

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Tuesday, 11th November, 2014.

Present:- Councillors Nazir (Chair), Smith (Vice-Chair), Bal (until 8pm), Chahal, N Holledge, Malik and Rana

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Usmani

PART I

24. Declaration of Interest

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

25. Minutes of the Last Meeting held on 11th September 2014

Resolved – That the minutes of the last meeting held on 11th September, 2014 be approved as a correct record.

26. Member Questions

None were received.

27. Performance and Finance Report: Quarter 2

The Assistant Director, Finance and Audit, outlined details of the latest forecast financial information for 2014/15 financial year. Although the Council was forecast to overspend by £0.76 million this was a much better position in comparison to the previous financial report where a potential overspend of £1.55 million had been reported. The main area showing an overspend related to the children and families service area with a forecast overspend of £0.65 million.

Key areas of concern on the Council's balanced scorecard were highlighted. The following indicators were given a red status as they were more than 5% adrift of their currently defined target values:

- *Average staff sickness rate (days lost per FTE).* Year to date sickness rate of 8.9 days was above the current target of 6.5 days. Managers and Staff were encouraged to use the overall Balanced Scorecard diagnostically to focus on areas of high sickness. Members requested further details regarding sickness levels and specifically a breakdown of figures by directorate and categories of sickness be provided. It was agreed that this information would be included in the Quarter 3 Financial and Performance report.
- *Percentage of single assessments completed and authorised within 45 working days.* Although there was marked improvement in compliance with these timescales (85% in July), performance in the past two

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months had fallen below this level. The national target for this measure was 100%.

- *Number (and %) of Adult Safeguarding Alerts that led to a strategy meeting per month.* For the whole of the 2014/15 period this indicator was above the target tolerance. Performance had been flagged to the safeguarding team and data accuracy investigations were underway.

In summarising the six gold projects, Members were advised that five had been assessed as Amber and one as Red. Responding to concerns regarding the red status of the Safeguarding Improvement Plan, Members were advised that various developments were on going and although there were clear indications of improvements, significant further work was required prior to a change in status to amber.

A Member commented that figures relating to homelessness and unemployment had risen. It was explained that a 60% increase in homeless figures and welfare benefit changes had led to financial pressures and that the Housing Team were working to mitigate these factors.

Responding to a query regarding the Council's capital projects, it was noted that the Council had spent 22% of its available 2014/15 capital budget in the first half of the year. Any capital overspend would be reported and the reasons for the overspend outlined. An annual review of the capital programme was carried out adjusted accordingly should there have been any overspends.

The Assistant Director informed the Committee that there had been a significant increase in business rates within the Borough which had had a positive impact on the Council's financial position. It was explained that although the collection rate was slightly lower when compared to 2013/14, this was due to a change in legislation which allowed customers to pay over 12 instalments as opposed to 10 instalments.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

28. Treasury Management Annual Report

The Assistant Director, Finance & Audit introduced a report which summarised treasury activity in 2013-14 and the first part of 2014-15. The report detailed the position in relation to the Council's borrowings and investment activity.

Members noted that external debt had been reduced during 2013/14 and investment income of £0.542m had been achieved, with a rate of return of 0.59%. The Treasury Management Strategy 2014/15 adopted by Council in February 2014 increased diversity in the portfolio, whilst continuing to prioritise security and liquidity over yield.

A Member queried the decision to change the Council's banking from the Co-Operative Bank to Lloyds Bank. It was explained that Moody's had

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downgraded the long term rating of Co-Op bank from Caa1 to Caa2, reflecting the agency's view that the ongoing deleveraging process at the Co-Op would lead to a smaller and less systematically important institution.

Members discussed the approach to debt repayment and the range of strategies that local authorities were taking in relation to treasury management. Members were informed that the remaining balance due from its previous investment in Icelandic Banks had been refunded.

Responding to why investments had been made with Newcastle City Council and Northumberland County Council, it was explained that in August 2014 the Council invested £5m each with the local authorities for a period of three years at rates of 1.40% and 1.5% respectively. These were seen as favourable rates for the credit risk the Council was taking on. It was also brought to Members attention that the Council was investigating the possibility of establishing a subsidiary housing company, to increase revenue income and that a report would be taken to Cabinet regarding this matter in the near future.

Resolved – That the Treasury Management activities for 2013-14 and the beginning of 2014-15, as set out in the body of the report, be noted.

29. Estate Services: Procurement & Commissioning of Services - Verbal Update

The Assistant Director, Housing and Environment, updated the Committee regarding the commissioning of services to tenants and leaseholders. Members were reminded that the previous contract with Interserve was due to expire in 15 months and that this presented an ideal opportunity to shape the services for the future.

Members were informed that a recent Customer Satisfaction Survey had identified that the majority of service users wanted to be involved in setting the framework for the scope of future services. It was noted that a number of focus groups had been established to involve tenants in identifying and suggesting improvements for inclusion in any future contract.

Members questioned the Assistant Director as to what the length of the contract was anticipated to be and what changes would be made with regard to ensuring that smaller businesses within the Slough area were given trade. It was explained that officers were in the process of setting up a database of local businesses and investigating the possibility of them receiving similar rates from suppliers as those given to major contractors. It was envisaged that the contract would be for a period between five to seven years. The timetable for the contract being re-tendered was outlined and Members informed that the new contract would be implemented from April 2016.

Resolved – That the update be noted.

(Councillor Bal left the meeting)

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30. Town Centre Car Parking Task and Finish Group

Members were reminded that at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting in September 2014, a Task and Finish Group be established to discuss and examine the need for a more defined policy on town centre car parking. The Scrutiny Officer reported that the Task and Finish Group had met in October 2014 and formulated the Terms of Reference within which the review would be carried out. It was noted that membership of the group included Councillors Bal, Mellor, Nazir, Plenty and Strutton and that the first meeting of the Group had been scheduled for 9th December 2014. It was anticipated that the findings and recommendations of the Group would be reported to the Committee in March 2015.

Resolved – That the Terms of Reference for the Town Centre Car Parking Task and Finish Group, as set out in the report, be agreed.

31. Forward Work Programme

Details of the Committee's Work Programme for the municipal year 2014/15 were outlined.

A number of Members expressed concern in relation to developments regarding the establishment of the Children's Trust and running of the service in the interim period. It was agreed that a report detailing the latest position with regard to Children's Services be submitted to the January meeting of the Committee and that Members be invited to a meeting of the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Panel when the matter was being considered.

Resolved -

- (a) That details of the Work Programme 2014/15 be noted.
- (b) That an update on the Children's Trust be provided at the January 2015 meeting.
- (c) That Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members be invited to a meeting of the Education and Children's Services Panel when the Children's Trust is discussed.

32. Attendance Record

Resolved – That details of the Members Attendance record be noted.

33. Date of Next Meeting - 13 January 2015

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 13th January 2015.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.25 pm)