

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Thursday, 5th February, 2009.

Present:- Councillors Grewal (Chair), Basharat, Coad (from 7.20 p.m.), Davis, Dodds, Haines, Matloob and Walsh.

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Anderson, Parmar and Shine.

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Munkley.

PART I

63. Declarations of Interest

Councillors Davis and Walsh declared a personal interest in agenda item 4 (Housing Revenue Account Budget) as they were both Members of the Board of People 1st.

64. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 15th January, 2009 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

65. Establishment of Scrutiny Task and Finish Groups

The Committee was advised that requests had been received from two of the Scrutiny Panels to establish Task and Finish Groups (T&FG) to undertake specific pieces of work.

The first was in respect of the Health Scrutiny Panel which intended undertaking a review of wider well-being issues impacting the health of communities, groups or sections of communities in Slough. The Council had been invited to submit a funding bid to the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) to conduct such a review and whilst this initial bid was unsuccessful, the CfPS was sufficiently impressed with the bid that they had been able to identify alternative funding to support it. Details of the terms of reference of the T&FG were presented and the membership was currently being considered. It was suggested that the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Health Scrutiny Panel be authorised to finalise the membership to avoid any delay. The timescale for this review was the end of June, 2009.

The Community, Leisure and Environment Scrutiny Panel on 28th January, 2009 had considered a report on the Borough's library service including work being undertaken to transform and upgrade the libraries as opportunities arose. A strategic review of the service was to be undertaken and the Scrutiny Panel had recommended that a T&FG be established to undertake the review along with officers, including looking at issues such as the provision of more community library provision and how this could be achieved and financed; the identification and extension of partnerships in the field of library provision; the mobile library service; and parking/access issues at the

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Central Library. Councillors Davis, Long and Walsh had indicated that they would be prepared to serve on such a T&FG. This Group would also need to report back by June, 2009.

Resolved -

- (a) That the Committee approve the establishment of Task and Finish Groups on the following issues:-
 - (i) Health Scrutiny Panel – Review of wider well-being issues impacting on the health of communities, groups or sections of the communities in Slough.
 - (ii) Community, Leisure and Environment Scrutiny Panel – Review of the future vision for Slough’s library services.
- (b) That the terms of reference and membership of the Task and Finish Groups be as set out in the report and that the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Health Scrutiny Panel be authorised to finalise the membership of the Well-being T&FG.

66. Revenue Budget Strategy 2009-10 and Future Years

The Strategic Director of Resources made a presentation to the Committee setting out the Borough Council’s financial, capital, treasury and asset management strategies in advance of their submission to the Cabinet on 9th February and Council on 23rd February where the Council’s budget for 2009/10 would be determined, including the Council Tax to be levied from residents. The report set out the Strategic Director’s recommendations on the revenue and capital budgets and updated Members on the likely precept requirements of the Thames Valley Police and the Royal Berkshire Fire Authority. It also set out the latest position with regard to the local authority mortgage interest rate. He reminded Members that the individual Scrutiny Panels had received reports setting out the detail of those budgets relating to their particular portfolios and his presentation therefore concentrated on the overall budgetary policy as well as corporate growth and savings issues. The report was presented to the Committee for its comments for onward transmission to Cabinet and Council.

On completion of the presentation, Members raised the following issues in the subsequent debate:-

- A Member referred to the next three year settlement beginning in the financial year 2011/12 which would be before the 2011 census outcomes were published and noted the officer’s recommendation that strong arguments be made to the government not to close the three year settlement but that indicative three year budgets only were presented. This would enable them to be adjusted to reflect the Census outcomes as soon as the data was published. He asked whether such a possibility was likely. The Director responded that the

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next three year settlement was part of the current lobbying campaign and the government's attention was being drawn to the fact that there was a precedent for setting indicative budgets and, given that it had been recognised that the population figures were flawed, it was hoped that the government would take this into account before the settlement was closed.

- A Member asked whether the current financial climate was having an effect on the Council's ability to collect Council Tax and whether a sympathetic line was being taken where people were in financial difficulties. The Director explained that it was essential that as much as possible of the Council Tax was collected and the collection rate had been set at 99% in the current year. Whilst this was quite an ambitious target, arrears were pursued over several years and the Council performed relatively well compared to other areas with a churning population. He advised that the authority was collecting at its highest ever level in-year within the current financial year and hoped to achieve 98% overall but would continue to pursue arrears so that the target of 99% could be achieved. He also referred to the fact that the collection fund for 2007/08 had been over-achieved so it had been possible to feed some £400,000 back into the current year's budget.

Officers had not yet noticed a particular problem with householders being unable to pay their Council Tax this year but advised that, where necessary, flexible terms were put in place to assist people in difficulties. However, given the Council's financial position, it was important that as much of the Council Tax as possible was collected.

- A Member referred to the projected increase in places required in primary schools which was some 10 or 12% above the previous projection. He asked whether, given the problem with the population statistics, schools were also losing out financially. The Director commented that, because the funding for schools was based upon an annual pupil count, schools would not be falling short in the funding they received for their pupils. However, where the authority was losing out was in respect of the funding to provide additional school places through new build provision as the population figures did not recognise this additional need.
- A Member referred to the proposed reduction in posts in the Council's licensing office and asked whether this was appropriate, given that the service should be self-funding and may be able to achieve a profit for the Council. However, if the staffing was reduced, this was less likely. The Strategic Director confirmed that a licensing service was only permitted to break even, and that, at the present time, it was being subsidised by the Council. These proposals should mean that the cost was nearer a break even position.

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- Reference was also made to the reductions in the budget for the West Wing Arts Centre and whether this would have serious consequences for the viability of the project. The Director commented that a review of the West Wing was currently under way and the future provision would be decided on the basis of that review.
- A Member sought clarification as to the precept collected by the Borough Council on behalf of the Parish Councils and was advised that, if he required further detail, he contact the Parishes direct.
- At the request of a Member, the Director provided an update on the current negotiations in respect of shared services which were proceeding well.

Resolved – That the report and the recommendations to Cabinet and Council be noted.

67. **Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget Adoption and Annual Rent Setting 2009-10**

The Assistant Director, Housing presented a report proposing the revision of the 2008/09 Housing Revenue Account budget estimates to take account of changes in the government's funding regime which were announced after adoption last year; the proposed base budget for 2009/10; and the annual rent and service charge rise to tenants as dictated in the government's subsidy determination. Members were advised that the Board of People 1st (Slough) were recommending an average rent increase for 2009/10 of 6.32%, in accordance with the national rent restructuring formula. This equated to an average weekly rent increase of £4.80.

A Member asked whether it would not be possible to reduce the management fee paid to People 1st so that more money could be ploughed into improving services for tenants. However, the Assistant Director advised that the management fee did in fact include all of the services provided by People 1st and, in addition, the formula for the management fee were set out in an agreement which would have to be renegotiated and very strong reasons would have to be given for any such move.

A Member referred to the fact that, as the rent increase of 6.32% was an average, lower rental properties would in fact have a higher increase than that and sought guidance as to whether any action could be taken to protect such tenants. The Assistant Director undertook to undertake some work on this and respond to the Councillor direct.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

68. **Performance and Financial Monitoring for 2008/09**

The Strategic Director of Resources submitted a report highlighting the Council's overall performance from delivery of services to financial

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management, focusing upon performance management, debt recovery, human resources statistics, the revenue monitoring position and the capital programme. In respect of the revenue budget, there was currently projected overspend by directorates of £260,000, a reduction of £150,000 from that reported to Cabinet on 19th January. Corporate pressures currently stood at £1.7m, making a total projected overspend of £1.11m. Directorates continue to work on their action plans to contain pressures by the year end, with the Corporate Management Team having issued enhanced purchasing rules to reduce, if not eliminate, any non-essential spend between now and the end of the financial year.

Resolved – That the current position be noted.

69. Member Call-in on Communications

Councillor Plimmer had submitted a call-in requesting a review of the Council's current communications policy. He wished to examine whether, in the light of the existing budget difficulties, it would be possible to bring all of the smaller communications budgets held within departments directly under the central communications team, thereby leading to efficiencies. He was also interested in the question of how events could be delivered in future given the difficulty in the Council providing funding. In addition, he wished to have some input into the challenge of communications going forward in relation to the difficulty of maintaining the Council's identity under partnership working within the Local Area Agreement.

Councillor Plimmer had submitted a number of specific questions, answers to which had been prepared by the Head of Communications and were tabled. Councillor Plimmer was given the opportunity to speak to his call-in and explain his thinking on the matter. He believed there were many issues that could be looked into, including obtaining better value through joint arrangements with external partners and joint provision, perhaps with other neighbouring authorities. He also believed it would be possible to learn from the experiences of other authorities with innovative ideas and drew particular attention to the external events which the Council was finding increasingly difficult to support financially. He considered it should be possible to look into increasing the level of sponsorship from local businesses and elsewhere to ensure that events in the town continued.

The Chief Executive commented that the possibility of pooling all of the communications work into one area had been looked at and had been agreed in principle although there was still a lot of detailed work required. It was believed that greater value for money could be achieved in this way and work was proceeding.

Member expressed concern at the potential loss of such events as the Canal Festival where ICI had put in substantial funding over the years. The fear was that, if the Festival did not proceed, then such sponsorship would be lost. Officers commented that the Council's budgetary position required savings to

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be made but that if events such as the Canal Festival could continue without a Council contribution, then this would be an excellent outcome.

Members felt that this was an area that required further review and that it should be possible to achieve a higher level of sponsorship of events with there being many potential partners in the town. Following discussion, it was proposed and agreed that a Task and Finish Group be established to look into the area of communications and that the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Committee be authorised to agree the membership. Councillor Plimmer requested that he be included within the membership of the Group. In addition, all Scrutiny Members would be asked to express an interest in being involved in the Task and Finish Group, and in particular those with knowledge or expertise of media and communications issue.

Resolved – That a Task and Finish Group be established to look into the issues of communications, including sponsorship of events, and that the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Committee be authorised to agree the membership of the Group.

70. Forward Agenda Plan

The Committee considered its agenda plan for future meetings. It was agreed that an update be presented to the next meeting on the Comprehensive Area Assessment as the framework for it should have been published by then.

The Chief Executive referred to the attendance at the next meeting of the Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police and suggested that Members give consideration to issues and questions they wished dealt with at the meeting, otherwise the agenda would be set by the Chief Constable rather than by the Borough Council. The Scrutiny Officer was asked to coordinate the preparation of questions.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 p.m. and closed at 8.30 p.m.)