

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Thursday, 11th September, 2014.

Present:- Councillors Nazir (Chair), Smith (Vice-Chair), Bal, Chahal, N Holledge, Malik, Rana and Usmani

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Pantelic

PART I

15. Declaration of Interest

Councillor Bal declared a personal interest in that a family member was employed by Slough Borough Council.

16. Minutes of the Last Meeting held on 9 July 2014

Resolved – That the minutes of the last meeting held on 9th July, 2014 be approved as a correct record.

17. Member Questions

None were received.

18. Transactional Services Update - April 2014 to August 2014

Committee Members were provided with an update on the progress of the Thames Valley Transactional Service Centre partnership with arvato for the period April 2014 to August 2014. In particular:

- arvato had undertaken significant organisational changes over the last nine months to better allow the pursuance of additional business within the Thames Valley region.
- arvato were expecting to retain 50% of the recently ended 2014 NVQ's in full time roles and were in the process of bringing on a further 10 NVQ roles, as per the partnership agreement with the Council.
- arvato continued to actively support Slough Aspire in an effort to encourage business growth
- Two Neighbourhood Benefit Advisors had been appointed, to ensure the maximisation of benefit take up across the borough by providing a more local accessible and tailored service.
- Details regarding the number of apprentices employed by arvato to date were outlined and Members informed that at the end of year three, arvato will have employed 20 apprentices in total, thereby exceeding their contractual commitments to date.
- Key Performance reporting for services within the scope of the contract were highlighted. In particular it was noted that:

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- i) the year end activities were successfully completed, including updating all benefit claims, notifying customers, applying the new Council Tax and Business rates charges and dispatching bills in time for a 1st April instalment.
- ii) Joint working with the Council's procurement and finance team to implement the Council's NO PO NO PAY policy to ensure that invoices were processed and paid at a much speedier and efficient rate.
- iii) Payroll support for all staff working on the elections completed successfully.
- iv) Legislative changes relating to auto enrolment of staff onto the Council's pension scheme.
- v) Implementation of the new IV Log Queue management system for the front of house.
- vi) Paperless direct debit for council tax and business rates for telephone customers had now gone live for the back office service.
- vii) ICT support for the Council's election process in terms of new equipment.

Members were reminded that the transfer of ICT services to arvato were completed in December 2013 and that the Programme Management Team were currently working to ascertain a baseline position of all service improvements that were currently within the scope of the partnership and develop a Service Improvement Plan. It was noted that arvato had employed two new project managers to assist in providing project management expertise for the programme of activity.

It was brought to Members' attention that given the current significant financial pressures facing the Council, collection of council tax remained a high priority. To ensure that the Council's priorities remained at the heart of the partnership, an agreement had been made with arvato to increase recovery action for non paying residents. This had resulted in an increase in court summons being issued in order to secure the debt with the overarching aim of increasing the in year overall collection rate. A Member requested details relating to statistics for collection rate targets for residential and business council tax arrears and the timeframe and process relating to recovery of council tax. It was agreed that the information would be circulated to Committee Members.

Committee Members requested that details regarding financial savings that had been realised to date to be provided. It was reported that a number of projects were currently being implemented, including a reduction in the number of IT servers, which when completed would result in realisation of savings to the Council.

Concern was expressed as to whether the Customer Service Centre (CSC) was able to respond and deal with enquiries in an efficient and timely manner, given that the rate for calls that were answered was 70%. It was explained that whilst significant improvements had been made, with calls answered for

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the same period in the previous year at 61%, a number of changes had been made in work practices to improve the service further. An annual season plan had been put together to anticipate peaks and troughs at the CSC including council tax bills going out and school admission queries.

Resolved: That the update report be noted.

19. Financial and Performance Report - Quarter 1 2014/2015

The Assistant Director, Finance and Audit, summarised the latest financial information for the 2014/15 financial year. The Council was forecasting an overspend of £0.98m and without remedial action this would have a significant impact on the Council's General Reserves. The main service areas showing variation from budget was Adult Social care and Health Partnerships and this was due in particular to an overspend on Mental Health Services of £395k.

A summary of the Council's six gold projects as at June 2014 indicated that the overall status of five had been assessed as amber and one as red. Further details were provided regarding the projects, including the Safeguarding improvement Plan which had been assessed as red and Members were informed that the projects were monitored on a monthly basis.

Further details were requested regarding the investment of £50k in the Municipal Bonds Agency. The Assistant Director explained that this expenditure would be capital in nature and whilst this was a relatively modest amount of money for the Council in terms of investment, the benefit to the Council would mean lower capital financing rates available to the Council when it next refinanced existing debt or used new debt.

Members expressed concern with regard to the increase in the staff sickness rate which had increased from 8.3 to 8.6 days lost per Full Time Equivalent (FTE) member of staff. It was noted that whilst there had been a slight increase in the figures, the rate had significantly improved from 2012/13 where the average staff sickness rate was 11.6 days per FTE. Committee Members were informed that managers were encouraged to focus on areas of high sickness and that the statistics were subject to regular monitoring.

In response to writing off debt, and in particular over £96k in relation to Housing Benefits, Members were informed that work was on-going to reduce write offs as much as possible.

Referring to the number of primary schools in special measures or with notice to improve, a Member requested further details regarding the procedures in place to assist schools in addressing concerns raised and implementing improvement activity. The Assistant Director stated that this information would be circulated to Committee Members.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

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20. Car Parking Policy in Slough Town Centre

At the Planning Committee meeting in July 2014, Members had requested that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider a report on the Council's current parking policy for residential development in the town centre. The referral was prompted by concerns about the number of proposals for the development of flats or change of use of offices to flats in the town centre and the fact that there currently was no minimum requirement for car parking in residential schemes in the centre.

Members agreed that a Task and Finish Group be established to consider and review the issue in further detail. The Scrutiny Officer outlined the process for setting up the Task and Finish Group, explaining that the terms of reference for the Group would need to be agreed by the Committee; following which a number of meetings would be held, including site visits and consultation with local residents. It was anticipated that the final report of the Group would be reported to the Committee in 6- 8 months time. Members were requested to submit their nominations to serve on the Task and Finish Group by 19th September 2014.

It was brought to the Committee's attention that the Council was currently revising its Parking Strategy and that the Task and Finish Group would be included as a consultee as part of the public consultation process.

Resolved – That a Task and Finish Group be established to review the issue.

21. Forward Work Programme

Details of topics for forthcoming meetings were outlined. Members requested that a working group be established to examine Child Sexual Exploitation issues and the Council's response to addressing the issue.

Resolved – a) That the Forward Work Programme be noted.

b) That the possibility of establishing a Working Group re Child Sexual Exploitation be explored.

22. Attendance Record

Resolved – That details of Members attendance be noted.

23. Date of Next Meeting - 11 November 2014

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 11th November, 2014.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.23 pm)