

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Thursday, 26th February, 2009.

Present:- Councillors Grewal (Chair), Davis, Dodds, Matloob, Munkley and Walsh.

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Anderson, Dhillon, Long, Maclsaac, Plimmer and Stokes.

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Basharat, Coad and Haines.

PART I

71. Declarations of Interest

Councillors Grewal and Munkley declared personal, prejudicial interests in agenda item 5 (Scrutiny of “Castlevie” Issue – Further Consideration) and would leave the meeting when this item was reached. Councillor Munkley reiterated his concerns raised at previous meetings at having to withdraw from the meeting for this item.

72. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 5th February, 2009 were approved as a correct record, subject to two minor corrections; firstly, in minute 65 (Establishment of Scrutiny Task and Finish Groups), the timescale for the review of well-being issues being amended to report by the end of May, 2009 rather than June; and, in minute 69 (Member Call-In on Communications), clarification of the resolution to state that the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Committee had been authorised to agree both the membership and the terms of reference of the Task and Finish Group looking into this matter.

73. Presentation by Chief Constable, Thames Valley Police

Sara Thornton, Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police, accompanied by Superintendent Chris Shead, Local Area Commander (LAC) for Slough, made a presentation to the Committee outlining the Force’s overall priorities for policing, and referring in particular to the Slough policing area and the priorities for the town that had been identified in part through the Neighbourhood Action Groups (NAGs). She commented on the emerging themes for crime in the town and noted in particular that, whilst there had been falls in certain types of recorded crime, there was concern at an increase of some 15% in assaults recorded in Slough, in particular in the town centre area. However, local residents across the town had invariably put anti-social behaviour in their areas as being their primary concern rather than crime and this was probably due to the fact that such behaviour affected a larger number of residents than isolated incidents of crime. (A copy of the full presentation has been separately circulated to Members).

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On completion of her presentation, the Chair referred to a list of questions from Members which had been forwarded to the Chief Constable earlier in the week and a copy of which had been circulated to all Members of the Council. While some of the issues had been addressed during the course of the presentation, a number had not and the Chief Constable and the LAC were given the opportunity of responding to the remaining questions during the subsequent discussion. Members of the Committee and other Members present also asked further questions of the Chief Constable. The following issues were raised:-

- A Member asked whether it would not be possible to provide Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) with additional powers so that they had a more effective presence in the neighbourhood. The Chief Constable was in favour of this to some extent although she cautioned that it was important that the police and the PCSOs had distinct roles which did not overlap to any great extent. She referred to a national review currently taking place on this very issue.
- On a related issue, a Member noted that the presentation had shown that the level of police manpower per head of population in Slough was lower than that in other parts of the force and asked whether that figure included PCSOs. The Chief Constable confirmed that the figure related only to police officers and that PCSOs were in addition to this. The Member went on to comment that she had concerns that there was a lack of clarity amongst the public as to the precise role of the PCSOs and that an information campaign might prove useful. The Chief Constable confirmed that part of the problem was that individual forces had discretion within their areas as to the powers delegated to PCSOs and they therefore varied from one force to another and this may well have led to confusion in the minds of the public. The national debate referred to earlier was centring upon a standardisation of PCSO powers and her own view was that it would be useful if certain powers such as being able to issue speeding tickets was included and this was certainly the view of many of the NAGs in Slough.
- The Thames Valley Police Authority had agreed to an increase in its budget for 2009/10 of 4.5%. This would enable a further 94 police officers plus support staff to be recruited to the force in the next year with an additional 12 in the Berkshire East area.
- A new Home Office confidence target was to be introduced. This would be monitored on a quarterly basis through the British Crime Survey and related to “how well are the police and the local council tackling crime and anti-social behaviour in your area?” The Police had some concerns about the difficulty of meeting the proposed target.
- A Member asked whether the well-publicised lobbying campaign by the Council in respect of under-funding of its population by the government had any effect on the funding provided for the police. The Chief Constable commented that whilst the level of funding allocated to particular areas

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was predicated to some extent on the population, this was only one factor in a complex formula and other factors such as crime levels were taken into account. Her view was that the level of funding for Slough did not seem to be particularly inappropriate although over-resourcing in certain areas such as Oxfordshire had been identified as an issue. The Police Authority tried to ensure that resources were allocated on a fair basis across the force taking into account a range of factors.

- The Chair asked what support was being offered to Slough, given that there are emerging communities and the issues that this may present in terms of language barriers. The Chief Constable commented that the force was undertaking a variety of work to address the issue of the many languages spoken in the area, not least the large number of Polish speakers that had moved to Slough in recent times. More generally, she was aware of the pressures that Slough was under given its transitory population and the large number of incomers into the town; additional resources had been made available to the Slough police including additional funding for overtime payments to meet demand. In addition, a range of initiatives had been prioritised in the area including work on knife crime, including work in all of the Slough secondary schools. Particular reference was made to the additional monies provided by government to undertake initiatives targeting young people and the police were acutely aware of the need to engage with young people in Slough and referred to the range and success of the initiatives that they were currently undertaking.
- The issue of drugs in Slough and the police response to them was discussed. Superintendent Shead referred to Operation Chester which had proved extremely successful in targeting many of the major drugs dealers in the town and taking them off the streets. He believed that this had led to a change in the way the drugs market operated in Slough with much less open dealing and dealers apparently doing business with established contacts on a much more covert basis. Cannabis was still the most prevalent drug in the town, followed by heroin and cocaine. As regards crack, this was not considered to be a major problem for Slough although there were occasional seizures. Heroin was a bigger problem. He did not believe that there were any particular drug 'hotspots' in the town at present and there was no evidence to indicate that Slough was a 'drugs hub'. With regard to whether the drugs problem continued to have an effect on other types of acquisitive crime, there was a somewhat confused picture in that Operation Chester had coincided with a reduction in burglaries of some 7½%. However, there had been an increase in vehicle crime at the same time so no clear picture could be discerned. However, the view of the police was that Operation Chester had been successful in reducing the amount of open drug dealing in the town and had had a positive impact overall.
- A Member asked whether the police were targeting crimes involving lorries in the town as she believed there were a number of cases where lorries were being utilised to transport both drugs and illegal immigrants as well

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as take stolen items such as cars out. The LAC commented that whilst it was undoubtedly true that lorries were used in this way, and a number of high profile cases had been publicised where illegal immigrants had been found in the backs of lorries in Slough, the police had to take an intelligence-led approach as it was simply not possible, given the huge number of lorries passing through Slough, to undertake random checks. Where intelligence was available, a number of notable successes had been achieved including a raid on a local scrap metal dealer who had been involved in the transportation of stolen vehicles to Africa. As regards drugs, there was no evidence that lorries were being used for drug importation on any major basis.

- A Member also sought information on the difficulty in obtaining the criminal records of foreign nationals from their home countries and the problems this could pose for employers and others. The Chief Constable commented that there were varying degrees of co-operation with the authorities in other countries and, depending upon where an individual was from, it was sometimes very difficult or even impossible to obtain criminal records. However, the degree of co-operation was improving gradually and it was anticipated that the situation would continue to improve.
- With regard to a question about the force's strategy on recruiting black and Asian officers, the Committee was advised that over the last ten years, the force had increased its proportion of black and minority ethnic officers from 2% to 4%. This was however well below the target figure of 7½% although the ability to change rapidly was constrained by the fact that police officers normally served for 30 years and any change was of necessity gradual in nature. A target of 10% BME recruitment had been set for the current year although the level achieved would probably be nearer 7% and efforts were continuing to be made to undertake a range of initiatives to target the BME population to consider a career in policing. Slough, Wycombe and Reading were being particularly targeted for publicity in and a range of strategies were being undertaken including information stands in shopping centres and visits to places of worship. It was not true as had been suggested by one Member that a large number of BME Officers left within the first two years of being recruited.
- A Member referred to a recent report by the Runnymede Trust which had criticised the failure to promote and retain black officers and overuse of stop and search against BME groups. The Chief Constable commented that she was looking at ensuring that all BME Officers within the force were given the opportunities they needed to gain promotion and she outlined the steps that she was taking in this regard. The force was extremely committed to ensuring that BME Officers had an equal opportunity with their white counterparts to succeed within the force. With regard to stop and search, it was true that, nationally, the stop and search rate in respect of the BME communities was disproportionately high. In the Thames Valley area, the rate in respect of black individuals was less disproportionate but more disproportionate in respect of Asian individuals

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and she was currently examining the possible reasons for this although no conclusions had been drawn.

- The Chief Constable was asked to give feedback on the recent Audit Commission community safety inspection, particularly with regard to the increase in crime statistics and how the force could work with the Council and its partners to effectively address areas of weakness. She responded that the inspection report related to performance in the previous year and she had concerns given that certain of the crime statistics were now worsening. Her view was that serious efforts needed to be made to improve joint working between the police, the local authority and other partner agencies as there was clearly still a great deal of additional work that needed to be done.
- A Member asked what the Police's priorities for policing were in Slough over the next 12 months and whether the current policy for the Britwell area had been effective and whether the approach had been changed in the past 18 months. Chris Shead commented that the priorities for Slough were based on those agreed with partners through the Local Area Agreement and were aimed at tackling anti-social behaviour and other areas of concern. As far as he was concerned there had been no change in the policy adopted in the Britwell area in recent times and the police were working to ensure that the level of resources committed to the area was maintained. Interestingly, there had been a reduction in the levels of crime in Britwell and the north of Slough over the past year although there had been an increase in the east and south of the town including the town centre.
- A Member asked what police community initiatives were currently being worked on in the town. Superintendent Shead referred to a range of projects and initiatives including a successful bid for Slough to be a pilot area for the development of neighbourhood policing. Additional monies had also been secured for undertaking specific work on youth crime and there was a whole raft of work taking place in respect of family intervention. He also referred again to the high level of community safety work including work on knife crime in the town's schools. There was a great deal of police work being undertaken in the community.
- Reference was made to the high levels of crime around some garage areas on Slough's estates and whether the police specifically patrolled and checked such areas. The LAC commented that where such a problem was identified, the police would deal with the issue. Sometimes the problem was identified as being of an environmental nature and he referred to an example at Kenilworth Close where the police had made recommendations to reduce the likelihood of an area being subject to anti-social and other behaviour. Where the police became aware of particular area being used for criminal purposes, then officers would be deployed to tackle it.

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- Reference was made to the problem of vehicle crime which was a major issue for Slough and he referred to the operations put in place to tackle it. This had given rise to some improvement in the situation. He also referred to the prolific offenders programme which aimed to encourage such individuals to change their ways and, if they were willing to do so, strategies were in place to assist them. This programme had already shown a measure of success.
- There was a variety of schemes in place to protect the lonely elderly and the police worked with Age Concern and other agencies in the field to tackle this issue. The police strategy of always trying to speak to victims of crime in the vast majority of cases would also seek to reassure the elderly in particular.
- A Member asked what the protocol was when someone rang to report a crime. He was advised of the procedure followed with an urgent call being responded to within 15 minutes or within 60 minutes for less urgent cases. Otherwise, the information was passed on to the local police station who arranged for the call to be responded to.
- A Member asked what action could be taken where a serious crime was reported and the police did not respond. The Chief Constable commented that if the police failed to meet their own standards, then there were ways that individuals could seek to address such a failure. She reiterated her plea made at previous presentations that Members and others should always advise her of failures on the part of the force so that action could be taken to address the problem.
- A Member asked whether the Chief Constable viewed the reality television series "Road Wars" which included scenes shot in Slough had been beneficial to policing in the area and whether the police were likely to continue to be involved in this. The Chief Constable commented that the decision to be involved in this programme had been made several years ago and she shared Members' concerns that it did not always show Slough in a good light. For this reason it had been agreed to take no further part in it. However, repeats were being shown on television over which the police had no control.
- A Member asked what the police were doing to tackle the fear of crime as evidenced by the responses of local residents in the last annual attitude survey. Chief Constable acknowledged that this was a difficult issue because fear of crime did not always reflect the reality of the situation in an area. She believed that the policy of always attempting to speak to victims of crime was helping the situation as was the increase in neighbourhood policing and making sure that the police were always accessible and visible. However, she acknowledged that one crime in an area could have a disproportionate effect on people's attitudes and high levels of anti-social behaviour were particularly difficult in this regard.

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- A Member referred to concerns expressed by his local NAG about certain individuals who were known to the police as being the instigators of much anti-social behaviour in the area and there was a feeling that the police did not seem to be able to effectively tackle these individuals. He also referred to the problem where police did not always appear to respond to reported crimes. The LAC commented that it was a concern that local residents did not always appreciate the action that the police were taking where individuals were known to them. However, the police were making significant use of both ASBOs and Anti-Dispersal Orders although there was a perceived problem in that where individuals breached their ASBOs, the courts did not always, in the view of the police, impose sufficient penalties. He would be meeting the magistrates shortly to urge them to impose appropriate penalties in their courts in respect of individuals who breached their ASBOs.

With regard to the issue raised about responding to certain types of crime, it was the case that the police always responded to certain crimes but it was not always possible to respond to every crime reported because of the scarcity of police resources. It was for this reason that the initiative referred to earlier in the meeting to ensure that all victims of crime received a visit either from a police officer or a PCSO had been initiated in November, 2008 and it was hoped that this would be seen as a positive move.

- A Member expressed the view that it might be appropriate for them to be a more structured and formal relationship between the neighbourhood police and elected Councillors as there had been occasions where he as a Ward Councillor had been unaware of changes to police personnel in the area. It was not always possible for Ward Councillors to attend every NAG meeting and another method of communicating with local councillors would be appreciated. The Chief Constable commented that this was a key relationship and it was important that a structure was in place that worked well for that locality. She was happy to support whatever worked well for Slough although she was slightly hesitant about having additional formal meetings which were not always the best use of scarce time and resources. If the communication of information by email to local Councillors would be of benefit then this could be explored with the LAC and this would be discussed and taken forward as appropriate. Reference was made to the possibility of a regular monthly email to the local Councillors to update them on recent events and this was welcomed.
- A Member asked whether police funding was available to bring the cameras on the A4 into the local authority's own CCTV system as she understood that there was a technical problem requiring recabling. Chris Shead acknowledged that CCTV was an extremely useful tool for the police and the authority, but that no money was currently available for this work. However, discussions were ongoing with the Council's Strategic Director of the Green and Built Environment to identify a possible funding stream for a bid through the LSP and this would be pursued.

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- A Member asked whether the police had enough funding to undertake their role and whether the monies allocated were used as efficiently as possible. He also asked whether officers should give their badge number if requested and made reference to a particular issue of concern to him. The Chief Constable responded that the funding was never as much as the police would wish ideally but she believed they used it in as efficiently as possible. She confirmed that a police officer should always give their number but could not comment on a particular case referred to by the Councillor. She advised him to raise his particular case with her separately or through the normal complaints procedure.
- A Member sought information on what percentage of police officers were trained in child protection policies and procedures and whether such training was co-ordinated with partner organisations. He also asked what improvements the police had instigated as a result of the Laming Inquiry. The Chief Constable referred to the force's child abuse unit within which all of the officers were trained to an extremely high level to deal with child protection issues. The staff worked extremely closely with the local authority and other partner agencies in this field. More generally, police officers were not given specialist child protection training although they did receive awareness training to identify issues. Where a child protection issue was identified, then they would refer it to the specialist team. With regard to the Laming Inquiry, the police had fully considered the recommendations at the time and had implemented changes as recommended to comply with them. The Member expressed some disappointment at the response as he understood that specialist training for all officers was now required.

On completion of the questioning, Members expressed the view that a six monthly update from the police would be appropriate. The Chief Constable commented that due to her other commitments she would be unable to attend these meetings on more than an annual basis and it was agreed that the LAC attend on a six monthly basis in future.

There were also a number of other written questions which had not yet been forwarded to the Chief Constable and these would be sent off for a written response. Members also requested that a copy of the presentation be forwarded to them for information and this was agreed.

The Chair thanked the Chief Constable and the Local Area Commander for attending the meeting and for dealing with Members' queries.

Resolved – That presentations be made to the Committee by the Thames Valley Police on a six monthly basis in future, with the Chief Constable being invited to attend on an annual basis as at present.

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74. Neighbourhood Shops Policy

The Assistant Director of Housing reminded the Committee that in September, 2008 it had considered a report outlining concerns about the inflexibility of the current neighbourhood shops policy and seeking a review and possible amendment of it. He reminded Members that the Council owned 88 shops situated on HRA designated land with People 1st (Slough) being responsible for managing them on the Council's behalf. People 1st had instructed ColliersCRE to provide estate management and valuation services in respect of the shops it managed. Following the previous Member comments, ColliersCRE had been requested on behalf of the Borough Council to undertake the policy review and a copy of their review document together with a draft amended policy was submitted for the Committee's consideration prior to its submission to the Cabinet in April.

The aim of the policy was to provide the Council, shop tenants and local people with a clear indication as to what the Council as landlord hoped to achieve from retaining these parades and the management strategy that had been adopted. The policy set out the following key messages:-

- The Council supports retention of local parades.
- The Council would seek to encourage uses which meet the needs of local people.
- The Council will give preference to uses that demonstrably meet essential local needs and/or create employment opportunities.
- The parades produce a valuable source of income which funds the Council's housing services. They will therefore be managed in a commercial, yet flexible manner, subject to other policy objectives.
- The Council will ensure that the general facilities at the local parades are maintained and will carry out inspections on a regular basis.

The section in the report dealing with change of use within local retail parades stated that the Council would normally only permit changes of use at ground floor level from shops (use class A1) where certain conditions were met. However, it stated that where a parade had reached the defined limit with regard to non-A1 and non-essential/desirable uses and a unit has been on the market for in excess of three months without any viable commercial interest from an A1 retailer, consideration should be given to applications for change of use if potential interest has been received. However, the vacant unit should continue to be marketed for a further three months and if an A1 tenant was found during this time, then preference would be given to that use rather than to any other use brought forward, providing the rental offer reflects the true market value. In addition, where there was a vacant unit and the level of non-A1 or non-essential/desirable goods in a parade is below the defined limit, consideration should be given to alternative uses without the need to market the property for a minimum of six months. However, at all times a healthy tenant balance should be maintained and a commercial approach should be taken to ensure the future rental valuation of the parades was not compromised. In such circumstances, should interest be registered for a unit from both an A1 retailer and a non-A1 or non-essential/desirable tenant, the

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level of rental offer would be the primary consideration. Where there was a considerable difference between the rental terms, the highest offer would be taken in order to protect the Council's interest. However, should the offers made be of a similar level, preference would always be given to the core A1 use.

A Member commented that complaints were received where more than one take-away shop was sited in a small parade and sought clarification of the proposed policy on this. The officer stated that no more than 50% of the shops in a parade should normally be take-aways and reiterated that one of the aims of the new policy was to ensure that shops were let rather than being boarded up for long periods which could attract vandalism and would bring down the appearance and environment of a parade. A Member also preferred to a specific shop tenant whose lease apparently referred to a condition that there should be only one take-away establishment in a particular parade in Cippenham and the officer stated that this would have to be looked at separately from the policy if that was indeed the case.

Other Committee Members took the view that the current policy was in urgent need of review and that a more flexible approach was required to ensure that shops on parades were fully let as far as was possible.

Another Member present at the meeting expressed the view that the current policy was fully adequate and should not be changed as the allowing of additional take-away premises on shopping parades could lead to a number of problems including non-viability of the take-away businesses which may be in competition with one another and associated problems including litter and anti-social behaviour in the parade, particularly late in the evening when take-away establishments were frequented. He also believed that a proliferation of take-aways was unhelpful in that many of them would only open in the evenings and would be shut out throughout the day.

Another Member referred to the need to formulate a policy in respect of the threat of Tesco's opening shops close to existing shopping parades, undercutting the local shops, thereby leading to their eventual closure. Officers commented that this was a planning issue rather than one for the local shops policy.

One Member of the Committee, whilst supporting certain of the aims of the policy, was extremely concerned particularly with regard to paragraph 3.6(4) where it was suggested that monetary considerations should be the most important factor in respect of a property which was vacant and where both A1 and non-A1 prospective tenants had come forward. He was fundamentally opposed to this part of the policy and could not therefore support it for that reason.

The officer commented that, notwithstanding the fears expressed by some Members, it was not the case that officers were inundated with applications for new take-away establishments and there was still a steady level of interest in A1 uses. He did however accept the concerns expressed by Members but

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felt that the additional flexibility proposed would be appropriate in ensuring that the parades continued to be as viable as possible.

Following further debate, a proposal that the Committee support the proposed new policy was put and carried by 4 votes to 2 votes.

Resolved – (Councillor Munkley dissenting)

- (a) That the review of the existing neighbourhood shops policy carried out by ColliersCRE be noted.
- (b) That the comments of the Committee, including its support for the proposed new policy, be passed to the Cabinet for consideration at its meeting in April, 2009.

(Councillors Grewal and Munkley withdrew from the meeting at this point.)

75. Appointment of Chair

In the absence of both the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Committee, nominations were sought from the remaining Members to chair the meeting during consideration of next item. Councillor Walsh was moved, seconded and appointed Chair.

(Councillor Walsh in the Chair).

76. Scrutiny of 'Castlevue' Issue - Further Consideration.

The Committee was reminded that at its special meeting on 4th November, 2008 it had considered a number of questions submitted by Councillors Coad and Stokes arising out of their post-decision call-ins relating to the proposed appropriation of land at Upton Court Park, the "Castlevue" issue. That meeting had decided that the questions and responses given be circulated to Committee Members and other interested parties; that Councillor Stokes and Committee Members be invited to submit any further questions by the end of November, 2008 ; that Officers respond in writing to all questions by the end of December, 2008; and that a copy of all questions and replies be circulated with the agenda for the meeting taking place on 15th January, 2009 and that the Committee consider at that meeting whether it wished to undertake any further scrutiny of the matter.

Subsequent to the November meeting, a number of further questions were received from Councillors Stokes and Davis before the end of November and responses to these were circulated to all Committee Members and Councillor Stokes on 9th December. Subsequently, Councillor Stokes submitted a number of further questions by letter dated 19th December, 2008.

At its meeting on 15th January this year, the Committee was advised that two files mislaid by the Council's consultants had been located and, as a result, it was agreed to defer further consideration of the matter until Officers had had

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the opportunity to review the information in the files and amend the responses to certain questions if appropriate. The responses to questions 1, 3, 4 and 5 asked by Councillor Stokes were subsequently amended. Members were therefore asked to consider all of the questions and responses as now circulated and decide whether to undertake any further scrutiny of this matter.

The majority view of the Committee was that a large number of questions had been responded to by Officers to the best of their ability in the light of the information available, given that some of the questions related to matters going back almost ten years. Whilst it was important that Members were able to scrutinise issues about which they were concerned, it was felt as much information as was available had now been provided for the Members calling in the issue and little purpose appeared to be served by pursuing the matter further.

Councillor Stokes was given the opportunity to comment further. He expressed his concern on a number of matters. He believed that some of the answers given by Officers were incorrect and referred to what he believed to be inaccuracies in two of the responses given. He did not believe that the Committee had discharged its responsibility to fully scrutinise this issue and was concerned that no comments or recommendations had been submitted concerning the loss of two files by the Council's consultants. In addition he was extremely concerned that there appeared to be gaps in the files relating to two particular years.

In response, Officers commented that the files commenced from November, 1999 and that there was no information prior to that date. Officers had spoken to former Officers who had worked for the Council prior to that date but no further light had been thrown on the matter.

Councillor Stokes reiterated his concern at what he considered to be an incomplete scrutiny of the matter and stated that he would be considering taking the matter further either via the Audit Commission or the police.

The Borough Secretary and Solicitor commented in respect of a Member question that during the period 2004 to 2008 the matter had been discussed at length at both formal and informal meetings and a number of briefing notes prepared for the then Cabinet, copies of which had been provided for the Committee at previous meetings. He believed that there was a clear audit trail of the issues raised previously and the advice given to Members, and he was therefore unable to provide any further information. He also commented that he believed that the information provided had gone far beyond the original remit of the scrutiny which had referred merely to the decision taken by the Cabinet on 10th March, 2008.

Following further discussion, it was moved and seconded that, in the light of the fact that Officers had provided answers to all of the questions asked to the best of their ability in the light of the information available, no further purpose could be served by pursuing the matter further and that no further action be

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taken in respect of this scrutiny. This proposal was put and carried by 3 votes to 0 votes with 1 abstention.

Resolved - That as Officers have provided answers to all of the Members' questions in the light of the available information and as no further purpose will be served by pursuing this matter further, no further action be taken on this scrutiny.

(Councillor Grewal rejoined the meeting and took the chair.)

77. Performance and Financial Monitoring for 2008/09

The Strategic Director of Resources submitted a report highlighting the Council's overall performance from delivery of service to financial management, focusing on performance management, debt recovery and the revenue monitoring position to January, 2009. A Member asked, given the current financial situation, whether the Council was directing individuals in financial difficulty towards appropriate debt counselling. The Director reminded Members that a Working Group of Officers had been set up some time ago by the Chief Executive to examine the impact of the credit crunch on both the Council and the community and it had worked jointly with the Member of Parliament and partner agencies to provide support and guidance for affected individuals and groups.

A Member sought confirmation as to whether the Council would be utilising any of its balances in the current financial year in the light of the ongoing budget gap and what would be the impact of this on the authority. The Director replied that work was still ongoing to close the gap by year end and it was anticipated that it would not be necessary to utilise any of the Council's balances to bridge the gap. He was reasonably confident in his role as Section 151 Officer that the Council's balances at year end would be within the recommended range.

A Member sought further information on the emerging issue set out in the report concerning the Schools' PFI project where the facilities management providers (Pinnacle FM) had submitted an unexpected invoice in respect of utilities consumption in the sum of some £400,000. The Officer commented that the matter was currently under negotiation with the provider and he was therefore unable to comment at this time. However, he would report back on the outcome of the negotiations to this Committee.

A Member expressed the view that the Committee should be taking a more proactive approach to dealing with these performance monitoring reports than simply noting them, and suggested that a "traffic light" system should be introduced to flag up more readily for Members areas of concern that needed to be examined and possibly referred on to the Cabinet for action. The Director commented that it was important that this monitoring information was regularly scrutinised by the Committee and reassured Members that where there were concerns, they were always flagged. However, he was more than

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happy to look at the possibility of amending the format of the reports in future so that Members could more readily identify the key issues.

Resolved - That the report be noted and that the Strategic Director of Resources give consideration to amending the format of future reports as requested.

78. Comprehensive Area Assessment and Local Strategic Partnership

The Interim Assistant Director, Change Policy and Performance, presented a report updating the Committee on the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) prior to its implementation in April, 2009 ahead of a further update presentation scheduled for the meeting in April. He drew attention to the key elements of the new regime referring in particular to the two main elements, namely an area assessment which looked at how well local public services were performing across the whole area; and organisational assessments for the Council, combining the external auditors' value for money assessment in the use of resources combined with the joint inspectorate assessment of service performance by the Council. It was however unclear at this stage what weighting would be given to each.

A Member again referred to the concern that failure by one of the Council's partners could have a detrimental impact on the outcome of the assessment regime. However, it was acknowledged that the new CAA environment should give a better overall view of an area, rather than simply concentrating on local authority services as had been the case in the past.

Resolved - That the current position be noted.

79. Forward Agenda Plan

The Committee noted its forward agenda plan.

80. Date of Next Meeting

Thursday, 16th April, 2009.

81. Vote of Thanks: Mr A Millard

The Committee passed a vote of thanks to Andrew Millard, Interim Assistant Director, Change Policy and Performance, who was leaving the authority on 27th February. The Committee thanked him for his invaluable input into the improvement of the scrutiny process in Slough.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 p.m. and closed at 9.55 p.m.)