

## **Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Thursday, 2nd December, 2010.**

**Present:-** Councillors Bains (until 8.45 pm), Bal (until 8.25 pm), Basharat, Coad, Haines, Shine, O'Connor and Walsh

**Also present under Rule 30:-** Councillors Parmar, S K Dhaliwal, Anderson and Matloob

**Apologies for Absence:-** Councillor M S Mann

### **PART I**

#### **39. Declarations of Interest**

Councillors Bal and Basharat declared a personal interest in that members of their family worked for Slough Borough Council.

#### **40. Minutes of the Last Meeting held on 10th November, 2010**

The Minutes of the last meeting held on 10<sup>th</sup> November 2010 were approved as a correct record.

##### Matters Arising

In response to a Member question regarding the current position on the Census 2011, the Committee was advised that a meeting had been arranged for 16<sup>th</sup> December, 2010 and this would be attended by Glen Watson, Census Director, Ruth Bagley, Chief Executive and other Officers. An update would be provided at the Overview and Scrutiny meeting scheduled for 27<sup>th</sup> January 2011.

#### **41. Performance and Financial Reporting 2010/2011**

##### Financial Reporting

Julie Evans, Strategic Director of Resources, outlined a report setting out the revenue and capital monitoring position to October 2010. It was noted that the Council's net revenue budget for 2010/2011 was £103.9m and the Housing Services agreed net operating budget for the same period was a surplus of £213k. The Committee was advised that there was currently a projected under-spend position for the 2010/2011 General Fund of £746k and this compared to a reported over-spend at the same stage last year of £854k. The Director advised that for the Housing Revenue Account there was currently a projected under-spend position of £1248k from the budgeted surplus position of £213k agreed at the start of the year and this showed a favourable movement of £173k from the figure reported in the previous month.

## Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 02.12.10

The Committee noted the month on month movement in variances within each Directorate. It was highlighted that within Community and Wellbeing an under-spend position of £14k was reported which was an adverse movement of £61k on the position reported in the previous month. Members were advised that the change was largely due to an increase in costs across Community Services and Adult Social Care due to an increase in external care packages, with 11 new clients being placed in October as well as care package revisions totalling £144k. This had been off-set by a saving of £74k for the provision of free swimming rising from a reduction in the contribution required to support Slough Community and Leisure.

It was reported that the Education and Children Services Directorate had an overall under spend position of £82k which was an adverse movement of £226k on the figure reported in the previous month. It was highlighted that there was a continuing pressure on the budget in Children and Families due to the number of looked after children.

The Committee was advised that the Green and Built Environment continued to report an overall break even position but the Department had reported a pressure arising due to the shortfall in the indexation costs associated with a number of major contracts. It was noted that negotiations were ongoing with Contractors in an attempt to contain the pressure.

Central Directorates had reported an under-spend position of £311k which was a favourable movement of £193k from the position reported in the previous month. The Housing Revenue Account showed an under-spend of £1248k and an in-year surplus of £213k on the Housing Revenue Account was approved by Cabinet for 2010/2011. The latest projection indicated an outturn surplus of £1461k which was an under-spend of £1248k against budget compared to last months under-spend of £175k. The change was primarily due to the release of surplus ex People 1<sup>st</sup> cash balances of £1215k.

The Director discussed the emerging issues and risks and it was noted that although the headline position was showing a projected under-spend of £746k. It was highlighted that at this stage of the financial year it had been necessary to achieve a significant level of gross savings, incorporating the £3.3m of in-year reductions as a result of the Government's £6.2billion of reductions across the public sector. It was considered prudent to deliver known 2011/2012 savings early to mitigate the risk of achieving the required savings over the next 4 years and Cabinet had therefore at it's meeting on 20<sup>th</sup> September 2010 agreed to the pre CSR 2011/2012 savings.

Members raised a number of questions/comments in the ensuing debate including the following (*responses in italics*):

- In the ensuing debate a Member asked for further details regarding the current position on foster carers and it was agreed that a response would be forwarded to him from the relevant Director.

## Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 02.12.10

- An investigation was underway within the Children and Families Division regarding the terms and conditions of Sure-Start funding. A Member asked what the current position was in this area?

*The tender process was ongoing and the relevant Director would be requested to provide an update report for the Member.*

- In relation to Community and Wellbeing the report stated that a provider had entered into a voluntary agreement with the Council not to accept other local authority placements and due to an embargo based on quality issues at this residence Slough had been unable to make placements. A Member asked whether the Council should be concerned about this?

*It was agreed that the relevant Director would forward the response to this question.*

- Within the Green and Built Environment it was highlighted that the cost of the new Pest Control contract would likely result in an end of year budget pressure of approximately £30k. It was stated that there was a disparity between the cost to the Council of that treatments against the charges made to Customers and a Member asked for detail of the gap.

*It was agreed that the relevant Director would forward a response to the Member.*

- A Member asked why a property which had been vacated in Pemberton Road had had its kitchen removed when this was only installed 18 months previously?

*The Member was advised that this question had been raised at a previous Panel meeting and that an Officer was currently investigating this issue.*

### Performance

Roger Parkin, Strategic Director of Improvement & Development outlined a report setting out performance monitoring against the corporate balanced score card and the LAA balanced score card up to October 2010 which set out areas of exception, improved performance between 1<sup>st</sup> April to 31<sup>st</sup> October 2010, and an assessment of where improvements actions were required for performance to achieve end of year targets.

The Director provided a gold project update for the ten projects, setting out the time line, budget, issues and risks and overall status of each project. In respect of the 2011 Census it was highlighted that there were concerns that the cash budget was insufficient and recent discussions with partners had ensured that budget costs were back on track.

Members raised a number of questions/comments in the ensuing debate including the following:

## **Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 02.12.10**

- In response to a Member question regarding the number of Slough Sheds, the Director confirmed the number at 2177. He advised that the 'sheds' were not always in a poor state of repair, indeed some had been assessed within Council Tax Band B.
- In respect of the Customer Focus Project a Member expressed the concern that reports he had seen had indicated that My Council was not working efficiently. The Director responded that he was happy to work with Members in this area and it was important to review what was being done to ensure that people were attended to by knowledgeable staff. It was agreed that an update report on My Council would be provided for the Committee at its meeting on the 27<sup>th</sup> January, 2011 and this was added to the work programme.
- In respect of Adult Social Transformation Programme a Member asked why the status was amber and expressed the concern that the Council was not on top of this project. It was agreed that a response would be sought from the relevant Director for the Member in question. Another commented that she had concerns about the amber position of the mental health pilot and it was agreed also that the Director would respond to this concern.

### **Resolved -**

- (a) That the Performance and Project management aspects of the report be noted.
- (b) That the Financial performance – revenue and capital aspects of the report be noted.

## **42. Medium Term Financial Strategy and Related Savings**

Julie Evans, Strategic Director, Resources, outlined a report setting out the latest projections of the Council's revenue budget for the period 2011/2012 to 2014/2015 following the previous Cabinet report of 9<sup>th</sup> November 2010 and the meeting of the Policy, Performance and Review Group held on 23<sup>rd</sup> November, 2010. Regarding financial implications, the Committee was advised that in the short term the summary application remained as reported at November 2010, i.e. £4.423m savings already committed in 2011/2012 from the 2010/2011 PPRG process with an anticipated further savings potential of £6.9m in 2011/2012. The Committee was advised that to date £2.68m of savings had been identified and agreed subject to consultation and a further £1.6m savings had been identified for consideration. The Committee was reminded that the CSR had not altered the Council's medium term financial strategy of achieving savings of approximately £20m over the next 4 years. It was noted that the next significant milestone would be the provisional settlement where the Government would provide the Council with an estimate of the level of national grant they could expect to receive for the next year and possibly beyond.

## Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 02.12.10

The Director discussed the proposed elements of savings opportunities for the six Support Service areas and it was noted that wherever possible savings had been secured via voluntary expressions of interest, the deletion of vacant posts and the removal of temporary staff. It was noted that the Council was currently undertaking a review of its assets and its trading functions. The Council's general reserve stood at £5.4 million but drawing on reserves to fund any budget gaps was considered to be a last resort.

In the ensuing debate, Members raised a number of questions/comments as follows (responses shown in italics):

- How confident was the Director that a balanced budget would be achieved by February and beyond?

*The Council had clear proposals to address the needed savings and the detail of where these would be achieved were set out in the report. The £2.7 m gap remaining exceeded the amount needed and there were opportunities around the capital programme, assets, Town Hall, debt improvement, income and fees and charges.*

- Was there a 'Plan B' to cover the eventuality that the required savings were not achieved?

*The opportunity to achieve the £6.9m remained high. There was a safety net of £2.7m but it was unlikely this would be required. Further, a decision had been made to front load the savings to buy time.*

- What was the strategy regarding savings around frontline services?

*The strategy would include plans to organise transactional services into one team and externalise the service. This would make a significant contribution to savings (estimated at between £1.5m to £2m).*

- Were there any plans to find further savings through a review of senior management posts?

*Interim arrangements were in place at present but the Senior Management Team would be reviewed the following year. It was clear that some adjustments would be required to reflect for example, changes to public health responsibilities which would affect Local Authorities.*

- On the assumption that the Census in Slough went well and population figures were accurately reflected, would the Council's financial position be improved?

*An optimistic view was that an additional 30,000 residents would be shown in the figures and this would result in a further £18m funding but it was doubtful this would be achieved. It was also important to note that any uplift in funding would not be made immediately but on a*

## Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 02.12.10

*gradual basis and it would therefore take several years before the correct funding level was achieved.*

- Had the Council taken steps to encourage smaller local contracts?

*Yes, local providers were encouraged and national contractors were obliged to demonstrate a commitment to the local population. It would not be possible to exit contracts that were currently in place and these extended for a variety of terms, e.g. 3, 5, 7 or 15 years.*

**Resolved-** That the recommendations to be considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 13<sup>th</sup> December, 2010 be noted.

### 43. Communications - Revenue Spend

Kate Pratt, Acting Communications and Marketing Manager, outlined a report providing detail on the level of expenditure by the Council on newspaper and outdoor media advertising. The report was requested by the Committee at its previous meeting in order to clarify where the Council invested its communications budget, why it chose specific channels and how effectiveness was measured.

The Committee was advised that following a management restructure and resulting cost saving exercise proposed in October 2010, the Head of Communications post would be deleted and a new position of Head of Policy and Communications would be created. The current team had an annual communications budget spend of £134,920 excluding staff costs and events. This included the Citizen publication, all internal communications, the Council's website and consultations. The majority of marketing activity was funded by the respective department requesting the activity.

The Officer advised that the Council advertised services and events through various media outlets and consideration was always given to maximise impact and exposure. Some advertising was free of charge but where payment was required, preferential rates were normally achieved. It was noted that the main outlets used at preferential rates were local newspapers and that the Slough Express ran a free advertisement every week as part of a contra deal. In return the Council purchased an agreed number of newspapers for staff and visitors. The Council would occasionally negotiate free advertising when one of the local newspapers became a media sponsor for an event.

The Committee noted the arrangements for advertising on bus shelters, local radio, hoardings, billboards advertising and poster sites. It was also noted that the Council had 20 lamp post banner sites along the A4 from Gala Bingo in the east to the Town Hall which could be changed as required. There were initial start-up costs for the main banner frames and fixings but the cost of installing replacement banners was half price with no on-going rental cost. It was felt that the banners would be highly cost effective in the long-term. The Officer advised that in 2010, 24 large banners were erected on the main gateways into Slough and it was anticipated that these would be semi-

## Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 02.12.10

permanent sites with no current plans to make changes. The one-off cost of proving all 24 banners was £6,600, i.e. £275 per banner.

The Officer advised that the Council's Citizen newspaper was published six times per year, distributed to 46,500 households across the borough and was available in other venues such as libraries. The Citizen budget for the year was £48,300 which equated to £1.03 per household, and the latest attitude survey of residents in March had found that 39% of those surveyed preferred to receive information about the Council through the Citizen. It was found that 93% of those who read the Citizen found it informative.

The Committee noted the advertising costs for each directorate set out in the report and the measurable objectives used by communications.

In the ensuing debate a number of question/ comments were raised including the following (responses in italics below):

- There were concerns that the Citizen newspaper did not reach all areas of Slough?

*It was accepted that there were issues around the delivery of Citizen, particularly in the Colnbrook area and in some blocks of flats. Members were asked to contact Communications whenever they were made aware of circulation problems.*

- It was felt that some good causes were not published in local newspapers why was this?

*The Council had no control over the content of local newspapers and it was clear that there was enormous competition for coverage.*

**Resolved** - That the report be noted and that the Committee congratulate the Communications Team for their excellent work.

### 44. Long Term Unemployment in Slough

Rafiq Chohan, Assistant Director, Economic Development and Inclusion, outlined a report to update Members on the impact of long term unemployment in Slough, particularly with regard to those claiming job seekers allowance for more than 12 months and people aged over 50 yrs of age.

It was noted that for some years, Slough had managed to keep long term unemployment below the UK and South East figures. This was in part due to the Council and its partners providing additional investment in supporting newly unemployed individuals and the abundance of jobs in and around the town. The recent recession had however resulted in an increase in long term unemployment and there was a clear correlation between low skills as measured by qualifications and long term unemployment. Slough had for some years had a low skilled working age population but this had improved dramatically in the last few years.

## Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 02.12.10

The Committee noted that the total number of unemployed in Slough in October was 3,156 and of these 510 (16.1%) were aged over 50. This compared to a South East figure of 17.7% and was marginally higher than the UK figure of 15.3%. The Annual Population Survey 2009 found that the Slough cohort aged between 50 and 64 was 18,400, representing 21.2% of the total working age population of Slough aged between 16 and 64.

The Officer advised that there was no direct data available regarding the exact number of over 50's that were long term unemployed, i.e. for over 12 months. It was known however, that within this group, 220 people had been unemployed for over 6 months.

The Committee noted the recent changes to the benefits system and the concern that the provision of universal credits could represent greater challenges to the community in the current climate. Although many individuals were keen to return to work, a number of barriers included poor health, poor skills including language barriers, benefit traps and jobs that were not designed to accommodate the physical or mental ability of such individuals. In addition, Slough had seen its overall population rise and jobs decrease; the jobs density i.e. the number of jobs to number of people of working age had fallen to 0.95, below 1.00 for the first time in many years.

It was noted that the greater challenge in the next few years would be the proportion of over 50's currently on employment support allowance and incapacity benefit who would be reassessed as fit to work and re-categorised as Job Seekers. Slough's over 50's faced multiple and complex challenges including poor language skills and these would be factors in competing for fewer jobs. Policies and support programmes would need to be developed to respond to this within partner organisations in the private, public and voluntary sectors in Slough.

In the ensuing debate, Members raised a number of questions/comments including the following (*responses in italics*):

- How many of the unemployed in the over 50's age range were female?  
*This information was not available but it was known that a high proportion of the individuals were from BAME backgrounds, including a high proportion from the Pakistani community, followed by the white and Indian cohort. There were issues in particular for females regarding the availability of part time work.*
- What were the statistics for the 18-24 age range?  
*Twice as many individuals were unemployed in the Pakistani community and the figures for the white and Indian cohorts were comparable.*
- How did the curriculum in schools address unemployment concerns?



## Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 02.12.10

*Local businesses were influential in this area and regularly visited schools to advise pupils of the necessary qualifications required to obtain particular jobs/ careers.*

- It was evident that many graduates who had left university two years earlier were still unemployed. How could this situation be improved?

*Discussions were held with business groups to address this problem but it was clear that this was a national and not just a local issue. It would be important to hold more work trials and placements.*

- Why were there more people unemployed in the Pakistani community?  
*Economic and historical factors played a part in this- it was also notable that where adults in a household were unemployed, the young adults often did not have a job.*

- What was being done to improve the employment situation?

*Lots of work was being carried out to bring residents in touch with local businesses to discuss apprenticeships etc. BAA had provided funds to support the council in assisting people with CV's etc so that Heathrow airport could recruit and retain local members of staff. It was reported that all secondary and grammar schools in the Borough were linked with local businesses.*

- Were there many part time or job share opportunities in the town?

*The provision of such jobs would be one of the items under discussion at a future meeting with representatives of the private sector.*

**Resolved** - That the report be noted.

### 45. Draft Voluntary and Community Sector Funding Policy

Rafiq Chohan, Assistant Director, Economic Development and Inclusion, outlined a report, setting out the Draft Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Funding Policy for all future commissioning and grants funding by Slough Borough Council to the voluntary and community sector.

The Committee was invited to scrutinise the policy and make suggestions for amendment prior to the report being presented to Cabinet on 13th December. The report also recommended that existing funding arrangements be terminated at the earliest possible date. The Policy had resulted from a strategic review of all the Council's funding, commissioning and support arrangements with the local voluntary and community sector. This included an extensive council-wide mapping exercise providing information on all grants and contracts provided by the council, and related support and monitoring arrangements. The Committee noted that a consultation was carried out with the voluntary and community sector and was sent to 350 organisations based or working in Slough.

## Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 02.12.10

The Officer discussed key issues identified by the voluntary and community sectors and the key aims of the policy including the strengthening of partnership working between the Council and VCS. It was noted that financial restrictions would require the Council to seek a closer alignment of activities funded through VCS organisations with the Sustainable Community Strategy and that opportunities would become available to VCS organisations with the adoption by the Council of a corporate approach to commissioning (the Strategic Commissioning Framework).

The Committee noted that the Policy was presented to the Voluntary Sector Members Panel on 21 September, 2010 and had been welcomed but the concern was expressed that sufficient time should be given to the VCS organisations during the transition stage from grants to grants/commissioning.

A number of comments/questions were raised in the ensuing debate including the following(*responses in italics*):

- It was felt that there were a number of bogus organisations in the town and these should be checked out. Also Members should receive a regular update on the allocation of funds.

*The Officer advised that he would continue to regularly monitor the situation.*

- Funding had been removed from the Britwell Youth Project and it was felt that this was an appalling situation.

*The Officer advised that there had been a small grants budget designed for such organisation but this was then removed.*

- It was felt that the Council's commitment to the Voluntary Sector was important and it was essential that they were helped to become more self sufficient.

- What checks were made when grants were applied for?

*The background of the organisation was looked at and monitoring was carried out but this was proportionate to the amount of money that was given.*

- Was the Council rising to the challenge and would local needs be met?

*The Council was attempting to do this but 25% of funding had been lost and the capacity to assist had therefore diminished.*

The Committee requested that an update report be provided in three months time.

**Resolved** - That the report be noted and that an update be provided in March 2011.

## Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 02.12.10

### 46. Housing Futures - Provision of Housing Services Update

Neil Aves, Assistant Director, Housing, outlined a report to update Members of the progress to date in developing the new Housing Service by combining the former People 1<sup>st</sup> Housing Management teams with their former SBC strategic housing counterparts. The report also outlined the next stages and draft timescales anticipated to the completion of the project.

The Committee was advised that since September the scale of transformation within the newly combined Housing Service had increased considerably and initial plans concentrating on restructuring the housing management element of housing services had been subsequently overtaken by the broader council wide initiative; Planning for the Future.

The Officer advised that on October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2010 a formal consultation document was released to all affected staff and their trade union representatives. Briefing sessions were arranged and questions raised and answers were placed on the Council's intranet. The consultation period would close on the 6th December and the process of internal and external advertisement of vacant posts would commence. It had been agreed that an externally facilitated assessment centre would be used to test all applicants. The Officer discussed future required competencies and training for appropriate housing qualifications.

The Committee noted the project objectives of the new Housing Service which included the improvement of the overall value for money of providing a housing service for Slough residents and increasing satisfaction levels for tenants, leaseholders and other residents.

The Officer advised that Tenants were updated of progress through the pages of the monthly Housing newsletter and a tenant volunteer would be nominated to attend the wider project board and to act as a focal point for all future tenant engagement.

In the ensuing debate, Members raised a number of questions/comments including the following(*responses in italics*):

- Why did the Britwell and Haymill Regeneration Project have an overall red status?

*Officers had tried hard to progress matters over the last 8 months but the scale of the project meant that it was dependent on government funding. No new expenditure had been committed in the CSR but a dialogue had been maintained with the Homes and Communities Agency. The project remained a priority and a meeting regarding funding would take place two weeks later. The scheme would possibly be re-phased to alleviate cash flow problems. The Committee would be updated when a response had been received from the Agency.*

- Was funding for the housing and shops safe?

## Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 02.12.10

*The retail development would be funded by Developers but the housing depended on funding from the government.*

- Would the funding expected through the decent homes programme still be available?

*This question would be responded to in detail at the next meeting in January 2011.*

**Resolved** - That the progress to date on the Housing Futures project and the proposed workstreams to be undertaken in the coming months to achieve the target go-live date of April 2011 be noted.

### 47. Executive Forward Plan

**Resolved-** That the report be noted.

### 48. Forward Work Programme

**Resolved** – That the report be noted and that the following items be added:

- Current position with 'My Council' - 27<sup>th</sup> January, 2011.
- Update on Voluntary and Community Sector funding – quarterly report (31<sup>st</sup> March, 2011).

### 49. Attendance Record

**Resolved** - That the report be noted.

### 50. Date of Next Meeting

The Committee discussed the availability of information regarding the Council's financial settlement that would be reviewed in early January. It was agreed that it would be appropriate to convene the next meeting at a later date so that the relevant detail could be made available to the Committee.

**Resolved** - That that the next meeting scheduled for 13<sup>th</sup> January, 2011 be moved to 20<sup>th</sup> January, 2011.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 9.15 pm)