

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Thursday, 3rd September, 2009.

Present:- Councillors Mann (Chair), Coad, Cryer (until 9.35 p.m.), Davis, A S Dhaliwal (until 9.05 p.m.) and Walsh.

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillor Parmar.

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Pabbi.

PART I

22. Declarations of Interest

None were declared.

23. Minutes

The minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 2nd July, 2009 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

24. Membership of the Committee and Scrutiny Panels

The Committee was advised that since its last meeting, Councillor Cryer had been appointed in place of Councillor Basharat and Councillor Pabbi in place of Councillor Pantelic. In addition, because of the appointment of Councillor Pantelic to the Cabinet, she was no longer entitled to serve on any scrutiny bodies and the Labour Group had nominated Councillor O'Connor to the consequent vacancies on the Education and Children's Services and Health Scrutiny Panels. The Committee was requested to formally approve Councillor O'Connor's appointment to the Panel.

Resolved – That Councillor O'Connor be appointed to the Education and Children's Services and Health Scrutiny Panels in place of Councillor Pantelic.

25. Adjournment

The Chair noted that he would call a short adjournment at about 7.45 p.m. if any Muslim Members or Officers were present and wished to break their fast.

26. Performance and Financial Reporting for 2009/10

The Strategic Director of Improvement and Development and the Interim Strategic Director of Resources presented a report highlighting the Council's overall performance and focusing particularly on performance management, debt recovery, treasury management and capital and revenue monitoring. Particular attention was drawn to the first quarter report on the Council-wide 'Balanced Scorecard' which provided advice on the Council's overall performance in a number of critical service areas. Of the 60 indicators in the

Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 03.09.09

Scorecard, 21 were showing as green, 2 as amber and 4 as red with the remaining 32 having either not yet had targets set or the first quarter performance had not yet been finalised. The Strategic Director drew attention to areas of significant improvement where performance had exceeded targets and to those areas which had been flagged up as “red” and targeted action would be required to improve the situation.

The Interim Director of Resources outlined the current financial position of the authority drawing attention in particular to the various challenges facing the Council, including the level of Council Tax collection which was proving problematical at a time of recession.

Members raised the following issues of concern in the subsequent debate:-

- With regard to NI8 (Adult Participation in Sport) the Committee noted that Slough’s performance was extremely poor as against the England average and the Local Area Agreement (LAA) target and was at the bottom end of the lowest quartile nationally. Officers reported that the Slough Sport and Physical Activity Forum had developed an action plan to encourage wider participation across all age groups including a range of measures to ameliorate the situation and these actions and progress were being monitored by the Health and Wellbeing Partnership Delivery Group (PDG). Members expressed their serious concern at this situation and, whilst noting that issues such as the diversity of the population were a particular issue for Slough, felt that, given Slough’s particular health issues, a more detailed scrutiny of this area would be helpful. Officers were asked to arrange for a detailed report on the action being taken to address this issue to be submitted to the Community, Leisure & Environment Scrutiny Panel with representatives of the Health and Wellbeing PDG invited to attend as appropriate.
- Members noted an increase of 16% in the assault with less serious injury crime rate over the same period last year, although the overall severity of the violence in Slough had reduced. Details were presented of the range of measures that had been put in place to tackle this particular issue. Officers added that whilst the overall severity of violence recorded in Slough had been reducing, there was still concern that the base figure for Slough was above the national trend with the overall level of crime at a higher level than would be expected.

Members felt that the use of percentages was less helpful than actual crime figures and it was important that future reports on areas such as this gave more detail of the actual level and types of crime including for examples the levels of domestic violence in the town. Officers undertook to speak to the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) and the Thames Valley Police with a view to more detailed information being provided at future meetings.

Members referred to the ongoing problem of inadequate policing resources in Slough as compared to the position in other, densely

Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 03.09.09

populated areas and the problems that this was causing. The Chief Executive confirmed that recent figures demonstrated that the level of policing in Slough both in terms of per head of population and per crime was well below that of all of the metropolitan areas despite the fact that this town was similar in many ways to those areas. Members suggested that the matter should be raised at a senior level with the Thames Valley Police and the Chief Executive undertook to write to the Chief Constable outlining the Committee's concerns on the level of resourcing. It was also noted that the Local Area Commander would be attending the next meeting of the Committee and the Chief Executive undertook to brief him on the Committee's concerns in advance of his visit.

It was suggested that the views of the Committee on police resourcing were shared by the local force and that they were likely to welcome the support of the Committee in seeking additional police numbers or other resources for the Slough area. The view was expressed that Slough's particular problems, including the diversity and transient nature of its residents, the under-counting of its population and the "Heathrow effect" whereby the problems associated with the proximity to a large international airport including drugs, etc, had not been fully taken into account by the Thames Valley Force. For these reasons, amongst others, Slough could not be compared with other non-metropolitan areas around the country because of its particular needs.

- The Committee viewed the local indicator on staff appraisals with concern. This appeared to indicate that the number of appraisals being undertaken by managers across the authority was well below what it should be and Members requested that urgent management action be taken to ensure that appraisals were undertaken on time and the necessary paperwork passed to the Human Resources Department. Officers agreed that the current position was unacceptable and the matter would be taken up immediately. Members requested an update with detailed figures to its next meeting.
- Members again drew attention to the disappointing performance with regard to the average telephone queuing time for general enquiries to the Customer Service Centre. The introduction of the voicemail option had resulted in people holding on for longer rather than leaving a voicemail as had been hoped. Officers commented that the existing business model had not met expectations and that, whilst waiting times had reduced, they were still too high. Increases had been made in the number of staff at the Centre but the number of calls continued to grow due in large part to the current recession. The Strategic Director of Improvement and Development was leading a project reviewing how the public was dealt with and he reminded the Committee that a report on this issue was programmed for its November meeting. He hoped that an improvement in waiting times could be demonstrated by that time.

Members suggested a number of ways of improving the situation including the possibility of longer opening hours or introducing a system whereby

Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 03.09.09

telephone callers were informed how many people were before them in the queue. However, longer opening hours would have budgetary implications and the difficulty with giving information on the numbers in the queue was that it was impossible, given the very complex nature of some calls, to give callers a realistic expectation as to how long they may have to wait. However, a range of options were currently under consideration by Officers to improve the current performance.

- Further information was sought by Members on the level of Council Tax collection. The Interim Director of Resources responded that there were a number of difficulties peculiar to Slough including population “churn” both in terms of people moving in and out of the town as well as within the Borough and the current recession and levels of unemployment. This led to a huge volume of work for staff in identifying and chasing individuals liable to pay Council Tax and a large level of legal enforcement which was well above the levels required in many similar authorities. However, the Council had a legal duty to attempt to collect as much of its Council Tax as was possible. He outlined the procedures that the Council undertook in this regard and, in response to a question, stated that he did not feel that the policies in Slough were particularly different from those in other areas as regards initiating court action, etc. but that Slough had an extremely challenging climate for the collection of the tax.
- A Member referred to the Council’s current banking contract with the Co-operative bank and the proposal to extend it for a further two years which would provide sufficient flexibility and timespan to enable the Shared Services project to progress without long term commitment to a new banking contract. He asked whether the Shared Services initiative could give rise to a situation whereby the Council lost control of its own banking arrangements. The Interim Director responded that he found it extremely difficult to envisage a situation where the authority would not have its own banking arrangements.
- With regard to the current position in respect of the Heritable Icelandic Bank, a Member asked whether it would be possible to comment on the likely net loss to the Council on this investment. The Interim Director commented that it was not possible to quantify any loss at this stage but that a prudent approach was being adopted in case all of the monies were not recovered.
- Members noted the current position on the revenue budget which showed a projected overspend for 2009/10 of £1.1m, an increase of £237,000 over that reported in the previous month. This position, coupled with the possible pressures identified from emerging issues aligned to additional client activity across social care, gave some cause for concern at the likelihood of being able to deliver a balanced budget at year end. The Interim Director responded that recovery plans were in place across all directorates but acknowledged that the Council would be severely stretched to bring the budget into balance. The Chief Executive added that the Corporate Management Team was actively considering what

Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 03.09.09

action it could take at this stage in the financial year to ensure that a balanced budget was achieved.

- A Member referred to the savings identified in respect of home care and sought assurances that this would not be to the detriment of vulnerable individuals in the town. Officers responded that there was currently no evidence that any vulnerable individuals were at risk but front line managers would as ever need to be vigilant in ensuring that the needs of clients were properly met. Members reiterated that at a time of funding difficulty, it was essential that those receiving home care and similar services were not deprived of the care they needed. Reference was also made to the essential role which was already being played by the voluntary sector and the need to ensure that the Council fully engaged with them, particularly over the coming years when the financial position was likely to get worse.

Members requested that more detailed information on service levels and expenditure in respect of home care should be provided for the Health Scrutiny Panel so that it could monitor the position. In addition, the Chief Executive stated that she was already conscious of the important role played by the voluntary and community sector, particularly as far as adult social care was concerned and she undertook to speak to the Chairman of the Slough Council for Voluntary Service on the concerns expressed by the Committee. She also added that the LSP was fully aware of the current situation and that the SCVS were members of that body.

Resolved – That the report be noted and that the various actions identified by Members be taken forward by officers and reported back as appropriate.

27. **Comprehensive Area Assessment - The Audit Commission's Perspective**

Elizabeth Hale, the CAA Lead for Berkshire, and Kam Shergill of the Audit Commission attended the meeting to outline the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA), explaining that it looked at how public services worked together in an area as well as individual organisational performance, focused on local as well as national priorities and provided a robust but proportionate assessment of local services. Ms Hale outlined the process and timetable and drew attention to the challenges facing Slough and the themes within the Council's local Sustainable Community Strategy. The area assessment looked at how well local priorities expressed community needs and aspirations, how well the outcomes and improvements needed were being delivered, and what the prospects were for improvement. Whilst the area assessment was still in the process of drafting, Ms Hale gave the Committee some feedback on the initial findings, drawing attention in particular to the possibility of a "red flag" in respect of the partnership's capacity to deliver improvement on crime and fear of crime.

Members raised the following issues in the subsequent discussion:-

Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 03.09.09

- A Member sought clarification as to why consideration was currently being given to a red flag in respect of improvement on crime and the fear of crime given the comments made on an earlier agenda item concerning the particular difficulties Slough had with regard to underresourcing by the Thames Valley Police and the particular problems arising from a transient and highly diverse population. Ms Hale responded that whilst red flags were likely to be rare, one may be given where a priority area had been identified and there was insufficient evidence that it was being adequately addressed or there were significant concerns about future outcomes. It could also be given in the case where the inspectors did not have confidence that a partnership understood and had plans in place to tackle a particular issue.

Several Members expressed their extreme concern at this situation, given that, whilst Borough Councillors were democratically elected and accountable to local people, other members of the partnership were not and it was not always within the ability of the Council to influence those partners sufficiently. In this particular instance, there was a possibility of a red flag at least in part because the Thames Valley Police at a strategic level had not adequately resourced policing in the town. However, the local population would be unlikely to distinguish between the various partners and would be likely to blame the Borough Council for all poor performance in the town, whether or not it was directly responsible.

Members added that it was essential that the assessment took fully into account the very difficult circumstances in Slough including but not limited to an aging population, an increasing birth rate, a substantial under-counting of the local population which had been acknowledged at national level, the under-resourcing of the police force as compared to all other metropolitan areas in the country and issues as referred to earlier in respect of the proximity to Heathrow airport which gave rise to particular issues around drugs, etc. Members expressed the strong view that proper recognition of these issues should be taken into account in the area assessment.

Ms Hale responded that the role of the CAA was not to apportion blame to particular partners but to examine how well the partnership was delivering against its priorities. Whilst funding was recognised to be an issue, that was not the focus of the CAA, although the likelihood was that issues such as those referred to above may be mentioned in the introductory paragraphs setting the context. She added that elected Members were involved in the setting of the priorities and parameters for the LSP and Scrutiny Members also had an important role in monitoring performance and deciding how best to use the time available for scrutiny to concentrate on the issues of most concern.

She added that a red flag may be given where there was concern that a number of areas of data were poor and this would arise out of a cross-inspectorate view, not merely the view of the Audit Commission. She

Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 03.09.09

added that the latest data would be taken into account so that the final report would contain the most up to date information.

- A Member referred to the role of the elected Members and the fact that, at a time of increasingly scarce resources for local government, the Members' role would be likely to become much more limited as their aspirations may not be feasible given the financial situation. Ms Hale commented that Members would have an essential role in allocating scarce resources and it was therefore essential that a proper challenge and prioritisation role was undertaken. She added that one of the important judgements made within the CAA was to comment on value for money in what the partnership was undertaking and this would become increasingly important.
- Reference was made to the recent successful bid to the migration impact fund and the CAA would be looking at how this would be allocated. The Chief Executive commented that Slough had secured over a third of the available funding for the whole of South-East region and this should be properly recognised in the assessment.
- In response to a question about possible green flags in the assessment, whereby exceptional performance, improvement or innovation was signalled, Ms Hale referred to the Council's work in responding to the recession, skills development and the 'Prevent' agenda. She could give no assurances at this stage that green flags would be allocated but these were particularly strong areas for the partnership.
- Members again sought assurances that the assessment when published would recognise the particular difficulties of the town, not least the undercounting of its population. Ms Hale stated that the position had already been acknowledged and taken into account in some of the value for money assessments although she was not yet sure how valid it was to comment on that issue although it was likely to be acknowledged in the contextual section of the report. She reiterated that the CAA was about how the partnership operated rather than around funding issues but she acknowledged the serious concerns expressed by Members.

On completion of the questioning, the Chair thanked Ms Hale and Ms Shergill for their presentation and for their responses to Members' questions.

Resolved – That the current position be noted.

28. Involvement in the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP)

The Committee was reminded that it had requested at its meeting on 16th April, 2009 further information about broader Member involvement and the engagement of the local community in the LSP process. The Assistant Director, Transformational Change and the LSP Manager introduced a report addressing the issues and outlining a number of identified gaps and areas for improvement. The arrangements for engaging elected Members as well as

Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 03.09.09

the voluntary and community sectors were outlined and information was provided on the programme of electing and training Community Champions who represented the views of the Community Network, a body bringing together a large number of voluntary and community groups in Slough. The report concluded that the partnership had made progress in developing its engagement and involvement strategy and individual Partnership Delivery Groups had started to develop mechanisms to secure the engagement of stakeholders on a more regular basis. In addition, the LSP was working closely with the Slough Council for Voluntary Service to utilise the Community Champions resource.

Members welcomed the information provided and suggested that it would be helpful for a regular, possibly quarterly update to be provided to the Committee on the work of the LSP. In addition, it would be helpful if reports were made to the appropriate Scrutiny Panels in respect of progress against the various Local Area Agreement targets.

A Member referred to the work being done with the Muslim community under the auspices of Slough Against Violent Extremism and asked what work was being done with other communities in the Borough. She also expressed the view that, proportionally, Sikhs experienced a higher number of racist attacks than Muslims and expressed hope that this had been picked up by the LSP. The Chief Executive responded that the issue of racist attacks against Sikhs would certainly be picked up and taken up to the relevant PDG for discussion. The work under Slough Against Violent Extremism was a separate issue but the Member's comments would be taken back. Members requested that the LSP be requested to respond to the concerns expressed in respect of these issues.

Resolved – That the report be noted and that Officers report back on the work being undertaken in respect of Slough Against Violent Extremism and to counter racist attacks on the different communities in the town.

29. Scrutiny of Crime and Disorder

The Head of Drugs and Community Safety introduced a report informing the Committee about new legislative provisions relating to the scrutiny of crime and disorder and suggesting a way forward in this area of work. It was being suggested that, as Community Safety was within the portfolio of the Neighbourhoods and Renewal Scrutiny Panel, it would be the most appropriate Panel to scrutinise crime and disorder issues. The matter had been considered by the Panel at its recent meeting and it had expressed a willingness to take on this work, with two meetings each year earmarked to look at crime and disorder issues and an in-depth scrutiny of two matters.

Members discussed the current role of the Neighbourhood Action Groups (NAGs), some expressing concerns at how they had operated insofar as the inclusion of the local Councillors was concerned. It was pointed out that the NAGs had been a police initiative which had been to some extent imposed on

Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 03.09.09

the Borough but that there were now some examples of good practice and the position around the town was developing over time with local Ward Councillors now being far more welcome to attend and engage in the process. Reference was also made to the work currently being undertaken by the Strategic Director of the Green and Built Environment on community engagement with all parts of the public sector and a report would be coming forward in due course.

Members welcomed the proposals and it was -

Resolved – That the approach suggested in respect of the scrutiny of crime and disorder matters in Slough be approved.

30. 'Councillor Call for Action' - Briefing Note

The Scrutiny Support Officer submitted a report informing Members of new scrutiny provisions arising from the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. The legislation introduced the “Councillor Call for Action” which allowed Members to refer any “local government matter” for consideration by the relevant Scrutiny Committee. The thinking behind this new power was that it could be used when all other attempts at a resolution in a neighbourhood had failed. It was not designed to provide an immediate solution but offered a chance to bring an issue to a wider audience for discussion. It could include such matters as sustained poor performance at a local school; poor maintenance of a park leading to increased anti-social behaviour; or a series of complaints about refuse collection services which may demonstrate systemic failures. The focus of the CCfA was on neighbourhood or locality issues and specifically the quality of public service provision in a locality. It should represent a genuine local community concern and should be a persistent problem which the local Councillor has been unable to resolve through local action and discussion with the Cabinet or relevant services and agencies. As with the current call-in procedure, individual complaints could not be forwarded and a number of areas were specifically prohibited including planning and licensing applications and appeals and Council Tax/Housing Benefit complaints.

Given the existing call-in procedures, it was suggested that Officers in consultation with the Chair and Vice-chair of the Committee give consideration to an appropriate procedure incorporating the new provisions to sit alongside and complement existing call-in procedures. A report would be brought back to the Committee suggesting a protocol for the Councillor Call for Action.

Resolved – That the report be noted and that a further report be brought to the Committee with a suggested procedure and protocol for the “Councillor Call for Action”, following discussions between the Officers and Chair and Vice-Chair of the Committee.

Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 03.09.09

31. Forward Agenda Plan

The Committee noted its agenda plan for future meetings. A Member suggested that the current policy for dealing with incursions by travellers on Council land needed to be reviewed and this was agreed.

Reference was also made to a number of matters raised at the Scrutiny Surgeries and the Officers in consultation with the Chair and Vice-Chair would take the appropriate action to respond to them.

That the Forward Agenda Plan be noted and amended as agreed.

32. Attendance Record

Noted.

33. Date of Next Meeting - Thursday, 8th October, 2009

It was noted that a request had been received from the Vice-Chair to change the date of the next meeting programmed for Thursday, 8th October. Members expressed their willingness to amend the date, provided the Local Area Police Commander was able to attend.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 p.m. and closed at 9.50 p.m.)