer rooms). I am also wary about officer's rights, including pensions and benefits, which is why I have not asked about straight outsourcing.

However, we could have dedicated teams focussed on different challenges (24 hour call-out, GIS, off-site access, et cetera). Obviously, we would need to standardize software and this might take time.

Therefore, I would like an update on the budget and staffing levels in IT, a list of each directorate's needs in IT, a list of challenges going forth and what measures are being made to meet those challenges. An update on the member's IT situation would also be welcome.

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It is time to open this debate.”

The Committee agreed that a detailed report be submitted to the June meeting of the Committee picking up all of the issues in the call-in. The Strategic Director of Resources commented that it would also be appropriate to address within that report the potential inclusion of IT services in the shared services arrangement.

Members also requested that the report deal with the issue of business continuity/back-up IT facilities and refer to any current IT difficulties and how they were being addressed in the short term. It was further agreed that the outstanding issue of IT support for Members should be addressed in the report.

Resolved – That a detailed report in the terms referred to above be presented to the next meeting of the Committee.

89. Performance and Financial Monitoring for 2008/09

The Strategic Director of Resources submitted a report highlighting the Council's overall performance and dealing with the range of matters including the Annual Audit Letter 2008; the Diversity Review; Customer Service Centre performance; Human Resources statistics; agency and consultancy spend; a range of financial indicators; and an update on the Council's lobbying strategy in respect of the population statistics.

A Member sought clarification as to whether waiting times at the Customer Service Centre had improved and was advised that a number of improvements had taken place to improve the service to customers including the introduction of a 24/7 self-service system whereby individuals, either by telephone or online, could “walk themselves” through some standard enquiries without the need to talk to a Customer Services Officer. The aim of this feature was to free up officer time to deal with more complex queries. In addition, telephone queuing systems have been changed so that if a client had to wait for longer than 30 seconds, then they were given the choice of continuing to wait or of leaving a message which would be responded to within 24 hours. He also referred to the fact that the Council had recently won an award as being in the top 50 customer service centres across the country, in both the public and the private sector, following mystery shopping by 300 customers. The Customer Service Centre had also been recognized as being the second best such local authority facility in the country.

With regard to the lobbying strategy, the Office of National Statistics (ONS) had undertaken a census pilot in Slough during March and it was understood that the findings from this were anticipated to show very poor response rates in respect of the methodology used. If this was the case, then it may prove useful for the Committee to undertake a scrutiny of the matter with a representative of the ONS being invited to the Committee to explain how they

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propose to overcome the difficulties evidenced in achieving accurate census returns for towns such as Slough and this was agreed.

Certain Members made reference to the timeliness of the information presented in the report and officers noted that the information provided related generally to the third quarter but that the final year information would be presented to the next meeting. The Director commented that there was an issue around capacity and IT capability and efforts were being made to provide the necessary statistical information more quickly than in the past.

A Member asked whether there had been a reduction in staff working at the Customer Service Centre given the enormous increase in the number of contacts being handled by it. The officers confirmed that there was a proposed reduction of 3.6 fte but that the introduction of the 24/7 service and other measures should mitigate against any reduction in service. However, the position would be closely monitored.

A Member asked whether the Council was considering making a bid to the £30m fund for innovation in service delivery and it was confirmed that this was currently being examined by officers.

In respect of the Council's investment strategy, the Director referred to a number of changes that were being made to the Council's policy due in part to the taking over of a number of banks by others, which meant that the authority now had investments in certain banks that exceeded the previously agreed levels. The situation would continue to be kept under close scrutiny.

In respect of the sickness statistics, it was noted that whilst these had improved in recent years, the figures were still above the national average.

A Member suggested and it was agreed that it would be appropriate for this report to be included at an earlier stage in the agenda in the future.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

90. Annual Report of Scrutiny 2008/09

The Scrutiny Support Officer introduced the Annual Report of Scrutiny for 2008/09 which was required by the Constitution and which gave the Committee and its Panels the opportunity to communicate the work that they had undertaken, the challenges face and improvements made. Members welcomed the report and approved it for submission to the Council.

Resolved – That the contents of the draft Annual Report of Scrutiny 2008/09 be approved for submission to the Council.

91. Forward Agenda Plan

The Committee noted its Forward Agenda Plan.

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The following changes were agreed to the Plan:-

- The inclusion of a report on commissioning of services to be included as a future item.
- The report back on Broom and Poplar Houses (Pellings issue) to be programmed for the June 2009 meeting.
- Details to be included in a future report as to how the Council is addressing the “credit crunch” on behalf of Slough residents.
- Update to be presented on the transition from CPA to CAA.

92. Vote of Thanks

The Committee passed a vote of thanks to the Chair and the officers for their work during the municipal year now ending.

93. Date of Next Meeting

The Committee requested that the next meeting programmed for 4th June, 2009 be changed in that it clashed with the date of the European elections.

Resolved – That the date of the next meeting of the Committee be amended to avoid a clash with the European Elections.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm. and closed at 10.12 pm.)