

Place Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Wednesday, 12th January, 2022.

Present:- Councillors Mohammad (Chair), Strutton (Vice-Chair), Gill and Minhas

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Ali, Gahir, Hulme and Mann

Apologies for Absence:- Councillors R. Davis and Grewal

PART 1

14. Declarations of Interest

No declarations were made.

15. Minutes of the Meeting held on 28th September 2021 and the Extraordinary Meeting held on 1st December 2021

Resolved – That the minutes of the meetings held on 28th September 2021 and the extraordinary meeting held on 1st December 2021 be approved as a correct record.

16. Member Questions

No Member Questions had been submitted.

17. Place Directorate Budget Proposals 2022/23

The Executive Director of Place & Community gave a comprehensive presentation that updated members of the Panel on the 2022/23 budget and savings proposals for what was formerly the Place directorate. An update on the Place & Community directorate restructure was also provided.

The 2022/23 savings were summarised as follows:

- Lease renewals and renting floor space (£1.38m), including at Observatory House.
- Increase in charges for waste services (£0.13m).
- Street cleansing reductions (£0.4m).
- Grounds maintenance reductions (£0.45m).
- Place directorate restructure (£1.15m General Fund and £2.4m overall).

The Panel noted the key and risks and pressures relating to the 2022/23 budget which included the impact on rent and lease income when buildings were sold; fluctuating diesel, petrol, electricity and gas prices; and further work on the costings for officer salaries in the directorate.

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In relation to the Place & Community directorate restructure it was noted that detailed work was taking place and that this would align with the capability and capacity review that the Council was required to undertake by the end of February 2022. There were 703 posts in the directorate of which 104 posts may be deleted, but noting that there were currently 99 vacant posts and a further 54 occupied by agency staff. All the proposals would be subject to union and staff consultation.

The Panel discussed the process of developing the savings proposals, including the detailed business cases that had been made available to Members to review. The Director was asked whether he was confident the business cases were consistently of the required quality on which to base savings proposals. The Director confirmed he was content with the overall quality and that their purpose to provide sufficient confidence that the saving figures identified were accurate and deliverable. The bigger risk to future savings was the financial data for the directorate and significant progress had been made to set a much more solid baseline than in the past, which would now provide a stronger foundation from which to build the budget from the bottom up.

Members discussed Observatory House and asked about the impact of renting out floorspace on any potential future sale if that was what the assets review recommended. The Director emphasised that the overall approach to asset disposals would be that each asset would be assessed independently and professionally with the overriding objective of securing best consideration for the Council. A procurement process was underway to appoint independent expertise to support the Council. The market remained strong for good quality office space in a prime and accessible location. A Member commented on the rental options for different parts of Observatory House and also commented that the lower ground parts of Herschel car park belonging to Observatory House were under-utilised. He asked if there were any plans to rent the car parking spaces out to nearby flats or hotels. It was responded that there were various potential options for the building and a flexible approach would be taken, but the key point in terms of the budget was that the estimated level of savings was considered to be a reasonable estimate of the income. In relation to the car park, it was noted that an occupier may want to utilise the spaces and this would therefore need to be considered as part of the asset review.

The Panel, and Members attended under Rule 30, asked a number of questions about individual savings during the course of the discussion which are summarised as follows:

- Leisure facilities – a Member commented that there was nothing in the savings plans about generating more income from leisure facilities such as the Salt Hill Park Activity Centre. The Director noted there was a separate savings plan for the leisure contract which was focused on securing the management fee as part of the contract with the provider, Everyone Active. Covid restrictions had had a significant negative

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impact on leisure centre income but the recovery was underway and the budgeted figure was therefore considered realistic.

- Waste services charges – Members asked about the approach to various charges for certain items such as mattress disposal and the Director explained that the strategy was to make the charges as simple as possible to administer and understand whilst ensuring the charges fully recovered costs.
- Fly-tipping - concern was expressed that higher bulky waste charges would increase fly-tipping, however, the Director stated that this perception was not supported by evidence and that most fly-tipping was by commercial tradespeople or unscrupulous landlords rather than residents seeking to dispose of unwanted large items. He commented on the approach being taken towards enforcement of fly-tipping and highlighted the need to take a balanced approach given the high cost of prosecutions, but that the Council did carry out surveillance, prosecution and removal to tackle the problem.
- Bulky waste fee discounts – the proposed charges for 2022/23 included a minimum charge of £51 for 3 items. Members expressed concern at the proposal to end free bulky waste collections for residents over 65 years of age or those in receipt of personal independence payments. In 2022/23 it was proposed that there be a £10 discount for those in receipt of income related benefit. The Director explained the rationale for the proposed changes. The charges had been reviewed in comparison to other local authorities and the proposed charges and exemptions would bring Slough more into line with comparators. The approach was based on the ability to pay. Several Members commented on the potential impact of a minimum fee and removal of free collections from those on low incomes and the Director agreed to carry out further review on the eligibility for discounted collections.
- Street cleansing – Members scrutinised the proposed savings and asked questions about vehicle leasing costs, enforcement of littering and dog fouling and litter picking regimes. It was acknowledged that the reductions in the frequency and litter picks, vehicles and staff would have an impact but levels of cleanliness would be closely monitored and the resources that were available would be deployed in a more responsive rather than regimented way to achieve acceptable levels of street cleanliness. There were set service standards and response times set for certain areas.
- Grounds maintenance – Members asked about the likely impacts of service reductions. The Director commented that there was likely to be an overall impact on the amenity but it hoped they could be minimised through good management. Priority would be given to maintenance where there were potential safety issues e.g. hedge trimming to maintain sight lines on highways. It was clarified that provision for HRA

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land was separate from General Fund provision and the Council would continue to comply with service standards provided for tenants.

- Restructure – further detail was requested on how the savings would be achieved. The detail was still being worked through but the Director was confident the proposed level of savings could be achieved.

A question was also asked about the proposed Customer & Community saving regarding reductions to the community and youth work teams. The Director stated that the Customer & Community Scrutiny Panel has expressed concern about the possible impact of this saving and work was ongoing to seek to identify alternative funding and gather evidence on the impacts of the service.

At the conclusion of the discussion the Panel noted the report and broadly accepted the savings proposals. It was proposed by Councillor Minhas, seconded by Councillor Gill, and agreed by the Panel that the Director be asked to carry out a further review of the eligibility for the bulky waste discount to support people on low incomes as far as possible.

Resolved –

- (a) That the Place directorate budget and savings proposals for 2022/23 be noted.
- (b) That the Director be asked to carry out a further review of the eligibility for the bulky waste discount to support people on low incomes as far as possible.
- (c) That the update on the Place directorate restructure be noted.

18. Forward Work Programme

The Panel reviewed the forward work programme for the remainder of the municipal year. Members expressed an interest in future scrutiny of the use of Section 106 funding and on income generation from the Place directorate. These would be considered for addition to the Panel work programme at the appropriate time, and noting that the Audit & Corporate Governance Committee and Overview & Scrutiny Committee had also expressed interest in the Section 106 issue.

Resolved – That the forward work programme be agreed.

19. Members' Attendance Record

Resolved – That the Members' Attendance Record for 2021/22 be noted.

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20. Date of Next Meeting - 24th February 2022

The date of the next scheduled meeting was confirmed as 24th February 2022.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.00 pm and closed at 9.21 pm)