

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Tuesday, 13th September, 2011.

Present:- Councillors M S Mann (Chair), Basharat, (Vice-Chair), Davis, Minhas, Munawar, Plenty and Smith

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillor Parmar

Apologies for Absence:- Councillors Haines and O'Connor

PART I

17. Declaration of Interest

None.

18. Minutes of the Last Meeting held on 12th July, 2011

The Minutes of the meeting held on 12 July, 2011 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

19. Member Questions

One Member question was received regarding the Government policy on capping housing benefit and whether this would result in an increase in required housing in Slough.

Neil Aves, Assistant Director of Housing Services, informed the Committee that it was currently too soon to assess the full impact of the changes, particularly due to the implications of the recession. He advised that there had been an increase in housing registration applications by 32% since 2010 and that all accommodation, excluding emergency accommodation was now full. It was noted that Slough was already taking places from at least 20 other local authorities, and this had a number of knock on effects for the Borough. Members were advised that Thames Valley Police had expressed concerns with regard to the number of criminal offenders who could possibly be relocated to Slough.

The Assistant Director also stated that it was becoming increasingly difficult to find private accommodation to rent in Slough, as an increase in demand was allowing landlords to ask for large deposits upfront, in addition to the requirement to provide a guarantor. Members were also informed that an increase in homelessness was foreseeable as claimants between the ages of 25 and 35 would become eligible for a single room rate only as opposed to entitlement to rent a flat, as had previously been the case.

A Member questioned where the surplus people requiring accommodation had come from, and was advised that there had been an increase in people moving to Slough from West London, Berkshire and other urban areas such

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as Portsmouth and Southampton. The Assistant Director confirmed that Slough was required to add those people requiring accommodation to the waiting list, which consequently had implications for the social services and education service areas.

20. Finance and Project Reporting For Monitoring Report to 31st July, 2011

Emma Foy, Acting Head of Finance, outlined a report to update the Committee on the latest financial position at the end of July, 2011. She highlighted a number of areas, including that the Finance Section had forecast an overspend for the 2011/12 General Fund of £32K at the end of period four, and that the Housing Revenue account recorded a projected surplus of £43K in addition to the budgeted surplus position of £87K. It was also reported that the Community and Wellbeing Directorate had an under spend at 31st March of £17K relating to the Free Swimming Initiative. The Education and Children Services Directorate was currently in a break even position, however increasing pressures in Looked after Children would result in an upward forecast the following month. The Committee was advised that the Commercial and Transactional Services had a further budget pressure of £215K due to the annual running costs for the SAVVIS server.

A number of questions were asked by Members, including whether or not any proposals had been put in place to ensure that the Council would save money and the implications that inflation was expected to have on the Council's budget. The Committee was informed that proposals had been put in place by PPRG to save £8m, however due to the current economic climate, the Council was unable to sell property at the speed required to fund the capital programme. Members were told that the current years' budget build had been calculated to take inflation into account and contracts were frequently being reviewed and renegotiated, if possible, to offset the cost of inflation. A Member raised a concern with regard to generation of income via the sale of Council property; Members were assured that the only Council assets to be sold fell within the 'D' Category, the 'A' Category being the most valuable.

A question was raised with regard to the use of the Co-operative Homes which were handed back to the Council in September 2009, and the Committee was informed that the properties were blighted and consequently one had been sold and three had been destroyed after all residents were relocated.

Update with regard to Staff Appraisals

Kevin Gordon, Assistant Director of Professional Services, provided the Committee with statistical information demonstrating that there had been progress throughout the Council with regard to the number of staff who had been provided with appraisals. It was noted that 1265 staff were eligible for an appraisal and in the 12 months to 12 September, 470 staff had an appraisal which equated to 37.2% of staff. The Chief Executive Directorate had the highest percentage of completed appraisals whilst Resources and Regeneration had the lowest level. The Assistant Director accepted that the

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number of staff who had received appraisals was not yet at the required level, however the process had been hindered due to a number of restructures, the number of staff on annual leave last month and the time which it took to collate all the information. It was confirmed that the Chief Executive and all Directors fully supported quality appraisals and a progress report would be brought to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in three months time. It was also felt that it would be beneficial to consider the statistics at the end of year and budget setting process.

A number of questions were raised by Members, including the frequency at which appraisals were carried out and the consequential cost. The Assistant Director advised that it was standard practice within the Council to provide appraisals annually; however discussions were in place with regard to implementing a more rigid appraisal scheme which if formalised, would be carried out at the start of the financial year. It was noted that appraisals required a significant investment from the Council; however this cost would be offset by the efficient working of staff who were properly performance managed and well trained.

Gold Project Update

The Assistant Director outlined a summary of the Council's Gold Projects at 31st July, 2011. It was highlighted that the 'Safeguarding Improvement Plan' had been added to the list of projects, in response to the recent Ofsted Inspection. The Committee noted that seven projects had a green status, and two had an amber status. None of the projects were categorised as having a red status.

The Committee raised a number of questions regarding Adult Social Care Transformation and the Personalisation Programme. In response, the Assistant Director advised that the programme was a national one but was a matter of choice for individuals and would not always be appropriate for all clients.

Members praised Officers for the work they had done to make the Chalvey Community Hub a success. A Member felt however that the success of the scheme had been overshadowed by the ongoing road closures on Chalvey Road West and argued that the current system threatened many businesses in the area. The Committee agreed that an update report on this issue should be submitted to its next meeting. Further concerns were raised regarding the effectiveness of the Council's telephone systems and a Member reported that every week he received several emails of complaint. It was agreed that a report on this subject would be requested for the next meeting of the Committee.

Members noted the position on the School Places in Slough Project. A Member commented that there was evidence from parents that insufficient places were available. Clair Pyper, Director, Education and Children Services, advised that there were sufficient places available for the number of places predicted in September. It was highlighted that a requested preferred

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school could not always be guaranteed and also that there was no guarantee that children would automatically be allowed a place in the same school as older siblings.

A Member asked whether in relation to school places in Slough, all of the budget had been spent by August and it was agreed that The Director would forward a detailed response to this after the meeting.

Resolved-

- (a) That the report be noted.
- (b) That the Committee places on record its congratulations to Officers for the completion of the Chalvey Community Hub.
- (c) That further reports be submitted to the Committee as follows:
 - Staff Appraisals- update on completion rates- 6th December, 2011
 - Staff Appraisals- update on end of year completion rates-10th April, 2012
 - Chalvey-Road Closures: current position
 - Effectiveness of Council's public telephone systems-to be included in Transactional Services report , 11th October, 2011

21. Housing Revenue Account Subsidy System

Neil Aves, Assistant Director, Housing Services, outlined a report setting out Government Proposals regarding changes to the national Housing Revenue Account (HRA) subsidy arrangements. The Committee was advised that the existing system required the Government to predict the rental income and spend of the Council which gave rise to a number of problems including, that only 3 months were available for the Council to set its housing budget in. The new system would require the national housing debt to be divided up between Local Authorities. It was confirmed that in order to ensure that Councils do not acquire more debt than they can afford, a limit, as to how much money could be borrowed, would be set. It was expected that legislation detailing the scheme would be implemented in April 2012. Until that time it would not be possible to provide exact figures with regard to the Council's expected debt, as this would be generated by Government.

The Committee was informed that one of the benefits of the new system was that it would enable Councils to keep all rental income generated by their housing, as opposed to being required to return a proportion of the income to Government, as was the case under the current system. The Assistant Director informed the Committee that it was expected that the debt acquired as a result of the scheme, would be paid off within 15 to 20 years at which point all rental income would become available to the Council. Members were told that it would be of key importance to ensure that the scheme was run efficiently. A project was underway to establish how much money would be required over the following thirty years, to maintain the stock in its present

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condition. This would enable the Council to plan expenditure for projects, such as the replacement of doors and windows, as necessary.

A Member asked how long it would take before a profit would begin to be made as a result of the scheme and was advised that during the early years of the scheme the Council would be paying back a large sum of the interest and principle sum; however it was expected that after approximately five years the Council would begin to make a profit.

A number of questions were raised with regard to the 'Right to Buy' scheme, in particular, the implications of selling Council properties and who would reap the benefit from such sales. The Assistant Director informed Members that the number of houses sold under the scheme had reduced significantly and it was predicted that between 12-18 houses would be sold annually. This loss would be taken into account by the Government when calculating the Council's estimated rental income. The Committee was informed that the Council would retain 25% of capital at the time a property was sold; the further 75% became property of the Government who reinvested it in new affordable housing.

The Assistant Director advised that the Treasury would be looking into the possibility of borrowing for HRA alone, to ensure that the Council would not be prevented from borrowing for additional areas in the future.

Resolved - That the report be noted.

22. Heart of Slough Scheme-Update

John Rice, Interim Assistant Director, Environment and Regeneration, outlined a report providing an update on the Heart of Slough (H of S) Project, including information on Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs). The Committee noted that progress had been made with regard to all quadrants of the H of S scheme and the new bus station had been fully operational since 28th May 2011.

Members were advised that the CPO for the land and rights required for the proposed site of The Curve, had been agreed by Cabinet in February, 2011 and the Order was made on 29th June 2011. The notice was served on all recipients of the Order, and 20 objections to the CPO had been received by the Secretary of State, the majority of which were concerned with access to buildings for delivery and fire escape purposes. The Committee was informed that this could easily be resolved by the granting of covenants to those who would require the retention of these rights. The Assistant Director stated that the only occupier directly affected by the plans was JD Sports, who had made use of a service ramp which would no longer exist once the plans were complete. The Council had suggested that a scissor lift be provided as an alternative access and the Assistant Director was optimistic that all objections would be withdrawn. Should this not be the case, the Secretary of State would call a public enquiry if necessary.

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In response to a question concerning Quadrant Four, the development of land belonging to the University of West London, Members were advised that the University had appointed architects who would be drawing up plans within the following 6 to 9 months. Members questioned whether any provision had been made for a play area on the site, in response to which the Committee were informed that the Council owned 13% of the site and therefore had some influence over how the land was to be built on. It was also noted that consideration had been given to the building of a large tower block which would contain a high volume of flats, thereby freeing some of the land and providing for public amenity space.

A number of further questions were raised including the adequacy of the pedestrian crossing which was to be installed and the lack of information which had been provided detailing the timetable for the development of the bus station. Members were told that new traffic signalling was to be controlled by a system known as SCOOT, which worked via sensors within the road and monitored traffic flow. The Assistant Director confirmed that additional services were being developed at the bus station, including toilet facilities, which would be contained within the on site café.

A Member questioned whether plans had been made to bring additional shops and restaurants into Slough town centre. The Officer confirmed that the Council had considered a number of options to boost the retail business within the town, including relocating Council offices; however this was not something that was economically viable at the time of consideration.

In response to a Member request, the Committee agreed that a report detailing costs and expected completion dates would be presented at a future meeting.

Resolved – That the current position be noted and that a report detailing the financial position be submitted to the Committee on 15th November, 2011.

23. Arrangements for Temporary Workers

Kevin Gordon, Assistant Director, Professional Services, presented a report setting out the arrangements the Council had in place for the use of temporary staff. Members were informed that the use of temporary staff provided flexible working opportunities for the residents of Slough and although the Council endeavoured to recruit staff directly, there were occasions when the use of temporary workers was advantageous, such as when the post was not required on a long term basis. The Committee was also advised that shortages in some occupational groups meant that the Council had no choice but to recruit via the temporary market.

The Assistant Director advised that Pertemps, the Council's onsite Temps Agency was frequently used to source temporary workers. It was noted that this contract would be due for renewal and renegotiation in the near future.

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It was also highlighted that the use of contractors had on occasions, despite being relatively expensive to employ, saved the Council a significant amount of money. A Member questioned whether it was possible for a number of Local Authorities to share the employment of one consultant, and was advised that this was something that the Council would implement were possible. It was noted for example that the post of Health and Safety Officer was shared between Slough Borough Council and Reading Borough Council.

The Assistant Director advised that this was the first time that the Council had collated statistical information with regard to the use of temporary workers and that further work would be carried out with all departments, to collate and analyse information such as the annual spend on temporary workers, their average cost and the average length of a temporary worker's tenure. Members were advised that a further report would be presented detailing this information.

Members were particularly concerned that temporary workers/ consultants should not be used by the Council for long periods of time. It was noted that all Council departments would be made aware that temporary staff employed via Pertemps could be transferred with no cost to the Council, after the completion of nine weeks employment.

The Assistant Director agreed that a more detailed report would be presented to the Committee at its December meeting.

Resolved – That the report be noted and that a further detailed report on the Employment of Agency Staff/ Consultants be submitted to the Committee on 6th December, 2011.

24. Census 2011- Verbal Update, Naveed Mohammed, Scrutiny Officer

Naveed Mohammed, Scrutiny Officer, provided a verbal update on the current position regarding the Census, 2011. The Committee was reminded that Slough's population as recorded at 2004 was 131,000; however the reliability of this information was somewhat questionable due to the failing of some residents to complete the census when requested. It was noted that there had been a steady rise in the number of new pupil registrations at schools, which suggested that many people were moving to Slough with the intention of settling, as opposed to the frequently referred to 'transient communities'.

Members were advised that the Office for National Statistics (ONS) would not release the results of this year's Cnsus, to any local authorities, until July 2012. However, it was noted that ONS might consider releasing additional data detailing the method of completion, for example, prior to this date. It was agreed that a further update would be provided to the Committee early next year, when the ONS would be invited to attend.

Resolved – That the report be noted and that the ONS be invited to a future meeting to discuss the outcome of the Census.

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25. Consideration of reports marked to be noted/for information

None were received.

26. Forward Work Programme

Details of the forward plan were noted.

Resolved – That the following items be added to or amended on the forward plan:

- Staff Appraisals- update on completion rates- 6th December, 2011
- Staff Appraisals- update on end of year completion rates-10th April, 2012
- Chalvey-Road Closures: current position
- Effectiveness of Council's public telephone systems-to be included in Transactional Services report , 11th October, 2011
- Implementation of the Equalities Act-moved to 15th November, 2011
- Localism Bill and Big Society-moved to 15th November, 2011

27. Attendance Record

Noted.

28. Date of Next Meeting- 11th October 2011

The next meeting of the Committee would be held on 11th October 2011

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 9.30 pm)