

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Monday, 7th October, 2013.

Present:- Councillors O'Connor (Chair), Malik, M S Mann, Minhas (from 6.38 pm), Nazir and Smith (Vice-Chair)

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Hussain and Small

PART I

27. Declaration of Interest

None.

28. Minutes of the Last Meeting held on 10th September 2013

In relation to Minute No. 22, Quarter 1 Performance and Finance Report, it was highlighted that the next Performance and Finance report in November would include more detailed information on the LD Change programme and an update on progress in addressing the projected underspend in the 2013/14 capital budget; a report on the implications of the Dilnot report would be considered in February 2014. Details regarding the measures being put in place to meet the funding gap in the Transactional Services contract, together with an explanation of the increase in the number of households in temporary accommodation had been circulated to members prior to the meeting.

Resolved – That the minutes of the last meeting held on 10th September 2013 be approved as a correct record.

29. Member Questions

A member referred to the response given at the last meeting regarding the expenditure on credit cards in 2012/13. He questioned why it was necessary for 45 individuals to hold a credit card and questioned in what circumstances the cards were used. The Director advised that the majority of the cards were held by staff in social services and were used, for example, for overnight accommodation, and emergency payments. It was highlighted that the credit limit on the cards was very low. In response to a further question the Director advised that he had used the card when it was necessary to move tenants out of homes where a fire had taken place (out of office hours). A hotel had agreed to provide rooms for the tenants once they had secured a deposit through a card payment. This was an example where the availability of the cards was important.

A further question requesting a breakdown of credit card spend by Directorate had been submitted and a response be circulated to the Committee when the data had been collated.

Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 07.10.13

30. Progress on the Thames Valley Transactional Service Centre (April 2013 - August 2013)

The Strategic Director, Customer and Community Services, introduced a report to update the Committee on the progress of the Arvato partnership for the period April to August 2013.

John Wybrant, Partnership Director for Arvato, provided an update on the continued development of the relationship between Arvato and Slough BC. He discussed the creation of new income streams, adding value through the partnership and the focus on the young and unemployed in the area of apprenticeship and employment whilst supporting sustainable businesses to deliver more jobs for Slough residents. The Committee noted the progress of the first apprenticeship scheme which had recently completed its first year of operation and that a second scheme had commenced in September. It was highlighted that individuals had been given placements in Arvato departments.

Mr Wybrant updated Members on several areas of progress during the reporting period which included the development of a robust governance framework, regular customer liaison meetings between ICT, Housing, Strategic HR and Customer Services, and the introduction of a performance management quality assurance system. The latter had enabled Arvato to set and monitor performance targets whilst enabling supervisors to give weekly feedback to staff. This had achieved a significant reduction in the days taken to process benefit claims compared with the previous year and the change of circumstance forms now took 11 days to process instead of 24. Mr Wybrant advised that accuracy levels had increased from 82% to 97%.

The Governance Framework for the partnership was now established well and included informal client meetings, operational board meetings, quarterly strategic board meetings and an annual review meeting, the first of which took place in July 2013. The Annual Service Plan would set out the activities and objectives of the year but this had been placed on hold whilst phase 2 was implemented. The plan involved the take on of Customer Services and ICT with effect from 1st October 2013 but this had been delayed. The Committee noted the detail of key performance indicators and that the service improvement plan had been reviewed to reflect the council's changing priorities. It was also noted that the lease for Airways House would end in December 2013 and Arvato would move into new premises within the Borough. The premises would have the capacity to accommodate current staff and allow for future expansion to create new jobs in the Borough. The Arvato partnership would continue to focus on the development of a new successful Thames Valley Transactional Service Centre which would maximise income, improve performance and the use of resources, whilst providing efficiencies and improvements to the Council.

In the ensuing debate, members raised a number of questions including:

Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 07.10.13

- There was evidence that the better training and processes introduced by Arvato had significantly improved performance. Would this training be applied elsewhere across the Council to achieve a similar outcome.? The Director advised that training delivered for Arvato was of a specialist nature that was relevant to Revenues and Benefits casework. It would not therefore be suitable for other Council service areas.
- Had staff appraisals been introduced in Arvato? It was confirmed that there had been a significant increase in the number of appraisals taking place and personal plans had been created.
- Of the 100 staff members who had been Tupe'd across to Arvato, how many remained as part of the workforce? Mr Wybrant estimated that in excess of 90% of the staff had remained with Arvato and the additional staff who were brought in on a short term basis to help after the initial transfer had returned to their own Arvato work areas elsewhere.
- In response to a further question relating to performance, Mr Wybrant advised that Council tax collection had increased by approximately 0.2% in the year. There had also been a marked increase in enforcement action to recover payments for Council Tax (42%) and Business Rates (35% increase in summons). The recovery of debt on benefits and council tax were interlinked and expertise had been brought in to develop these areas. It was also acknowledged that current difficult economic circumstances contributed to difficulties in collecting the tax.
- In terms of outstanding debts at the end of August, the figure was £5.72m and £2.3m of this was overdue. Mr Wybrant explained that the majority of the £2.3m debt was raised by Wellbeing and included outstanding monies due from the PCT and the CCG. A significant amount of this would be received in the current month.
- A member placed on record his concern that major costs had not been factored in to the contract costs with Arvato. He assumed that Arvato would not want to see the Council "short changed" and asked how this issue had not been identified at an earlier stage. Mr Wybrant advised that Arvato had offered the Council a guaranteed saving and would continue to deliver on that model. He advised that he had not been privy to the internal accounting processes and it was important that the partnership with the Council remained flexible.
- How many Arvato staff members worked at home and would the new offices be able to accommodate all staff members including current homeworkers? It was confirmed that there would be sufficient capacity for existing and additional staff members. It was thought that homeworking was on occasion a beneficial tool to retain qualified staff. Only a handful of staff worked at home permanently.
- Was Arvato confident that the governance in place was sufficiently robust? The Director advised that processes were scrutinised by Auditors, Councillors and Officers. It was confirmed that the future 10 year partnership would be robustly scrutinised and monitored frequently.
- Had residents been surveyed to give feedback on the service that Arvato was providing? This had not been done to-date but would be considered in future with a view to establishing confirmation of customer satisfaction.

Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 07.10.13

Mr Wybrant confirmed that a report would be submitted to the Committee at six monthly intervals to update members on progress.

The Committee thanked Mr Wybrant for his comprehensive update.

Resolved –

- (a) That the progress made during the reported period be noted.
- (b) That a further update report be presented to the Committee at six monthly intervals.

31. Progress Update on Slough Regeneration Partnership (LABV)

The Strategic Director, Regeneration, Housing and Resources, introduced a report to update the Committee on the progress made within the Slough Regeneration Partnership (SRP) since its creation in March 2013. It was highlighted that following the Cabinet decision in September 2012 to create the Local Asset Backed Vehicle (LABV) it had subsequently become known as the 'SRP'. The Committee noted that a number of specific issues had been delegated to the Chief Executive and LABV Development Group and these included the initial adoption of the partnership business plan, the agreement of site development plans for the Curve, the agreement of SDPs for Wexham Nursery and the Ledgers Road sites and the agreement of a scheme of delegation for the LABV with some key matters reserved for Cabinet. It was highlighted that due to a change of personnel within SBC and Morgan Sindall, and the complexity of the legal documentation, progress had been slow in the early months. Working arrangements had now become more familiar, and there was greater clarity regarding decision making. The Director discussed governance arrangements which were conducted through a Board structure and it was noted that a partnership business plan would be considered by Cabinet at its meeting in November, together with the disposal of land to the SRP after planning permission had been granted and the land value had been established.

The Committee noted that substantial progress had been made with the development of the Curve and the project was on target to be completed in Spring 2015 as planned.

The Committee was reminded that the LABV was a new venture for the Council and it would be beneficial to take one scheme forward first and learn from the experience. In terms of Board membership it was highlighted that the Assistant Director, Finance and Audit was currently a Board member but would be substituted as there could be perceived conflicts with his Section 51 Officer responsibilities. The Director advised that expertise had been drawn from a member of staff at Bournemouth Council who had significant experience in the LABV progress and this had proven to be extremely beneficial to Slough BC in the development stages of the process.

Members raised a number of questions in the ensuing debate including:

Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 07.10.13

- What was the key risk identified? The Director considered that this was around land values. Legal agreements had ensured that the Council's assets had been protected and it was important that valuations were carried out at the point of disposal. It was clear that the Council would realise more profit than if it had not entered into the LABV arrangements.
- Would a Board constituted by six members be too small and was it councillor led or officer led? The Officer discussed the membership of the Board and the role of Members.
- A member asked for information regarding room provision within the Curve and whether there would be a council chamber? The Director advised that the Assistant Director for Community and Skills was responsible for the delivery of the project on the client site. She understood that there would be a performance space within the building and this would also double up for use as council chamber. The project was at an advanced stage in terms of layout. It was agreed that a briefing be arranged for members to view the floor plans and layout of the building.

Resolved -

- (a) That current progress of the Slough Regeneration Partnership be noted.
- (b) That the Assistant Director for Community and Skills be requested to arrange a Briefing Session for all Members to provide an update and layout details for the Curve.

32. Forward Work Programme

The Head of Democratic Services had asked for it to be noted that a call-in had been received relating to the Langley Road Scheme which had been considered by the Committee, and subsequently Cabinet at its meeting in June. It had been decided that the call-in fell within the six month rule and it had therefore been rejected.

The Chair advised that the item on Obesity had been deferred so that GPs could attend the meeting and address members.

Resolved - That the work programme, as amended, be noted.

33. Attendance Record

Resolved - That the attendance record be noted.

34. Date of Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 12th November, 2013. Members were advised that arrangements had been made to hold the next meeting at the Britwell Hub in Wentworth Avenue, Britwell. It was also hoped that a venue would be identified to hold a future meeting in the East of the Borough.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 7.45 pm)