

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Thursday, 3rd March, 2016.

Present:- Councillors Nazir (Chair), Strutton (Vice-Chair), Ajaib (from 6.47pm), Bains, Bal, N Holledge, Malik and Rana

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Usmani

PART I

65. Declaration of Interest

Councillor Bal declared that his daughter worked at Slough Borough Council.

Agenda Item 5, Slough Urban Renewal Update: Councillor Nazir declared that he was a Council appointed Director on the Slough Urban Renewal Board. Although Councillor Nazir remained in the meeting during consideration of this item, Vice-Chair Councillor Strutton chaired the meeting for this agenda item.

66. Minutes of the Last Meeting held on 4th February 2016

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 4th February 2016 be approved as a correct record.

67. Member Questions

None received.

68. Universal Credit - Implications for Local Residents

The Committee were provided with an update regarding the implementation of Universal Credit and any potential implications for local residents. Members were reminded that the aim of universal credit was to simplify a complex system of benefits by bringing them together in a single system for both in work benefits and out of work benefits for all working age applicants.

Universal Credit is seen by the government as a key part of a package of welfare reforms supporting a more dynamic and flexible labour market by removing barriers to work allowing individuals to get back into and progress in work.

One of the overarching aims stated by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) is making work pay and they are doing this via Universal Credit by providing:

- more help for low income working families
- helping customers keep more of what they earn
- improving incentives to increase hours of work
- simplified system which will make moving to work feel less 'risky'

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Universal Credit was introduced in April 2013 in a limited number of Local Authorities and is gradually being rolled out across the country; Slough's implementation went live in September 2015. It encompasses all new benefit claims for working age single people and couples without children. The intention is that Universal Credit will be rolled out further between now and 2021. The next phase will be for all new claims from all working age benefit recipients to be made for Universal Credit by July 2018. Although an exact date for Slough to go 'live' was unknown at present, following recent correspondence with the DWP it was anticipated that it would be after December 2016.

It was explained that if an individual made a claim for Universal Credit and had rent costs either to a private landlord or to the Council, their rent costs would be calculated and paid within their Universal Credit. Similarly, if a customer made a claim for Universal Credit and they also paid Council Tax they were directed to the Slough Borough Council web site and requested to make a separate claim for Council Tax Support.

Members were informed that there were no formal statistics for Universal Credit claims in Slough as Universal Credit was a national benefit and only national figures were published. However, officers had maintained records of the contacts made regarding Universal Credit and the issues raised. Between 28 September 2015 and 12th February 2016, there had been 70 individual contacts regarding Universal Credit claims, this could be any forms of contact in relation to their claim. It was therefore assumed that at least 70 people had claimed Universal Credit in Slough. There were 12 council tenants and 11 private tenants who were currently in receipt of universal credit. On the basis that there were 23 claims known to the Council for help with rent payments, it was assumed that there would be 23 claims for Council Tax Support. At this stage however there were only 6 council tax claims. It was noted that this may be because the customers are living in houses in multiple occupation (HMO) but could also be because they are unaware that a separate claim has to be made. The Council, in partnership with arvato, was in the process of contacting these customers to see if they wanted to claim Council Tax Support. Without a valid claim for council tax support it was unlikely that they would be able to pay their council tax, which would adversely impact the Council's council tax collection rates.

Committee Members queried what support was offered to individuals to assist them both in claiming Universal Credit and managing their money better; given that payments were being made monthly in arrears. It was explained that the DWP had introduced a Personal Budgeting Support (PBS) service, providing customers with advice and support in managing their finances. It was noted that to date Slough had not received any referrals for PBS from the DWP. This was a similar situation for many other Council's nationally who are live on Universal Credit. It was brought to Members attention that the issue had been raised with the liaison officer in the DWP, who was actively trying to ensure that their staff made referrals. In addition a nationwide initiative had commenced to remind all DWP advisors to make referrals for PBS.

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Resolved – That details of the report be noted.

(Vice Chair, Councillor Strutton, in the Chair during consideration of the following item)

69. Slough Urban Renewal Update

The Committee considered details of the report which provided an update on the Slough Urban Renewal projects. The Strategic Director of Customer and Community Services reminded Members that Slough Regeneration Partnership (“SRP”) was established in 2013 and is a joint venture Limited Liability Partnership between the Council and Morgan Sindall Investments Limited (“MSIL”). Following a typical Local Asset Backed Vehicle (“LABV”) approach, the Council invests primarily through its land assets and MSIL invests primarily through finance and/or provision of services. The company was rebranded in 2015 and now traded under the name of Slough Urban Renewal (“SUR”).

SUR has developed into a key enabler of the Council’s regenerative and commercial policy. The company is building both council infrastructure, such as the Curve building, as well as major housing and commercial schemes across the borough.

Details of the community projects were highlighted. Although construction of the Curve was well underway, some unanticipated site issues meant a delay in the opening until summer 2016. Upon completion, the Curve would include a new library, cafe, museum, performance venue, learning rooms and computer suite.

Members were informed that the Arbour Park project had evolved over several years as a way to maximise the use of the vacant site created by the relocation of Arbour Vale Special School in 2007. The Arbour Park development strategy comprised of three SBC-led projects that were being built by SUR in tandem with the new Lynch Hill Free School. These were:

- The first phase of a new Community Sports Facility with an anticipated completion date by August 2016 and the entire facility completed by spring 2017.
- A 4 court sports hall, MUGA and some internal reconfiguration for St Joseph’s Catholic High School, and
- The remodelling of Orchard Youth and Community Centre to facilitate the relocation of the Creative Academy from the West Wing to be complete in March 2016.

The Committee were also provided with an update regarding commercial projects. The first SUR house building project went on site at Ledgers Road (marketed as ‘Milestone’ and named after the listed milestone on Bath Road) in August 2015 and would provide 50 homes for sale and 23 homes for rent. It was anticipated that the 23 social rented units will be handed over to the Council by November 2016 and the whole site completed by January 2017.

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Marketing of open market homes would be targeted at local and first time buyers (rather than investment purchasers) and the site had also been registered for Help to Buy.

Planning permission was granted in February 2015 (subject to completion of a s106 agreement) for 104 houses on the former Wexham Nursery site. The project would include 34 social rented houses that would be purchased by the HRA and be available for Slough residents on the housing waiting list. Construction was due to begin in late 2016 and the first completed homes would be available in late 2017.

Members raised a number of issues in the ensuing discussion:

- *A Member requested further details regarding the delay in the opening of the Curve, including financial information relating to the additional costs incurred by the Council as a result of the delay and why re-location of the registrars services were not considered earlier in the planning process.* The Strategic Director of Community and Customer Services explained that the initial handover date was December 2015. However due to delays in completion of construction of the building, the date was put back to March 2016. Morgan Sindall had accepted full responsibility for the delays and the Council would be fully reimbursed for costs incurred due to the delay. Following a decision to re-locate the registrars service to the Curve, an options appraisal was carried out. Although the initial venue choice was at the east end of the High Street, it was considered that this would not be suitable given the specialist specifications required for the registrars service. The decision to locate the registrars service to the Curve had resulted in further delays to the scheduled opening in March 2016.
- *Details regarding the costs of locating the registrars service to the Curve and which, if any, facilities were lost to accommodate the registrars.* It was noted that re-locating the registrars service had cost an approximate £650k. The costs were mainly due to the specialist equipment required for the needs of the service, including soundproof rooms. It was brought to Members attention that the service was being located in an area that had been reserved for exhibition space. An area on the ground floor would now be utilised for exhibition space.
- *Opening date for the Curve.* It was noted that the anticipated handover date was end of June/July.
- *Details regarding outline plans (including whether these included land obtained from Wexham Parish Council) and proposed development at land at the former Wexham nursery site and clarification regarding the profit share scheme.* It was reported that a 104 properties would be developed on the site and that the matter was due to be considered on 14th March 2016 by Cabinet. Outline plans for the site would be circulated to Committee Members. It was clarified that the land was owned by the Council and Morgan Sindall responsible for the development of the properties and the profit share, after expenses, was on a fifty/fifty basis.

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- *A Member requested details about the Local Economy Benefit Programme, including training programmes offered, the use of local suppliers and apprenticeship schemes offered.* It was explained that whilst Morgan Sindall had taken measures to employ local individuals where ever possible, there was a skills shortage in the construction labour market in Slough. Information regarding the use of apprenticeship schemes would be circulated to the Committee.
- *Lessons learnt / How improve communications with partners to avoid delays as experienced during construction of the Curve.* Meetings had been held between senior officers of the Council, SUR and Morgan Sindall Construction & Infrastructure (the main contractor) to ensure improved communication and reporting lines were in place, earlier communication and escalation of any adverse issues and clear roles and responsibilities for future projects.
- *Financial details regarding the total cost of the Curve and whether the operating costs would be covered by income generated by the Curve.* Members were informed that the total cost for the Curve project was £22 million. The Strategic Director Customer and Community Services explained that the financial forecast was that the Curve would operate at a financial loss. The Committee were reminded that locating a number of services within the Curve had meant that a number of other sites would be available for development. A Member requested information regarding the anticipated revenue costs of operating and maintaining the Curve on a quarterly basis and it was agreed that this would be sent when available.

Resolved – That details of the update be noted.

(Councillor Nazir in the Chair)

70. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered details of the work programme for the remainder of the municipal year 15/16.

Resolved – a) That the work programme be noted.

b) That the work programme for the municipal year 16/17 to include item(s) on the Housing Strategy and Housing Stock/Revenue Account.

71. Members Attendance Record 2015/16

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

72. Date of Next Meeting - 7 April 2016

The date of the next meeting was noted as 7 April 2016.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 7.34 pm)