

Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Tuesday, 28th November, 2023.

Present:- Councillors Manku (Chair), Shaik (Vice-Chair), Escott, Hulme, Iftakhar, Mann, Matloob, Mohindra, O’Kelly and Stedmond

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Bedi and Wright

PART 1

16. Declarations of Interest

No declarations were made.

17. Minutes of the last meeting

Following discussion, it was agreed that:

- the request for further information regarding ICT improvements set out in paragraph 3.3 would be sought from the relevant Associate Director;
- the actions in paragraph 3.4 would be listed in the committee’s recommendations tracker;
- paragraph 5.4 was erroneous and should state that ‘Councillor Stedmond undertook to provide a response in due course.’

Regarding the Action Tracker and Recommendations Register, the Scrutiny officer advised that the whole-numbered items were referred to Members’ attention specifically, noting that several were due to be considered at forthcoming Cabinet meetings and feedback would be received after those dates. Some items had a January 2024 deadline and would be dealt with in due course, while others dated back to February 2023. Most of these had been reported on and others had been partially implemented. Any outstanding actions would be reported at a future meeting of the committee.

Resolved – That:

- a) The minutes of the meeting of 24 October 2023 be approved as a correct record, subject to the amendments above;
- b) The attendance report, the action tracker and the recommendations register be noted.

18. Verbal presentation:: Budget Setting and financial update

The Chair stated that the Committee had been expecting to scrutinise the Council’s budget setting process in the form of the Cabinet budget report,

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however, the report had been delayed and instead Members had been sent a presentation regarding the budget, at very short notice. These circumstances did not constitute good budget scrutiny, nor did they comply with the budget scrutiny guidelines recommended by CfGS (Centre for Governance & Scrutiny) and LGA (Local Government Association) and did little to allay Members concerns regarding the robustness of the budget setting process. He emphasised that the following year's budget scrutiny process must follow best practice.

Members asked the following questions regarding the delayed report:

Why had the report been delayed? Where were the bottlenecks in obtaining the information for the reports? Was the delay an indication that there were areas of concern regarding the budget setting process? What impact would the delay have on the overall budget setting process and would it have a negative impact on residents? Would there be additional delays in providing this information? How could officers provide surety regarding the budget setting process? At a previous scrutiny meeting, the Lead Member for improvement & Recovery had given assurance that the recurring issue of poor-quality reports and late reports being submitted to Scrutiny would not be repeated in the future.

The SBC Executive Director of Finance & Commercial advised that the Q2 (quarter 2) budget monitoring report had been delayed pending more detailed investigation and assessment of the information and data contained in the report. The delay had been necessary to ensure that the most accurate and up-to-date information regarding the budget would be submitted to Cabinet and residents.

She added that these were unusual and undesirable circumstances, due in part to resource issues (her team's workloads were spread across multiple areas of activity and the team were trying to catch up with outstanding work; high turnover in staff; embedding new staff in the team, who had brought a new perspective to the work of the finance team and had raised a number of queries regarding the report which had needed to be investigated).

Once these issues had been resolved, the draft budget report would be submitted to December Cabinet. She expected her team to be in a far stronger position in 2024 and was considering implementing further improvements in work processes to ensure that such a situation would not recur. She added that she did not expect this delay to negatively impact either the budget setting process or residents. Two Member briefings on the budget setting process were planned in coming weeks, which would bolster the budget scrutiny process and she would support Members in shaping their key lines of enquiry regarding the budget.

The Chair stated that the delay would affect the momentum of the committee and its work programme and future reports must be provided on time and that budget scrutiny must follow best practice.

The SBC Executive Director of Finance & Commercial highlighted two areas of significant in-year overspend (about which scrutiny members had raised

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concerns). These were ASC (Adult Social Care) and TA (temporary accommodation). There was an overspend of £7.8m in ASC and £4m in housing in Q1. She briefly outlined the key cost and income drivers for these areas.

Members asked the following questions and received the responses below:

Why was there a variance of £11m in ASC budget? Why had virements been necessary? Where was the £3.4m virement funded from? What measures were in place to mitigate against the overspends? What actions were being implemented to control the overspends, what were the timescales for these and how much could the overspends be reduced by? Why were hospital discharges not funded from the BCF? Was there a gap between the local housing allowance rates and local rents? The out-of-borough placement policy would need to be scrutinised in the future. Had the Housing surgeries included private sector tenants and would they be expanded?

The SBC Director of Finance & Commercial advised that the forecast overspends related to the cost of services in all areas, particularly in the areas of ongoing long-term support and care provision, staffing and operational pressures, short-term services related to hospital discharge (the latter being a national issue faced by many councils). Some of the discharges could be funded from the BCF (Better Care Fund) and the hospital discharge grant but had to be negotiated with the ICB (Integrated Care Board).

Housing, planning and property continued to be under pressure from unachievable income targets, particularly in respect of re-charges to the HRA (Housing Revenue Account). The current significant increase in demand for temporary accommodation continued to rise. A number of actions were in place to mitigate against these pressures.

She added that during the budget setting process for 2023-2024, a large number of budgets and in-year grants had been held centrally, which should have been allocated out to service areas. These amounts had been retained centrally to cover the cost of inflation, as the previous year, inflation had been unpredictable and had significantly increased. The virement had been provided from those centrally held budgets which had since been allocated to relevant service areas.

The Lead Member for Adults advised that the overspend was the result of an inadequate budget being set for ASC. The outturn forecast for ASC this year was similar to last year. The service had absorbed growth pressures from an increasingly ageing population, increases in the cost of living and service provider costs. In September, Cabinet had agreed virements to ASC totalling £1.8m and had allowed expenditure against two ring-fenced grants awarded in 2023. The original ASC budget had been a significant underestimate for the scope of the undertaking in adults and this was now being rectified. Internal discussions on the importance proportionate investment in ASC had been undertaken. She added that the Leader of the Council had prioritised improving health outcomes for residents and Cabinet had recently approved a carers' strategy and an older people's strategy and was committed to

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delivering improvements in ASC and setting the right-sized budget whilst ensuring best value.

The transformation delivery board had delivered £3m savings, and there were further savings anticipated in agency staff spend (plans included reviewing the contracts of agency staff who had been at the Council for more than 3 years), in continuing health care by transferring costs to the NHS where appropriate and reviewing fees and charges.

The Lead Member for Housing advised that the original budget had been significantly underestimated and included some unachievable targets, for example, re-charges to the HRA (Housing Revenue Account), the significant increase in demand for TA.

Actions being taken to bring down the overspend included:

- robust provider invoice checking before payment
- Accommodation visits for welfare and tenancy checks
- Create missing rent accounts for nightly/daily rate clients to capture income.
- Increase placements to avoid ready to let HRA properties.
- Introduce a new Private Sector Leasing (PSL) scheme.
- Introduce a new Private Rental Sector (PRS) Incentive scheme.
- Update the Out of Borough Placement Policy

She added that the issue of TA was a national phenomenon, the forthcoming increase in the LHA (local housing allowance) would indirectly help reduce pressures on temporary accommodation. Her group were committed to supporting vulnerable residents, improving the housing service whilst achieving best value. TA was a challenging situation that had been significantly underfunded. Housing surgeries had been introduced and a revised resident engagement strategy was due to be agreed at Cabinet shortly. The Finance team working closely with the housing team to assist tenants to submit timely housing benefits claims. The housing budget was being re-evaluated and would be re-allocated at a more appropriate level. Pressure on non-HRA housing costs has also been reduced by agreeing that a recharge for asset contract management should be transferred to the HRA.

The budget and savings targets which had been signed off the previous year had not been met. How could the committee be confident that the current year's savings would be met? Would the issues of centralised corporate budgets recur? Which of the mitigating actions would have the greatest impact on issues of overspend in housing? How could the spend on hotels the pressures on TA be reduced?

The SBC Executive Director of Housing advised that all of the actions listed in the presentation were due to be implemented. There were approximately 300 homelessness presentations to the Council each month. This was lower than the previous year's peak but nevertheless of concern. The Council had 698 units of TA in stock. The savings identified were crucial to ensuring good budget management. Going forward, tenants would be placed directly into

private properties rather than through agents or landlords (thereby avoiding high daytime and night time costs levied by landlords) and the increase in the LHA would provide further savings. All these measures would take around 12 months to bear fruit.

He added that temporary accommodation levels could not be anticipated or predicted as this was a demand-led service. Most local authorities would agree that the current national housing policy was not aligned with the stated objective of achieving a sustained reduction in homelessness. It was crucial that the homeless be installed in less expensive points in the market. In addition, there were plans to allocate a minimum of the Council's own housing stock for those living in TA accommodation, so that they could move out of expensive private accommodation and into sustainable social housing, when the stock was available.

He added that the scope of the out-of-borough policy would need to be widened and it would need careful consideration due to the legal implications of placing people out of borough. The policy affected a relatively small number of people. The revised policy would be submitted to February 2024 Cabinet for approval. Its core would be placing people in lower cost housing areas and giving them real choices about their sustainable housing for the future.

He clarified that the housing surgeries had also been attended by private (right-to-buy) tenants. Attendees had sought advice on a mixture of issues, some of which would be shared with relevant partners. There were plans to review and expand the surgeries in 2024.

The SBC Executive Director of Finance & Commercial re-iterated that the centrally held budgets and virements had been a way of dealing with inflation the previous year. Four internal budget challenge sessions, which had included both officers and members, had evaluated pressure areas, how these might be mitigated against and any contingency plans. It should be noted that the budget and the MTFFS (Medium term financial plan) existed to ensure delivery of priority areas of the corporate plan, in this case vulnerable adults and housing support.

The SBC Executive Director of Housing stated that new, longer-term relationships were being developed with the private rental sector and housing officers had recently attended a modelling with meeting with DLUHC. The actions outlined earlier were predicted to generate £700k savings. Ensuring that rent accounts were correctly established, that tenants had signed up for all their benefit entitlements, recovering rents and the revised out of borough policy would contribute significantly to achieving savings targets. The Director of Finance & Commercial added that the actions outlined in the report were predicted to reduce overall costs as well as achieve key outcomes for vulnerable residents.

It was agreed that officers would provide an email update to the Committee regarding the temporary accommodation actions, in due course.

Resolved: That the verbal presentation be noted.

19. Report from the Task and Finish Group on the Preparedness of Adults Social Care for an assessment by the Care Quality Commission

The Chair advised that the scope of the Task & Finish Group (T&FG) on the Preparedness of Adult Social Care for an assessment by the CQC had been to consider whether recommendations would be needed to improve the accuracy of the SBC (Slough Borough Council) CQC self-assessment and suggest further preparation work which may improve the chances of a more favourable CQC (Care Quality Commission) inspection and its associated costs and benefits.

The Chair of the Task & Finish Group (T&FG) stated that learning point for future T&FGs would be to provide an initial briefing session for T&FG Members as preparation for undertaking the work. The work of the T&FG had been affected by issues of limited time and limited availability of key staff.

The recommendations arose from the readiness of the service for inspection, where gaps had been identified. The report also set out the following:

- areas where the service was doing well
- how it was managed
- its areas of activity
- whether it had sufficient capacity to provide the information required for inspection
- that further work would need to be undertaken before the inspection
- Cabinet may need to allocate additional resources to the service for this purpose

The Head of Governance & Scrutiny advised that it had not been possible to cost the recommendations in the report due to the tight timescales. Cabinet would need to give the matter due consideration and may not be in a position to respond immediately.

Lead Member for Adult Social Care praised the work of the T&FG and agreed that the availability of data and its analysis were key factors in the inspection preparedness. ?? Every Slough Councillor should be ??

The Chair of the T&FG advised appendix D of the report highlighted areas requiring improvement (this related to August 2023) and there may have been improvements since.

The Director of ASC advised that making improvements in the service was an ongoing and continuous process. Nevertheless, it was important to recognise the fact that the self-assessment had indicated that ASC at Slough was likely to receive an 'inadequate' rating from the CQC and that the Council did not currently have the resources required to avoid such a rating.

Resolved: That:

- a) Recommendations be submitted to Cabinet for approval;
- b) the verbal update be noted.

20. Proposals for the Scope (terms of reference) for a Task and Finish Group on Resident engagement and Re-building trust

The Head of Governance & Scrutiny advised that when considering the scope of the proposed Task & Finish Group, Members should also consider whether launching a T&FG would constitute a good use of time and resources, how lessons learned from the previous T&FG could be applied to this one, desired outcomes as set out in the scope, how these would contribute to the Council's recovery and improvement.

The SBC Head of Communications and Resident Engagement advised that three areas of the Council's Corporate Plan related to resident engagement (namely Resident focused, Building trust & Enabling Residents & Communities). It was therefore an important area to be scrutinized that would contribute to recovery and improvement. The LGA defined engagement as anything which created a stronger two-way relationship between a council and residents. These could include formal consultations, co-production, crowd-sourcing, events, public meetings, focus groups, etc. The Council had implemented proactive communication methods of engaging with residents, however, more emphasis was required on two-way communication and greater consideration should be given to the role of Members in this area.

A 2023 resident survey showed that 25% of Slough residents trusted the Council 'a great deal / fair amount' compared with a national average of 59%. They survey also showed that residents most trust information from their local councillor, or from direct contact with the council.

The resident survey showed that 28% of Slough residents thought that the council acted on the concerns of local residents 'a great deal / fair amount' , compared with a national average of 52%.

Different models of resident participation, T&F could assess the Council's current position, undertake desktop research, work with the LGA, set up resident focus groups and learn from best practice at other authorities.

Following questions she advised that the Tenants' Engagement Strategy would be submitted to December Cabinet for approval; and that 500 consultation responses had been received and analyzed using the same statistical methods used for polling. The respondents were cross-ward and accurately represented the demographics of the town.

Desired outcomes of the T&FG would be to build stronger relationship with residents, increase in the levels of resident trust and a clear understanding of

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the ambition for citizen participation, while bearing in mind that resources were limited, and the T&F would need to come up with creative solutions.

Following questions regarding the scope of the T&FG, it was advised that complaints would be looked at as a source of information regarding the levels of resident engagement with the Council and would not be an evaluation of the complaints process itself. If the T&FG were to look at data from consultations, it would need to decide whether to sample them or do a deep dive into a single consultation.

Councillors asked further questions about potential areas of focus, and the Head of Governance and Scrutiny advised that these would be more appropriate for Members of the T&FG itself.

Councillor Mohindra was appointed as Chair of the Resident Engagement Task & Finish Group. The remaining membership of the T&FG would be confirmed after the meeting.

Resolved: That:

- a) A Resident Engagement Task & Finish Group be launched as per the draft scope at appendix A of the report;
- b) Councillor Mohindra be appointed Chair of the Resident Engagement Task & Finish Group.

21. Forward Work Plan

Following the planned budget briefing for scrutiny Members on 13 December, there would be a workshop to consider and refresh the work programme.

Resolved: That the revised work programme be noted.

22. Vote of Thanks

The Chair advised that he was resigning as Chair of CISC to take up a Cabinet position. He thanked and praised Committee Members and officers for their diligent efforts and commitment to ensuring the establishment of a robust scrutiny function at the Council, in accordance with the Directions.

The Vice Chair thanked the Chair for his leadership and guidance and wished him luck in his new area of responsibility

23. Date of Next Meeting

4 January 2024.

Chair

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(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.28 pm)