

Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Tuesday, 28th November, 2023.

Present:- Councillors Manku (Chair), Shaik (Vice-Chair), Escott, Hulme, Iftakhar, Mann, Matloob, Mohindra, O’Kelly and Stedmond

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Bedi and Wright

PART 1

16. Declarations of Interest

No declarations were made.

17. Minutes of the last meeting

Following discussion, it was agreed that:

Regarding the Action Tracker and Recommendations Register, the Scrutiny Officer drew Members’ attention specifically to the recommendations, noting that several were due to be considered at forthcoming Cabinet meetings and feedback would be received after those dates. Most of these had been responded to. Those relating to the task and finish group on Childrens’ first workforce business case was the subject of an update report on their implementation.(This Agenda, Item 5)

Any outstanding actions, several of which had deadlines in the future and would be reported at a future meeting of the committee, as and when appropriate.

Resolved – That:

- a) The minutes of the meeting of 24 October 2023 be approved as a correct record, subject to the amendments above;
- b) The attendance report, the action tracker and the recommendations register be noted.

18. Verbal presentation: Budget Setting and financial update

The Chair stated that the Committee had been expecting to scrutinise the Council’s budget setting process in the form of the Cabinet budget report, however, the report had been delayed and instead Members had been sent a presentation regarding the budget, at very short notice. These circumstances did not constitute good budget scrutiny, nor did they comply with the budget scrutiny guidelines recommended by CfGS (Centre for Governance & Scrutiny) and LGA (Local Government Association) and did little to allay

Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee - 28.11.23

Members concerns regarding the robustness of the budget setting process. He emphasised that the following year's budget scrutiny process must follow best practice.

Members asked the following questions regarding the delayed report:

Why had the report been delayed? Where were the bottlenecks in obtaining the information for the reports? Was the delay an indication that there were areas of concern regarding the budget setting process? What impact would the delay have on the overall budget setting process and would it have a negative impact on residents? Would there be additional delays in providing this information? How could officers provide surety regarding the budget setting process? At a previous scrutiny meeting, the Lead Member for improvement & Recovery had given assurance that the recurring issue of poor-quality reports and late reports being submitted to Scrutiny would not be repeated in the future.

The SBC Executive Director of Finance & Commercial advised that the Quarter 2 (Q2) budget management report had been delayed pending more detailed investigation and assessment of the information and data contained in the report. The delay had been necessary to ensure that the most accurate and up-to-date information regarding the budget would be submitted to Cabinet and residents.

She added that these were unusual and undesirable circumstances, due in part to resource issues (her team's workloads were spread across multiple areas of activity and the team were trying to catch up with outstanding work; high turnover in staff; embedding new staff in the team, who had brought a new perspective to the work of the finance team and had raised a number of queries regarding the report which had needed to be investigated).

Once these issues had been resolved, the draft budget report would be submitted to December Cabinet. She expected her team to be in a far stronger position in 2024 and was considering implementing further improvements in work processes to ensure that such a situation would not recur. She added that she did not expect this delay to negatively impact either the budget setting process or residents. Two Member briefings on the budget setting process were planned in coming weeks, which would bolster the budget scrutiny process and she would support Members in shaping their key lines of enquiry regarding the budget.

The Chair stated that the delay would affect the momentum of the committee and its work programme and future reports must be provided on time and that budget scrutiny must follow best practice.

The SBC Executive Director of Finance & Commercial highlighted two areas of significant in-year overspend (about which scrutiny members had raised concerns). These were Adult Social Care (ASC) and temporary accommodation (TA). There was an overspend of £7.8m in ASC and £4m in housing in Q1. She briefly outlined the key cost and income drivers for these areas.

Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee - 28.11.23

Members asked the following questions (in italics) and received the responses below:

Why was there a variance of £11m in ASC budget? Why had virements been necessary? Where was the £3.4m virement funded from? What measures were in place to mitigate against the overspends? What actions were being implemented to control the overspends, what were the timescales for these and how much could the overspends be reduced by? Why were hospital discharges not funded from the BCF? Was there a gap between the local housing allowance rates and local rents? The out-of-borough placement policy would need to be scrutinised in the future. Had the Housing surgeries included private sector tenants and would they be expanded?

The SBC Director of Finance & Commercial advised that the forecast overspends related to the cost of services in all areas, particularly in the areas of ongoing long-term support and care provision, staffing and operational pressures, short-term services related to hospital discharge (the latter being a national issue faced by many councils). Some of the discharges could be funded from the BCF (Better Care Fund) and the hospital discharge grant but had to be negotiated with the ICB (Integrated Care Board).

Housing, planning and property continued to be under pressure from unachievable income targets, particularly in respect of re-charges to the HRA (Housing Revenue Account). The current significant increase in demand for temporary accommodation continued to rise. A number of actions were in place to mitigate against these pressures.

The Executive Director added that, during the budget setting process for 2023-2024, a large number of budgets and in-year grants had been held centrally, which should have been allocated out to service areas. These amounts had been retained centrally to cover the cost of inflation, as the previous year, inflation had been unpredictable and had significantly increased. The virement had been provided from those centrally held budgets which had since been allocated to relevant service areas.

The Lead member added that Temporary Accommodation pressures are not localised to Slough, they are national in nature. At the Autumn Statement the Government announced that LHA rates would be raised to the 30% percentile of local marked rates which should indirectly reduce pressure on Temporary Accommodation. Necessary actions will be undertaken to right-size the Budget on Temporary Accommodation, to ensure we meet the needs of the most vulnerable and ensuring Best Value.

On coming to office, the Lead Member, inherited a challenging situation: a Temporary Accommodation budget woefully underfunded at £300k. Driving improvements in our Housing service has been a key priority of the administration. The Lead member is proud of the work we have done to date, including introducing Housing Surgeries for our residents.

There is a clear plan now in place to bring down the overspend to manageable levels, delivering our commitment to ensuring Best Value and meeting the needs of vulnerable residents.

Within Housing, Planning & Property, significant pressures also arise from unachievable income targets, particularly in respect of recharges to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). There is also significant demand for Temporary Accommodation. The pressure was initially reported as being £2.1m in period 3; however, corrective action in the form of work starting on auditing use of temporary accommodation, the management of voids for Council owned stock, which should help bring expenditure levels down and on ensuring improved rent collection from service users and this pressure is now being reported as £1.6m. Pressure on non-HRA housing costs has also been reduced by agreeing a recharge for asset contract management should be transferred to the HRA (£300k).

Actions which are in place to bring down the overspend:

- Robust provider invoice checking before payment
- Accommodation visits for welfare and tenancy checks
- Create missing rent accounts for nightly/daily rate clients to capture income.
- Increase placements to avoid ready to let HRA properties.
- Introduce a new Private Sector Leasing (PSL) scheme.
- Introduce a new Private Rental Sector (PRS) Incentive scheme.
- Update the Out of Borough Placement Policy
- Advance completion of HB claims before tenants is placed.
- Check accuracy of historic HB forms/claims.
- Check the right level of LHA rates are being applied with the Autumn statement increases to be calculated in the budget process.

Temporary Accommodation pressures are not localised to Slough, they are national in nature. At the Autumn Statement the Government announced that LHA rates will be raised to the 30% percentile of local marked rates which should indirectly reduce pressure on Temporary Accommodation. In Slough we will take the necessary actions to right-size the Budget on Temporary Accommodation, to ensure we meet the needs of the most vulnerable and ensuring Best Value.

The Lead Member inherited a challenging situation: including a Temporary Accommodation budget woefully underfunded at £300k. Driving improvements in our Housing service has been a key priority of the administration and proud of the work we have done to date, including introducing Housing Surgeries for our residents.

We have a clear plan in place to bring down the overspend to manageable levels, delivering our commitment to ensuring Best Value and meeting the needs of vulnerable residents.

Being committed to putting residents first: we now have a Resident Engagement Strategy which is due to go to Cabinet on the 18th December. This sets out how we will engage with our tenants in an improved and consistent way.

Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee - 28.11.23

She added that the issue of TA was a national phenomenon, the forthcoming increase in the LHA (local housing allowance) would indirectly help reduce pressures on temporary accommodation. Her group were committed to supporting vulnerable residents, improving the housing service whilst achieving best value.

The Finance team working closely with the housing team to assist tenants to submit timely housing benefits claims. The housing budget was being re-evaluated and would be re-allocated at a more appropriate level. Pressure on non-HRA housing costs has also been reduced by agreeing that a recharge for asset contract management should be transferred to the HRA.

The budget and savings targets which had been signed off the previous year had not been met. How could the committee be confident that the current year's savings would be met? Would the issues of centralised corporate budgets recur? Which of the mitigating actions would have the greatest impact on issues of overspend in housing? How could the spend on hotels the pressures on TA be reduced?

The SBC Director of Housing advised that all of the actions listed in the presentation were due to be implemented. There were approximately 300 homelessness presentations to the Council each month. This was lower than the previous year's peak but nevertheless of concern. The Council had 698 units of TA in stock. The savings identified were crucial to ensuring good budget management. Going forward, tenants would be placed directly into private properties rather than through agents or landlords (thereby avoiding high daytime and night time costs levied by landlords) and the increase in the LHA would provide further savings. All these measures would take around 12 months to bear fruit.

He added that temporary accommodation levels could not be anticipated or predicted as this was a demand-led service. Most local authorities would agree that the current national housing policy was not aligned with the stated objective of achieving a sustained reduction in homelessness. It was crucial that the homeless be installed in less expensive points in the market. In addition, there were plans to allocate a minimum of the Council's own housing stock for those living in TA accommodation, so that they could move out of expensive private accommodation into sustainable social housing, when the stock was available.

He added that the scope of the out-of-borough policy would need to be widened and it would need careful consideration due to the legal implications of placing people out of borough. The policy affected a relatively small number of people. The revised policy would be submitted to February 2024 Cabinet for approval. Its core would be placing people in lower cost housing areas and giving them real choices about their sustainable housing for the future.

He clarified that the housing surgeries had also been attended by private (right-to-buy) tenants. Attendees had sought advice on a mixture of issues,

Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee - 28.11.23

some of which would be shared with relevant partners. There were plans to review and expand the surgeries in 2024.

The Director of Finance & Commercial re-iterated that the centrally held budgets and virements had been a way of dealing with inflation the previous year. Four internal budget challenge sessions, which had included both officers and members, had evaluated pressure areas, how these might be mitigated against and any contingency plans. It should be noted that the budget and the MTFs (Medium term financial plan) existed to ensure delivery of priority areas of the corporate plan, in this case vulnerable adults and housing support.

The Director of Housing stated that new, longer-term relationships were being developed with the private rental sector and housing officers had recently attended a modelling with meeting with DLUHC. The actions outlined earlier were predicted to generate £700k savings. Ensuring that rent accounts were correctly established, that tenants had signed up for all their benefit entitlements, recovering rents and the revised out of borough policy would contribute significantly to achieving savings targets. The Director of Finance & Commercial added that the actions outlined in the report were predicted to reduce overall costs as well as achieve key outcomes for vulnerable residents.

It was agreed that officers would provide an email update to the Committee regarding the temporary accommodation actions, in due course.

Resolved: That the verbal presentation be noted.

19. Report from the Task and Finish Group on the Preparedness of Adults Social Care for an assessment by the Care Quality Commission

The Chair advised that the scope of the Task & Finish Group (T&FG) on the Preparedness of Adult Social Care for an assessment by the CQC had been to consider whether recommendations would be needed to improve the accuracy of the SBC (Slough Borough Council) CQC self-assessment and suggest further preparation work which may improve the chances of a more favourable CQC (Care Quality Commission) inspection and its associated costs and benefits.

The Chair of the Task & Finish Group (T&FG) stated that learning point for future T&FGs would be to provide an initial briefing session for T&FG Members as preparation for undertaking the work. The work of the T&FG had been affected by issues of limited time and limited availability of key staff.

The recommendations arose from the readiness of the service for inspection, where gaps had been identified. The report also set out the following:

- areas where the service was doing well
- how it was managed
- its areas of activity

Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee - 28.11.23

- whether it had sufficient capacity to provide the information required for inspection
- that further work would need to be undertaken before the inspection
- Cabinet may need to allocate additional resources to the service for this purpose

The Head of Governance & Scrutiny advised that it had not been possible to cost the recommendations in the report due to the tight timescales. Cabinet would need to give the matter due consideration and may not be in a position to respond immediately.

Lead Member for Adult Social Care praised the work of the T&FG and agreed that the availability of data and its analysis were key factors in the inspection preparedness.

The Chair of the T&FG advised appendix D of the report highlighted areas requiring improvement (this related to August 2023) and there may have been improvements since.

The Director of ASC advised that making improvements in the service was an ongoing and continuous process. Nevertheless, it was important to recognise the fact that the self-assessment had indicated that ASC at Slough was likely to receive an 'inadequate' rating from the CQC and that the Council did not currently have the resources required to avoid such a rating.

Resolved: That:

- a) Recommendations in the report be submitted to Cabinet for its consideration, the timing of which to be discussed with the Executive Director for Adult Social Care.

20. Proposals for the Scope (terms of reference) for a Task and Finish Group on Resident engagement and Re-building trust

The Head of Governance & Scrutiny advised that when considering the scope of the proposed Task & Finish Group, Members should also consider whether launching a T&FG would constitute a good use of time and resources, how lessons learned from the previous T&FG could be applied to this one, desired outcomes as set out in the scope, how these would contribute to the Council's recovery and improvement.

The SBC Head of Communications and Resident Engagement Officers introduced the principle and guided members towards the review and explained the context to this investigation were the corporate plan's five commitments, three of which relate in some way to resident engagement. This work is an important and relevant option for a T&F group, and one which will really contribute to recovery & improvement and the Corporate Plan.

Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee - 28.11.23

Those commitments are

- Resident focused
- Building trust
- Enabling residents & communities

The LGA defines engagement as ‘anything that creates a stronger two-way relationship between council and the community. This runs from formal consultation to more deliberative and informal listening exercises. It can include co-production, crowdsourcing, events and public meetings.’

The Council has focussed on developing communications over the last year or so, but with perhaps not enough emphasis on two-way communication with our residents, and we could do more to consider the role of members.

The officer provided the following baseline evidence:

Building Trust: Our 2023 resident survey showed that 25% of Slough residents trusted the council ‘a great deal / fair amount’ compared with a national average of 59%. The survey also showed that residents most trust information from their local councillor, or from direct contact with the council.

Resident Focused: The resident survey showed that 28% of Slough residents thought that the council acts on the concerns of local residents ‘a great deal / fair amount’ , compared with a national average of 52%

Enabling Residents and Communities: There are different models of participation which we can consider, with scales ranging from Non-participation to citizen power. The T&F group could consider using tools to assess the council’s current position and appetite within the available resources.

Options for the T&F group might include desktop research, a LGA workshop, a resident focus group, or visits to comparable authorities

The desired outcomes of the work would be to contribute towards;

1. stronger relationship with our residents.
2. an increase in trust by our residents.
3. a clear understanding of ambition for citizen participation.

Members questions related to scope of the investigation, and areas where the committee might want to focus. The officer set out options for ways of delivering the work, and explained that creative thinking would be useful to assist the council in thinking about what is the art of the possible, within the council’s limited resources.

Councillor Mohindra was appointed as Chair of the Resident Engagement Task & Finish Group. The remaining membership of the T&FG would be confirmed after the meeting.

Resolved: That:

Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee - 28.11.23

- a. A Resident Engagement Task & Finish Group be launched as per the draft scope at Appendix A of the report;
- b. Councillor Mohindra be appointed Chair of the Resident Engagement Task & Finish Group.

21. Forward Work Plan

Following the planned budget briefing for scrutiny Members on 13 December, there will be a workshop to consider new proposed Scrutiny topics and potentially refresh the work programme for the remainder of the municipal year. Any revisions will be brought to the January 4 2024 CISC meeting for approval.

Resolved: That the revised work programme be noted.

22. Vote of Thanks

The Chair advised that he was resigning as Chair of CISC to take up a Cabinet position. He thanked and praised Committee Members and officers for their diligent efforts and commitment to ensuring the establishment of a robust scrutiny function at the Council, in accordance with the Directions.

The Vice Chair thanked the Chair for his leadership and guidance and wished him luck in his new area of responsibility

23. Date of Next Meeting

4 January 2024.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.28 pm)