

## **Customer and Community Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Tuesday, 9th November, 2021.**

**Present:-** Councillors Begum (Chair), Muvvala (Vice-Chair), Ajaib, Ali, Kaur, Minhas, Mohammad and Sandhu

**Also present under Rule 30:-** Councillors Akram, Carter, Gahir, Hulme, Mann, Matloob and Sharif

**Apologies for Absence:-** Councillor Hussain

### **PART 1**

#### **1. Declarations of Interest**

No declarations were made.

#### **2. Appointment of Non-Voting Co-opted Members of the Panel**

Members considered the proposal to appoint non-voting co-opted members to the Panel. After due consideration, it was agreed to allocate three places on the Panel to representatives of the Residents Panel Board. It was anticipated that two of these would be Ms Matharu and Mr Pollard who had previously been co-opted to the Neighbourhoods & Community Services Scrutiny Panel.

**Resolved –** That the Residents Panel Board be allocated three non-voting co-opted member places on the Panel.

#### **3. Member Questions**

There were no Member questions.

#### **4. Draft Budget Proposals 2022/23 - Customer & Community**

The Director of Place & Community gave a presentation on the progress of the 2021/22 in-year budget provision and the initial 2022/23 savings proposals for the Customer & Community directorate. The Panel welcomed the opportunity to scrutinise the initial proposals at an earlier stage of budget development than in previous years.

The directorate budget was £9.703m in 2020/21 compared to £7.094m in the current 2021/22 financial year. It was noted that the directorate had been assigned savings of £2.609m in the 2021/22 financial year and that it was on track to deliver this programme. Savings in-year had included stopping the use of 'as and when' staff in libraries and pausing the purchase of new books during the Covid 'lockdowns'; reducing temporary accommodation expenditure by expanding the number of landlords willing to accommodate the cohort of residents leading to competition and reducing the unit cost; pausing the discretionary Local Welfare Provision payments; making management

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savings and removing some posts; the removal of leisure passes for looked after children and offer of free swims for the over 65s.

The budget for 2022/23 would be reduced to £4.294m which meant savings of £2.8m would need to be achieved. Savings of £2.632m had been identified and were set out in the report. The remaining £168,000 would be achieved through Place and Community management savings. The main savings proposed for 2022/23 were summarised and included:

- Libraries – an estimated £400,000 budget saving was proposed, subject to the genuine consultation that was currently open.
- Learning - £137,000 was proposed to be saved by further integrating the activities of the Supported Employment service into the work of the ESFA Funding Community Learning Team.
- Leisure – an additional £845,000 income was anticipated from the management fee from the leisure contract with Everyone Active.
- Communities & Leisure - £452,000 was proposed to be saved by stopping community development and youth work services, unless alternative funding sources could be identified.
- Customer services - £161,000 savings were proposed from staffing savings.
- Archives - £75,000 would be saved by withdrawing from the Berkshire Joint Archive arrangements.
- Accommodation - £561,000 savings had been identified from a restructure of the accommodation team and adopting a new 'tenure blind' way of working.

The key risks for the budget included receipt of the leisure contract management fee, which would be dependent on the continued recovery of usage following Covid closures, and controlling the expenditure of temporary accommodation services.

The Panel discussed each service and proposed saving in turn. An email from Councillor Bedi opposing the reductions to the community development and youth work services had been circulated to all members of the Panel. Several Members expressed concern about the impact of stopping these services, stating that whilst short term savings may be achieved there would be longer term impacts on young people, including pressures on other services. Queries were raised about the potential of securing alternative funding for these services. The Director explained that stopping these community development and youth services was not something the Council wanted to do, however, service reviews were taking place to identify statutory and discretionary services across the Council. Each saving had a business case and these could include evidence that investing in such non-statutory services could be justified if it would contain costs in the longer term or in other related service budgets. Other funding options would be actively explored and these could include the public health grant, community safety funding, crowdfunding, other grant funding or working with the community and voluntary sector. If alternative funding could not be secured the services would be stopped. However, the Lead Member for Children, Learning & Skills

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highlighted that there would continue to be services for young people, such as the targeted youth support delivered by Slough Children First.

Speaking under Rule 30, Councillors Matloob and Sharif also highlighted the potential longer term costs of stopping the current service and the potential wider impacts on crime and anti-social behaviour. At the conclusion of the discussion on this proposed saving, Councillor Kaur proposed, Councillor Minhas seconded and the Panel agreed that the work of the community development and youth service teams was very important; that Members were concerned about the impacts on service users if the services were stopped; and that the Panel would be updated in January 2022 on the progress in securing alternative funding to seek to continue the service.

The Panel reviewed the proposed £400,000 saving in the library service. It was noted that the Cabinet had already agreed to start the 12-week consultation which set out various options and no decisions would be taken until the consultation feedback had been fully considered. Slough had made significant investment in its library service in the past and currently had good provision. The review provided an opportunity to test how an efficient and affordable library service could be delivered in a modern setting. The Panel highlighted that libraries provided much more than traditional book borrowing services including digital provision, study and social spaces. Members commented on the importance of continuing to ensure vulnerable children and adults could access services. The Panel recognised that any decisions on specific changes would be informed by the consultation, however, the general view of Members was that building closures should be avoided given the vital role of Langley and Cippenham libraries in the local community. In response to a query, the Director highlighted that the saving in 2021/22 had largely been achieved by the one-off Covid related measures such as delayed book buying and the fact libraries were closed for part of the year. These were therefore one-off savings and future reductions to increase affordability would need to be made through more sustainable service changes. There had been a good initial response to the consultation and Members made a number of further suggestions to ensure key groups were engaged, for example working with schools to ensure children's need for study space were incorporated. It was emphasised that both current users and people who didn't use existing library services should be encouraged to respond. The Panel asked a number of other questions about the impact on library staff and the ownership status of current library buildings. The Director responded to these questions.

On the supported employment service the Director was asked if the proposal was a service reduction or delivery the service in a different way. It was responded that it was hoped the same or improved outcomes could be achieved by integrating it into the community learning team. Members asked number of questions about the leisure contract including how realistic it was that Everyone Active would be in a position to pay the management fee. The Director commented that service usage had recovered quite strongly since Covid closures and restrictions had eased and that the management fee was part of the agreed contract. The Covid impacts on the sector had been significant and it was noted the Government had put in place a scheme for

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local authorities to claim a proportion of lost income last year. Overall, it was considered that securing the contracted income was realistic, albeit there were risks if any further Covid restrictions were required. It was noted that if any of the savings or income was not achieved than alternatives would need to be identified elsewhere in the directorate.

The Panel discussed the customer service proposals and concerns were raised about the current response times and potential deterioration of service levels if the staffing reductions were made. The Director explained the steps to promote 'channel shift' to deal with as many enquiries as possible online rather than through the call centre. It was recognised that a quick and efficient response would reduce the overall volume of further enquiries and that more work was required to meet the necessary standards across the Council. The majority of call volumes were in the revenues and benefits service, which had faced challenges and was in a period of transition. This had contributed to some of the delays in responding to queries. Members commented that the online offer needed to be supplemented alternative ways of contacting the Council and assurance was provided that a telephone based service would continue to be provided for those who needed it. A Member asked for clarification about whether the standard 10 day response time referred to calendar days or working days. It was 10 working days.

The proposed archive saving was discussed and a question was asked about the in house costs compared to the joint Berkshire arrangement. It was responded that it was assumed existing SBC premises would be used and the full sum could therefore be saved. The Panel supported the saving.

The accommodation proposals were reviewed and Members asked about the proposed 'tenure blind' system of working. It was noted that some housing services had become fragmented and the intention of the changes was to achieve closer collaboration across housing services to deliver better outcomes. The Panel discussed services relating to homelessness, including the work that had taken place during Covid to support rough sleepers. It was noted that the periodic rough sleeper count would take place on 17<sup>th</sup> November and this would provide an opportunity to engage and offer support to the circa 20-30 people rough sleeping at any one time. Temporary accommodation continued to be a significant budget risk and Members noted the work to reduce demand on temporary accommodation. The implications of Brexit on the eligibility of some individuals was also noted.

Members asked a number of other questions including about housing services ICT provision, specific asset issues and the provision of leisure passes for looked after children. Members were concerned at the withdrawal of the free leisure passes, however, the Director commented that take up had been low. Concern was also expressed about ceasing the free swims for those over 65. It was noted that these had been savings made in-year in 2021/22 and the Panel asked that the specific amount saved for each of them to be clarified so that a view could be taken about whether it would be feasible to reinstate them.

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At the conclusion of the discussion the Panel thanked the Director for the presentation. Further work would be carried out to refine the budget proposals and the Panel would receive a further report in January 2022 prior to the budget being put to Cabinet and Council in February and March.

### **Resolved –**

(a) That the initial budget proposals, and the comments of the Panel, be noted, including:

- The significant concern expressed about stopping the community development and youth work services, unless alternative funding could be secured. An update would be provided in January 2022.
- The concern about ceasing with free leisure passes for looked after children in 2021/22 and swimming for over 65s. The Panel asked the costs of each be clarified so the feasibility of continuing this in future years could be considered in January.

(b) That a further report be brought to the Panel in January 2022.

## **5. Forward Work Programme**

The Panel reviewed the work programme for the 2021/22. It had previously been agreed that the January meeting would include a further review of the budget proposals for the directorate and it was anticipated that a report on the outcomes of the library consultation may be ready for detailed consideration as part of the wider budget proposals.

For the next meeting on 8<sup>th</sup> December it was agreed that there be a report on the Repairs, Maintenance & Investment contract. The Revenues & Benefits performance report would be scheduled when available.

**Resolved –** That the work programme be updated, noting the above comments.

## **6. Date of Next Meeting - 8th December 2021**

The date of the next meeting was confirmed at 8<sup>th</sup> December 2021.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 9.14 pm)