

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Thursday, 25th February, 2010.

Present:- Councillors Mann (Chair), Cryer, Davis, A S Dhaliwal, Pabbi (until 7.30 pm) and Walsh (arrived at 6.40 pm).

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Coad

PART I

71. Declaration of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

72. Minutes of the Last Meeting held on 4th February, 2010

The minutes of the last meeting held on 4th February, 2010 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

73. Local Economic Assessment

Rafiq Chohan, Assistant Director for Economic Development and Inclusion, outlined a report setting out details of the Council's obligations under Part 4 of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill, which placed a duty on County Councils and Unitary Authorities to assess the economic conditions of an area. He advised that £65,000 would be provided for the area based grant which was to be used for developing the local economic assessment and conducting economic development activities.

The Panel was advised that the Government believed that local authorities should have a central role in leading economic development and regeneration and that the new local economic assessment duty would help to ensure that local authorities had a clear understanding of the conditions required for business to flourish in their area and for people to take advantage of economic opportunities. The Panel noted the core principles of a local economic assessment and that a number of broad principles should be applied to ensure maximum impact. The Government believed that economic assessments should not be constrained by local authority boundaries and for Slough the areas had been provisionally decided as Windsor and Maidenhead, South Bucks, Wickham, Spelthorne, Hillingdon and Hounslow. It was recognised that there was a lot of movement in commuting patterns within these areas and there were established links with Hounslow and Hillingdon through to Heathrow Airport.

The Panel noted that an assessment should form part of the evidence based for the sustainable community strategy and following on from this would also inform local area agreement and multi area agreement negotiations.

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The Officer advised that the main bulk of the funding available would be spent on economic development activities that were key priorities of the economy as identified and highlighted in the assessment.

In the ensuing debate a Member asked what control the Council could put on local bodies to make sure that skills were created and was advised that wherever possible the Council would try to influence this and now worked better with statutory agencies. Members also asked a number of questions about Heathrow Airport relating to the number of employees who lived in the Slough area and also how the third runway would benefit the local economy in Slough. The concern was expressed that the additional runway would have a high impact on the infrastructure and schools and other services in the area and the Officer advised that colleagues in the Green and Built Environment would make representations on behalf of the Council in this area. In terms of the Heart of Slough project, Members asked in what ways the Council could influence the local economy by ensuring that building work was carried out by local firms.

Resolved –

- (a) That the report be noted.
- (b) That within the Local Economic Assessment, the Council consult with those businesses which provide new technology and look at opportunities for up-skilling the workforce in Slough.

74. Response to Economic Downturn

Rafiq Chohan, Assistant Director for Economic Development and Inclusion, outlined a report to advise the Committee of measures taken to support residents through the credit crunch and to discuss unemployment levels within Slough's communities. The Committee were also informed of the Slough Economic Taskforce (SET), which was an internal partnership developed as a direct result of the downturn.

The Committee was advised that Slough Borough Council was quick to respond to the global economic downturn and the SET had been launched to support local residents and businesses through the economic uncertainty. Information had been made available to residents through the council's website and leaflets had been distributed to homes to provide advice on housing, benefits, debt and local employment. Advice had been given to businesses including information on debt recovery, business grants, etc. Following consultation with private, public and voluntary sectors a 10 point plan had been compiled to cover areas such as the provision of employment seminars and workshops for the unemployed and the increased support proposed for volunteering opportunities. The Officer advised that the economic development and inclusion team had partnered with Business Link to ensure that support was available to local small and medium sized businesses and a number of seminars and workshops had been arranged.

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Future seminars planned for the first quarter of the year included the subject of how to secure contracts for the 2012 Olympics.

The Committee noted that external funding had been sourced to set up support for the unemployed who had lost their jobs as a direct result of the recession. The project would provide assistance with job search, CVs and interview tips. The Officer discussed other projects that had arisen including the lone parents project and Migration Works, which was funded by the Border and Immigration Office to support newly arrived communities to integrate into Slough's community as quickly as possible.

The Officer advised that that 2,461 clients had been seen within the projects and of these 174 were known to have gained sustainable employment. Many others had gone into training or set up in business and it was recognised that without the support of these projects clients would have been more likely to remain unemployed and disillusioned.

The unemployment figure for Slough in January 2009 was 2,260 and this rose to 3,350 in November 2009. It was envisaged that unemployment could be decreasing month on month but only on a small scale. Despite the downturn it was noted that unemployment rates amongst the 16-25 year old group was amongst the lowest in the country and the November figures had shown a dramatic fall in this age range which had fallen more sharply than the rest of the South-East. Long-term unemployment was lower than the UK and the South-East as a whole which suggested that the support infrastructure provided was helping to prevent people from becoming stuck in the rut of long term unemployment.

In the ensuing discussion a Member asked whether any feedback had been received from end users. The Officer advised that testimonials had been received from people who had used the workshops and these had been very positive. It was also noted that a representative from the Government Office for the South-East (GOSE) had visited the Council recently to view what it considered to be best practice in this area. In response to a further question the Officer advised that arrangements for a Credit Union were almost up and running but this would not be an easy project as it was difficult within the current economic climate to persuade people to sponsor the scheme. In response to a question regarding which particular communities were adversely affected, the Officer advised that it had been found that white youngsters within the 16-24 year old age groups were more at risk as they tended to not go into further education as much as other groups.

A Member asked for information regarding the effect of the economic downturn on mental health problems in residents and was advised that 25% of the unemployed had been found to have mental health issues. It was thought that early support in this area could help to prevent residents becoming disillusioned.

Resolved-

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- (a) That the report be noted.
- (b) That the Committee notes with concern the percentage of new mental health cases which have arisen due to the economic downturn and recommends to Cabinet that pressure be placed on the relevant authorities to ensure an early assessment of need in these cases.
- (c) That a report on the issue of mental health cases due to the economic downturn be considered at a future meeting of the Health Scrutiny Panel.
- (d) That a report on the current position regarding Credit Unions be brought to a future meeting.

75. Improvement to Customer Service Provided at MyCouncil

Zena Miller, Head of Customer Services, outlined a report to provide an update on the progress made in improvements to Customer Service at MyCouncil and also an outline of future improvement plans.

The report set out the detail of proposed actions and outcomes in various areas together with the date of implementation and the status of the actions.

Members asked a number of questions in the ensuing discussion as follows:-

- A Member asked how much value there was in the ability for residents to use the Internet. The Officer advised that this would be of huge value and it would be useful to have an automated payment system on the website. It was thought that the likely cost of this would be approximately £60,000 and it would be linked with IT.
- A Member asked how the morale of the staff had been affected by the growth in the volume of work handled by MyCouncil and was advised that the team had only recently been awarded with the Investors in People Award which was a significant achievement.
- A Member asked for further information on the 'investigate alternative IT solution in the event for self service' and was advised that it was hoped that a self service option would be made available through an upgrade to the Seibel system as there had to-date been questions over security. It was hoped that a new version would address these issues.
- In relation to the take up of the call back option within the phone system, a Member asked why benefit callers were least likely to use this facility. The Officer advised that the complexity and nature of the calls would drive whether or not the person was willing to wait in a queue and ways were being explored in which the message within the queuing system could be more appropriate for particular customers.
- A Member noted that the 'proposed action detailed under planned upgrades on systems to introduce self service and the provision of alternative IT solutions for self service', had indicated that possible budget cuts in IT could prevent or delay this facility. The upgrade had already been deferred from 08/09 and 09/10 and the Member

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understood that there had been no cuts within the IT budget. He asked that this could be checked and the Officer advised that she hoped to have a definitive answer on this in the very near future.

- The report had stated that arrangements would be set up for the voluntary sector to see how improvements could be made in the way that the Council and the organisation worked together. A Member asked how many queries had been received through the system and the Officer advised that these were minimal; the Citizens Advice Bureau would be given priority for example but they had not attended in over a year as they were up-to-date with their queries.
- A Member asked how Slough Borough Council's Call Centre performance compared with other Boroughs and was advised that this was difficult to assess, however, for example, the London Borough of Barnet had wanted to follow the work of Slough Borough Council and considered it to be a model of excellence.

Resolved-

- a) That the report be noted.
- b) That a report on the impact of the budget on MyCouncil be brought to a future meeting of the Committee.
- c) That the Committee places on record its congratulations to Zena Miller and her team for the receipt of the Investors in People Award.

76. Performance Report

Kevin Gordon, Assistant Director, Transformational Change, outlined a report setting out the performance for Quarter 3. The report drew attention to areas of exception including areas where improvement actions were needed for performance to achieve end of year targets.

The Officer highlighted that the completion of staff appraisals remained a significant improvement challenge. The Committee noted that there had been some improvement with a completion rate of 34.1% in the year to 9th February, 2010 compared to 27.2% in the year to 31st December, 2009. In relation to MyCouncil issues, the average queuing time at MyCouncil it was noted that performance had improved significantly from 50 minutes average waiting time at the end of the financial year August 2009 to 22 minutes at Quarter 3 for the current financial year. It was also noted that more queries had been resolved directly by Customer Service Advisors at first point of contact and the average queuing time for benefits enquiries by phone, had exceeded the target time.

The Officer discussed a number of other indicators including the slight decrease in the number of adult attendances at all local leisure centres and this was attributed to the downturn in the economy. The Council's free swimming initiative launched in April 2009 had seen over 25,500 swims being taken up to December 2009 but uptake in the over 60 age group had been

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low and further marketing would address this. In relation to initial assessments for children's social care carried out within 7 working days of referral, the performance for the third quarter remained lower than the agreed target of 80% but it was thought that this target may have been too ambitious in the context of a nationally raised profile and increased awareness of children's safeguarding issues. To address this a restructure of the front and duty services had been carried out to ensure that duty workers taking new referrals and assessments had the capacity to manage work coming in through the door. The Committee noted the national indicator for achievement at key stage 4 in English and Maths, where Slough was ranked in the lower quartile nationally for this indicator and ranked 139th nationally out of 152 local authorities. The school improvement service would work closely with national strategies to provide challenge and maximise support to targeted schools.

In the ensuing discussion Members raised a number of comment/questions as follows:-

- In relation to swimming facilities, a Member pointed out that females in some ethnic groups did not wish to attend swimming in public in mixed groups. The Officer advised that he would report this back to the relevant Officer so that this could be examined further.
- A Member was concerned regarding the number of initial assessments for children's social care carried out within 7 working days of referral, and he was asked whether this was due to a shortage of staff. He was also concerned that 25.9% of cases had not been assessed within 7 days as required. The Officer advised that this could be due to the collection of information from other agencies and suggested that this subject could be scrutinised further at the Children's Scrutiny Panel.
- In relation to NI 92, narrowing the gap between the lowest achieving 20% in the early years foundation stage profile and the rest, the member was concerned that Slough was ranked 135th nationally out of 152 local authorities and asked the Officer to comment further on this. The Member was referred to the detail of the initiatives which had been implemented, including that nine schools were now involved in the communication, language and literacy development programme and there was now a parent engagement partnership. It was recognised that this was a complex area and action was required on a number of levels.
- A Member returned to the issue of national indicator 59, Initial assessments for children's social care carried out within 7 working days of referral, and expressed the concern that the data produced for the third quarter 2009 was now five months out of date. He argued that because this was a red topic these statistics should be provided on a monthly basis so that the Committee could have knowledge of the latest information. Clearly the information provided was now historic. The Officer advised that the information should be reported on a monthly basis but reminded the Committee that the last meeting was dedicated to the budget. He assured the Committee that performance

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would be considered on every scrutiny agenda and that information on the indicators would be broken down so that it could be understood.

Resolved - That the report be noted.

77. Slough Borough Council's Carbon Management Plan 2009/10

Kevin Gordon, Assistant Director, Transformational Change, outlined a report to update the Committee on the Council's Carbon Management programme.

The Committee noted that the Government's target was to reduce UK direct emissions of carbon dioxide by 34% by the year 2020 and by 80% by the year 2050. At present emissions were in the region of 560 million tonnes per annum and it was thought that 8% of this was from the public sector. The Council was one of the largest employers in Slough and its activities resulted in significant carbon emissions. The Council hoped to become climate neutral by 2020 and had signed the Nottingham declaration on climate change and was developing the climate change strategy for publication in March 2010.

The Officer discussed the Carbon Reduction Commitment (CRC) and also referred to National Indicators 185 and 186 which related to the reduction of CO₂ emissions and the percentage reduction per capita in each local authority which would be reported annually.

The Committee noted that an objective within the Council's Sustainable Community Strategy and Strategic Plan, 2009/2011, was to "enjoy a high quality environment". The Council recognised that it should take a positive lead in reducing its impact on the environment by taking measures to increase energy efficiency which would in turn help to reduce energy costs. This was important for the future given the predicted increases in energy and fuel costs which had seen a dramatic rise in recent years with energy prices increasing by well over 50% since 2004.

The Officer advised that in 2009, Slough Borough Council was selected to take part in the Carbon Trusts Local Authority Carbon Management (LACM7) Programme. A Carbon Management Plan was being developed as a result of this and its target was to reduce CO₂ emissions across its own buildings street lighting, business travel and transport fleet by 40% by April 2014. The Officer discussed the five processes within the LACM7 which included the mobilisation of the organisation, setting baseline forecasts and targets and creating the implementation plan which was the final step of the Carbon Trusts Programme and the beginning of a four year process. It was also noted that an Annual Carbon Management report would be prepared for endorsement by the Carbon Management Programme Board, the Climate Change Partnership Delivery Group of Slough Forward, the Corporate Management Team, and Elected Members. This would be endorsed at the end of each financial year, up to and including 2014.

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An Interim measure would commit the Council to achieving a 10% reduction in CO₂ emissions by December 2010. The Committee noted that the financial value at stake of the carbon management programme was £12.3m, i.e., the projected accumulated savings that could be realised over the period 2009/2014 if emissions were cut by 40%.

The Officer referred the Committee to a table showing the financial costs of the programme and sources of funding for the five year period from 2009/10 to 2013/14. It was noted that in year 2 of the plan, 2010/11, the Council intended to fund the £1,343,651 from planned maintenance or capital improvement budgets where possible. It was noted however that £951,699 of the capital needed for this particular year still had to be found and a bid was being prepared to the Council's capital and assets group to cover this anticipated shortfall in expenditure. The Committee noted that 'Salix' funding would be made use of for certain eligible projects subject to match funding being found across the council. The first tranche of £50,000 had been received from Salix finance and this would be matched funded from the Council by the end of March 2010 and committed to a number of Salix compliant capital projects. It was recognised that as part of the Council's commitment to reducing carbon emissions it would also be necessary to supplement the Council's existing capital resources with additional funding (such as that from the Salix energy efficiency loan scheme) so that the Council could fulfil its corporate priorities and commitment to reducing carbon emissions.

The Committee noted the benefits and savings of the programme over the five year period and it was highlighted that in the year of the programme 2010/11, there was an estimated annual cost saving to the Council of £915,139 if all of the projects identified in the plan were implemented. This would reduce to £52,309 by year 5 meaning that the programme board and project team would need to identify further project options from year 3 of the plan onwards in order to fully maximise both the savings and benefits of the programme.

In the ensuing debate, members raised a number of questions/comments, including the following:-

- A Member asked how much carbon emission would be saved in the Heart of Slough scheme. The Officer was advised that he was aware there had been some discussion on thermal heating within the development and clearly new buildings would be assessed within the scheme to check their carbon emissions.
- In relation to the deficit in funding during the identified three year period, a Member asked how this would be done as this was a difficult task in his opinion. The Officer advised that the administration would need to identify funds for this purpose.
- The subject of creating fuel from household waste was of particular interest to a Member and he asked whether any progress had been made within the Council in examining this source of energy. The Officer was unable to comment on this but advised that he would refer the question to the relevant Director.

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- A Member noted that schools represented 41% of the carbon emissions and asked what could be done to rectify this. He also commented that it appeared that only the Grammar Schools in the town were receiving funding for works and it appeared that other community schools were not receiving this. He asked why this was the case. The Officer advised that he was unable to respond to this particular query and would refer the question to the relevant Director.
- It was noted in relation to short and medium term projects that a lot of expenditure would be required for equipment such as mechanical equipment and a member asked whether the replacement/ maintenance costs of such equipment was taken into account in the calculations. The Officer replied that this was not the case and for example where a new boiler was fitted the costing would have been for the initial cost of the boiler. The Member argued in this case that the calculations had not been done correctly and it could be that the Council would end up paying significantly more costs to cover maintenance where needed. The Officer advised that he would take this comment back to the relevant Director.

Resolved-

- a) That the report be noted.
- b) That the Committee support the proposal that the draft Carbon Management Plan (at Appendix A) is considered by Cabinet on 8 March 2010.
- c) That the Committee Support the activities listed in Section 4 of Appendix A of the report.
- d) That the Committee places on record its concern that given the scale of the plan, there are sufficient financial resources to progress the plan and necessary actions.

78. Forward Agenda Plan

Resolved –

- a) That the Forward Agenda Plan be noted.
- b) That a report on the current position regarding Credit Unions be brought to a future meeting.
- c) That a report on the impact of the budget on MyCouncil be brought to a future meeting.

79. Attendance Record

Resolved – That the Attendance record be noted.

80. Date of the Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting on Wednesday, 7th April, 2010 was noted.

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Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.50 pm)