

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Thursday, 1st July, 2010.

Present:- Councillors M S Mann (Chair), Haines (Vice-Chair), Bains, Basharat, Shine and Walsh

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Anderson and Matloob

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Bal and O'Connor

PART 1

8. Declaration of Interest

None.

9. Minutes of the Last Meeting held on 7th June, 2010

The Minutes of the meeting held on 7th June, 2010 were approved as a correct record.

10. Financial Performance Reporting for 2009/10

The Chief Executive introduced the report and advised that the Strategic Director of Resources would cover issues relating to the long-term impact of the recent government budget and that the Committee would also be advised of the scale of changes that would be required. It was highlighted that it was important to bring Members up to speed on the implications of the Government's recent announcements. In response to a question submitted by a Member, the Chief Executive advised that the discussion would cover the macro view of the process but this evening's discussion would cover the high level impact of the budget. This would be followed at a later date by the micro view and the long-term view.

The Strategic Director of Improvement and Development outlined the current position with regard to staff appraisals and advised that 635 had been completed across the Council for the rolling year up to 11th June, 2010 and this reflected an appraisal rate of 44.2% of all staff eligible for an appraisal. It was highlighted that the Community and Wellbeing Directorate in particular had worked hard to reach a 62.4% completion rate from a low starting baseline. A new form and related guidance had been introduced and five workshops had taken place to assist Managers with the new appraisal process. The Director referred the Committee to the detail of the Council's identified "gold" projects and it was noted that of the 10 projects, 6 had a confidence level of green.

The Director discussed the performance monitoring update covering the period to 31st March, 2010. The target set comprised 44 national indicators including 4 local targets on priority areas which were linked to Slough's key local priorities. The status indicated that 30% were set at green, 2% at amber

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and 25% at red. 6 targets were not set, the results were awaited on 13 of the targets.

During the ensuing debate a number of comments/ questions were raised as follows:

- A Member commented that the status suggested that 70% of the targets were potentially set at red because only 30% were identified as green. The Director responded that some of the targets had only narrowly been missed and improvement plans had been put in place where necessary.
- A Member questioned why many projects were not included in the gold projects list and was advised by the Director that because it was important to have plans in place quickly many projects had not been risk assessed but these would be done at a later date. The Chief Executive advised that what decided whether a project would be a gold project was whether it was of a certain size or scale and it was agreed that Kevin Gordon would circulate the relevant criteria to Committee Members with further information regarding the nature of the project.
- A Member was concerned that the “improving customer service” project was now closed and in his opinion the service was not acceptable. The Director advised that the closed status indicated that the measures were now in place to carry out the needed improvement and the project was therefore set up to go. In these circumstances the project status was shown as closed. Members felt that this was misleading and it appeared that the project was no longer being monitored and the comments should indicate otherwise. It was agreed that an update on the gold projects be presented to a future meeting the next meeting of the Committee. It was emphasised by the Director that the information provided reflected the risks associated with projects in the planning stages.
- A Member raised concerns regarding the national indicator for the achievement gap between pupils eligible for free school meals and their peers achieving the expected level at key stages A2 and B4. He was concerned that this was set at the red status. The Chief Executive advised that this was one of the most difficult targets to meet and this was due in part to the gap between the number of disadvantaged children against high achievers and levels of deprivation in the Borough, the lack of English as their first language in the home contributed to the difficulties in risk area. It was suggested that an Education Officer could provide more detail to the Committee if required.

The Director of Resources referred the Committee to the projected budget as at 31st May, 2010 showing the current financial position. The Committee was advised that the current budget was just under £104m and the projected outturn was also just under £104m and there was no variance. The Director advised that the Council could not have forecasted accurately the circumstances it now found itself in after the budget announcements on the 22nd June. The Committee was referred to a table showing departmental

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growth and savings analysis for 2010/11 and the Committee was advised that the budget had been set knowing that savings had to be achieved this year in order to achieve targets in the next year's budget. The balance in year budget of £103m would force savings of £400,000 in 2011/12 and £4m in 2012/13 after savings of £5.2m and £1.1m. Savings and efficiencies would be used to offset growth of £5.1m and £4.2m over the period, mainly being related to capital requirements. These figures were based on assumptions including the government grant, income, and council tax increases.

The Director outlined a number of changes that had been made since the election. These included the removal of a number of grants from dedicated activity ring fencing, in year cuts to area based (non-ring fenced) grants and specific funding programmes, and the impact of a reduced revenue of £2.5m.

The Council now faced a deficit of £2.5m from April 2010 to March 2011 and drawing on resources to meet the deficit would not be an option. Directors would work with Commissioners to explore ways to meet the reduced budget and recommendations would be prepared for Cabinet which would reflect £1.8m of the sum needed. The Director was confident that the balance of the required savings would be delivered if Members accepted the recommendations. It was clear that there would be an inevitable impact on future savings and there would be resultant major pressures for residents, communities, partners and employees of the Council. It was noted that the government had made it clear that the decision as to how cuts should be made would be made locally. The announced fees on council tax would cause a £1.2m annual reduction and this would have an on year cumulative effect. Changes to the housing benefit and welfare system would increase demand for services and an increase in VAT of 2.5% would have an effect on 3rd party contracts. There would be an impact on staff who would face a 2nd year without a pay rise and pay freeze and a pensions review. A sizeable percentage of staff would fall below the £21,000 threshold and this would mean that those staff would be given a small increase in pay.

In summary there had been savings built into the budget for 2010/11 but there were now additional pressures for the current year of £2.5m and estimated pressures of approximately £25m over the 4 year period. It was noted that 70% of the Council's cost was for staffing.

In the ensuing debate, Members raised a number of comments / questions as follows:

- A Member asked whether the £2.5m cut was a total surprise or whether it was known in advance that some areas in particular would be cut. The Director advised that this was a historic surprise and no-one anticipated the level of the £2.5m cuts to some critical service areas. It would be necessary to secure £2.5m in year and in the emerging budget there would be 25% cuts in Government funding over 3 or 4 years.
- A Member asked whether the prediction that the private sector would pick up and create more jobs etc had been factored in to the budget

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proposals. The Chief Executive advised that a £25m reduction in resources was needed in the 4 year period and the economic situation would have relatively little impact on that fact.

- A Member asked whether the Census 2011 had been taken into account when assessing the budget. The Chief Executive advised that there was no guarantee that the Council would achieve a higher population count so this could not be factored into the budget. It was also noted that even if a higher population was achieved then it would take several years for the financial effects of this to be incorporated within the budget and even in the best outcome the improvement could not be anywhere near the £25m cut.

The Committee noted that the £25m cut equated for example to 70% of the total social care budget or all of the non school spending within Education and Children Services. The Chief Executive advised that it was impossible to ignore the situation and although some lobbying could be done particularly with regard to the census, a more strategic approach was required to address the problem. It would be important to go back to basics and drive forward and consider the focus of the organisation whilst delivering the Council's priorities and acute needs within the community. Within the next 6 months it would be important to identify, commit to and drive forward a new agenda. On the positive side the Council was in a position of having a strong Administration which was returned with an increase majority thereby giving clear decision making and direction. Also the Council had a strong strategic team, good employee relations and the commitment of its staff, having completed job evaluation. There was now a need to develop a strategic plan which would set a new 5 year medium term financial plan with a zero base budget for the next financial year. It would be important to work with partners, communities and residents and engage trade unions to adopt a workforce planning approach i.e. a resources fund would need to be established ahead of the difficult choices that would be required. It was clear that some things would be delivered differently and some services would not be provided at all. The end result would be a smaller Council with a smaller number of staff and there would be detailed financial sessions for all Members at which the future plans would be discussed. In response to a question about the freezing of council tax, the Chief Executive advised that the Government's advice on this was not clear at this time but advised that 2.5% of the council tax equated to £1.2m. More would be known in the autumn but clearly this amount would not make a big difference in the overall cuts.

A Member was concerned about the cuts to the voluntary sector and cited examples of schemes which could be affected such as the Britwell project which kept children off the streets. He was concerned that if this scheme was cut then there could be 50 children affected. The Chief Executive advised that it was possible that the voluntary sector would be commissioned to contract out such schemes to another organisation but at the same time in issues such as this it was important to look at prevention.

Councillor Anderson, Leader of the Council addressed the meeting and advised that every area would be looked at to decide where cuts could be

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made. It was highlighted that even in areas where there was a statutory obligation to provide a service, those particular services may not be provided as before. It was highlighted that this would be the first time ever that every year spending would need to be reduced and this was the biggest challenge that this Council had ever faced.

Resolved –

- (a) That the report be noted and that a financial update report be submitted to the Committee in January 2011.
- (b) That the Strategic Director, Improvement and Development, submit a report to the next meeting on the progress of the Performance Reporting Gold Project (Improving Customer Service)

11. Unemployment and the response to the Economic Downturn

Rafiq Chohan, Assistant Director, Economic Development and Inclusion, outlined a report to provide an update on the Council's response to the Economic Downturn. The Committee was advised that the main focus of the report related to the employment support provided for the unemployed.

The Committee was reminded that the Council had set up an economic task force, chaired by the Chief Executive at the start of the recession. Key data assessed included unemployment, housing, and benefits demand. The Council had worked in partnership with Job Centre Plus who had the primary statutory responsibility for the unemployed and in addition funding was secured from the LSP's performance reward grant and from GOSE for a project focused on supporting 18-24 year olds and BME communities. Further funding was secured from the Department of Work and Pensions, future job fund for 18-24 year olds and 10 young people between the ages 18-24 years of age were recruited for a six months period. It was noted that the project had been discontinued by the new government. The Officer discussed other support schemes for lone parents and others which continued to provide accredited information, advice and guidance for the unemployed and low skilled. The Committee was advised that the Employment and Enterprise Group was reaching the target client groups and engaging them in services by investing a wide range of Outreach activities and taking services to clients. Clients reported consistently high satisfaction levels and stated that they had moved on substantially as a result of the IAG services they had received. The Officer advised that relationships with partners were a key strength of the group and the Employment and Enterprise Manager had established the local IAG Officers group where best practice was shared.

The Committee noted that Slough's unemployment figure in January was 3,553 and this had reduced to 3295. Of these 2,170 had been unemployed for six months or less which represented 65.5% of all those claiming benefit. This compared favourably with the South-East and the UK as a whole where the figure was 62% and 60.6% respectively. The Officer advised that even

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though unemployment in Slough was marginally higher, long-term employment was lower and there were only 440 people who had been unemployed for over 12 months. This represented 13.3% of the total unemployed in Slough which was lower than the South-East (16.8%) and the UK (17.5%). This suggested that early intervention could contribute to minimising the risk of longer term and more damaging structural unemployment. The Committee advised that the Chalvey Ward had the highest level of JSA benefit claimants at 395 and the Langley St Mary's Ward had the lowest at 135. The Officer advised that the increased unemployment levels of 18-24 year olds was a particular concern and Slough had continued to see a reduction within this particular group in recent months. There was a concern however that many newly qualified Slough Graduates were unemployed or doing jobs that did not reflect their ability. In May 2010, 765 18-24 year olds were claiming JSA benefits and this was the lowest since February, 2009. A Graduate network would be established to support new graduates into employment. The Committee advised that job centre vacancies had increased from 289 in January to 512. It was clear however that 6.5 people were now chasing every job. Of particular was the impact of the loss of public sector jobs on the local economy and the Wexham and Heatherwood Trust had already announced significant job losses.

The Officer concluded that proposed new cuts in the public sector would mean that a double dip recession was almost inevitable, bringing with it housing repossessions, an increase in the number of benefit claimants and a huge impact on the prosperity of the most disadvantaged communities within Slough. It would be important to prevent relative short-term unemployment from becoming long-term employment with all of the negative impacts on society that would have. It was also clear that community cohesion in Slough had been good for many years and this could be at risk if impacted by high levels of unemployment. In the ensuing debate Members raised a number of questions/comments as follows.

- A Member noted the increase in the number of graduates and asked whether they had the right skills for the jobs available. The Officer responded that if an individual had better qualifications they would be able to move into a variety of work. It had been shown that as low skilled people in Slough had increased their skills they had increased their employment chances
- A Member commented that the most underperforming group was the White working class and he asked the Officer what had been done to improve this situation. The Officer advised that support had been provided across the Board but he accepted that progress in the Britwell area had not been as good as would have been liked. There was a trend for White working class people to prefer on the job training whereas more people from ethnic minorities moved into further education. The Member responded that companies for example those on the Trading Estate should provide guidance for children in schools on the skills that they needed. The Officer advised that the Council worked alongside companies in providing this kind of

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information to schools but it was clear that companies were more inclined to do this when the labour market was tight as supposed to a situation where there weren't many jobs available at all. It was also noted that Connexions worked within schools to provide advise on what qualifications were needed for particular mobs.

- A Member asked how many people were able to benefit from work experience at SBC and the Officer advised that he was unable to provide the exact figure but he confirmed that the Council was the biggest provider of work experience in Slough. It was agreed that the actual figures would be forwarded to Members by the Officer.
- A Member asked whether the Council gave preference to Slough residents for Council vacancies and was advised that the Council could not do this because this would not meet the requirements of equal opportunities.
- A Member advised that 2 years ago a scheme had commenced whereby all Secondary schools in Slough were twinned with a organisation/company in Slough and this scheme would be extended in the near future to primary schools.

Resolved – That the report be noted and that an update report be submitted to the Committee in November 2010.

12. Census 2011 Update- Presentation

Kevin Gordon, Assistant Director, Transformational Change, outlined a report to update the Committee on the planned preparations for the Census in 2011 and progress to date.

The Committee was advised that preparations for the Census had started at both local and national level and it was calculated that public services in Slough would receive approximately £22m over 10 years for every 1,000 people that completed Census documentation. In view of the substantial under count of the previous population numbers, Slough could gain in excess of £150m over the next 10 years. It was thought that Slough's current population was approximately 7,000 more than official estimates and this meant that there was the potential to gain in excess of £150m over the 10 years period.

The Officer discussed the planned project that had been agreed to prepare for the Census which included the engagement of a Census Project Manager, marketing and lobbying, community engagement and the support of local people to be recruited as ONS local field staff. The Officer also discussed the possible recruitment of staff into key roles and the provision of local intelligence through the use of external experts. Delivery of the project would be managed through three supporting teams who would have clear responsibilities for tasks within each phase of the project. Membership of the Project Board would be drawn from across the key public sector organisations and would include Ruth Bagley, Chief Executive, SBC as project sponsor and Kate Ford, Deputy Commander for Slough Local Police Area. Slough Council for Voluntary Services would be represented by Ramesh Kukar and the PCT

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and RBFRS would have representation. An “ensuring delivery” would focus on developing the community mobilisation plan, by for example organising and holding workshops with key communities, organising door knocking initiatives to improve completion rates and working with the ONS to help develop and deliver the partnership plan. It was important that the team created links with organisations such as the CAB, Voluntary Organisations, Religious Centres, Schools, GP Surgeries and local shops. The Officer discussed the role of the data collection team and key activities which included the identification of local hard to reach populations and groups.

The Officer advised that it was widely recognised that Members would have an important role to play in the Census project and the local strategic partnership was particularly keen to engage Members in the work of the Census. He welcomed suggestions on the best ways to achieve this. In the ensuing debate Members raised a number of questions / comments as follows:-

- A Member in attendance under Rule 30 commented that the ONS had admitted that its figures for the 2001 Census were incorrect and it was therefore important that this time the figures were more accurate.
- A Member was concerned that the list of organisations that links would be made with did not include the Hindu temples in Slough. He was concerned that this would be taken as bias towards other groups. The Officer advised that the list of groups shown was not exhaustive and to date a list of 150 organisations had been compiled.
- The Officer was asked how illegal immigrants would be included on the Census. He acknowledged that this was a big concern and ways in which this could be done would be examined.
- A Member had concerns regarding the number of HMOs in his Ward and he felt that it would be helpful if Census teams met up with local Councillors to share local knowledge.

Resolved –

- (a) That the report be noted and that an update report be presented to the Committee in November 2010.
- (b) That the Committee recommends that the Census teams meet with Elected Members on a Ward by Ward basis to share intelligence to help improve returns.

13. Carbon Management Plan- 2009/2014

Kevin Gordon, Assistant Director, Transformational Change, outlined a report to update the Committee on the Carbon Management Plan 2009/2014. The Officer reminded the Committee that Members had raised a number of questions regarding the draft plan at its meeting on 25th February, 2010 and the report included a response to those particular questions.

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It was noted that the Cabinet had approved the Carbon Management Plan at its meeting on 14th June, 2010. The Committee noted the response the questions raised at its meeting in February.

A Member questioned how the public would be able to know when and if SBC achieved its targets. The Officer and Members suggested that this information could be made available on the Council's website and within the Citizen magazine.

Andrew Millard, Scrutiny Officer advised that the Community and Leisure Panel had received a presentation on the previous night regarding climate change and it was agreed he would forward a copy of the slides to Committee Members.

Resolved –

- (a) That the Committee supports the Cabinet decision to approve the plan.
- (b) That an update on the PPRG figures be submitted to the Committee in November 2010.

14. Member's Attendance Record

The Members Attendance Record was noted.

15. Forward Agenda Plan

The Forward Agenda Plan was noted.

Resolved – That the following items be added to the Plan:-

- Customer Service Centre – Long-term Strategy – November, 2010.
- Accommodation Strategy- November, 2010.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 9.40 pm)