

Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Tuesday, 26th March, 2024.

Present:- Councillors Shaik (Chair), Khawar (Vice-Chair), Escott, Hulme, Iftakhar, Mann, Matloob, Mohindra and Stedmond

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Nazir

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor O’Kelly

PART 1

47. Declarations of Interest

No declarations were made.

48. Minutes of the last ordinary meeting held on 22 February 2024

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 22 February 2024 be approved as a correct record.

49. Minutes of the last extraordinary meeting held on 13 March 2024

Resolved – That the minutes of the extraordinary meeting held on 13 March 2024 be approved as a correct record.

50. Launch of a Task and Finish Group: Children's services and SCF Engagement with Children, families, and faith and community groups

It was noted that apologies had been received from the Lead Member for Education and Children’s Services and from the Executive Director, People, Children.

The Director of Operations, SCF (Slough Children First) in his summary of the report advised that the Task & Finish Group (T&FG) was being launched to help improve SCF’s engagement with the faith and community sector locally. This initiative had been identified as critical to the transformation and improvement of the service provided to children and families, was linked to the Council’s Corporate Plan and would contribute to the Council’s improvement and recovery. It was supported by the DLUCH (Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities) Commissioners and feedback from OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) and children & young people and families had indicated that improvement was required in this area.

Members endorsed the setting up of the T&FG and made the following points and asked the questions below:

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- with regard to the scope of the T&FG, it should be remembered some communities were more established and had a better understanding of engagement. Therefore, the T&FG should focus on any gaps in the Council's knowledge and address this. It should drill down to discover if communities were providing informal support to local children and families, that the Council may not hitherto have been aware of;
- the importance of two-way communication with community & faith groups and the awareness that community groups were not homogenous entities and it was important to appreciate the nuances between them;
- What had been the finding of the recent OFSTED inspection; had any mapping of early help provision been undertaken?

The Director of Operations advised that one of the stated outcomes was to map all the community and faith groups in Slough and identify where there was lack of engagement. The inspection report had highlighted the need for community recognition around certain types of harm, e.g., FGM (female genital mutilation) and exploitation. The T&FG would help build relationships with these groups which would enable learning by the Council.

With regard to mapping, the Council currently had a good understanding of the community & voluntary sector and more engagement with faith groups and places of worship was underway. The multi-faith forums had been re-established and work was ongoing with the voluntary sector to evaluate how many children and families they were currently supporting and to provide them with the tools and support to continue in this.

The following membership of the T&FG was agreed, with the Chair and additional Members' names to be confirmed by the Groups after the meeting: Councillors Mohindra, Khawar & Stedmond.

Resolved – That:

1. a Task and Finish Group (T&FG) be launched as per the draft scope at Appendix A of the report;
2. membership of the T&FG to include Councillors Mohindra, Khawar & Stedmond. The Chair and additional Members' names to be confirmed by the Groups after the meeting.

51. **Shaping proposals for a policy on Community Asset Transfers**

The SBC Executive Director of Regeneration, Environment & Housing stated that the formulation of a community asset transfer policy (CAT) was a crucial element in the Council's approach to dealing with its assets and finances. The development of an estates strategy, building the asset register, clarifying terms of ownership of assets, associated covenants, etc would help inform the policy. However, this information was not readily available at Slough and there remained much administrative work to be completed to finalise the asset register and consequently the estates strategy.

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Other issues such as how out-of-borough assets and development sites would be dealt with and which operational assets would be retained also needed to be resolved. The Council had a large portfolio of community buildings where sports groups and charities were based. Each building would require careful assessment and decision-making. The preferred option would be to ensure that voluntary organisations could continue to deliver current services through the adoption of a model of CAT. Options could include empowering local groups to take over assets and services, thereby reducing the Council's day-to-day responsibility for managing and maintaining them; or a mixed response, as detailed in the case studies in the report e.g., where larger organisations could be offered a package of buildings or encouraged to bid as a consortium.

Formulating the CAT would require careful consideration and resolution of the above and other issues, such as:

- defining the goals and outcomes of the policy – i.e., what was the policy aimed at achieving, how this would be done, the key drivers behind the policy and what parameters would be set;
- how best value, social value and community benefits would be balanced against each other and prioritised;
- reducing the Council's financial responsibilities and increasing the autonomy of the voluntary sector;
- the financial viability, expertise and experience of individual community groups and their capacity to deliver services;
- would assets be offered singly or in a suite;
- would groups be encouraged to share responsibility and bid as consortiums;
- the inclusion of any covenants regarding future use, change of use or future sale of an asset by a community group;
- would the Council become a corporate landlord;
- length of leases, etc.

If done correctly, a CAT could be a win-win situation for both the Council and Community groups.

Members made the following comments and asked the questions below:

- When would the asset register be finalised?
- Could the Council raise funds by selling or transferring assets to voluntary groups?
- What information was available regarding community groups' use of assets, the services they were delivering and their capacity? What support could be provided to them to build sufficient capacity to enable them to submit bids?
- Would equalities impact assessments be carried out? Would potential savings be identified?

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- Had existing community tenants expressed interest in taking over any buildings?

The Executive Director stated that the asset register was being continually updated as new information was discovered. However, there remained grey areas in the register that required further clarification. It was a challenging process as large numbers of assets had not been properly logged or managed over recent years. There was a history of rents not being levied on community groups. It was therefore crucial to formulate a policy first and then undertake the necessary work to implement it.

He added that some community groups had submitted expressions of interest regarding assets, however, there would need to be a vetting process to ensure that the group had sufficient capacity to undertake the responsibility. There was clear data regarding where council run services were delivered, and significant, though incomplete data regarding services delivered by voluntary groups. There was currently insufficient resource to compile more comprehensive data regarding the latter.

A number of different approaches were available in a transfer e.g., an asset could be designated nil value, usage could be free or discounted, whether market values should be applied, the length of leases, etc - all these options would require careful consideration.

Members made the following additional comments:

- council-owned assets with no community use should be retained;
- there should be no blanket discount given as some community groups were able to afford to pay commercial rates;
- the Council may not be aware of all council and other services being delivered at its buildings;
- how would groups be helped to build capacity?

It would be easy to identify council services at venues such as the Curve but more difficult to do for outlying facilities operated by voluntary and community groups where the Council's involvement was minimal.

The Executive Director advised that CATs had been done in the past, though this was not widespread. Any asset transfer should take into consideration the impact, financial benefit, market values, social/community value, service provision and the capacity of the organisation to deliver. An evaluation matrix would need to be devised to assess these factors. He added that large national charities and umbrella groups were no longer represented in Slough. In view of the high levels of need in the town, any CAT policy should aim to entice these organisations back to Slough.

He agreed that building capacity and offering first right of refusal to current occupiers would be a sensible approach, provided that the organisation could

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demonstrate it had been paying rent, maintaining the building and delivering reasonable services.

Members expressed the view that they were not in a position to make detailed recommendations regarding the priorities of the CAT on the limited information available. They would require the following information to inform their discussions and any recommendations arising:

- the finalised target operating model (which would set out what the Council would look like, how it would operate, which services it would continue to deliver and which services would be devolved to the voluntary sector);
- a complete asset register;
- the finalised estates strategy;
- details of current occupancy and service-delivery by the Council and community groups.

A Member proposed that the community asset transfer policy be submitted to the Committee prior to its submission to Cabinet. The Executive Director undertook to provide the draft CAT policy to a future meeting of the Committee.

The Executive Director agreed that it would be necessary to clarify the policy position with each service area and the voluntary sector, the structure of the authority its policy position on service delivery, etc. For example, the preferred option would be to implement a corporate landlord model, with all assets managed centrally by a corporate landlord team. A delivery model for this would need to be agreed. The estates strategy was due to be submitted to Cabinet in June for approval – however, the content of the strategy was contingent on finalisation of the standard operating model and timelines may need to be pushed back.

- Members then asked whether the impact of the proposed sale of Hatfield car park on shoppers and parking capacity been assessed;
- Serena Hall had been sold at auction and Slough Homeless had been obliged to move out of the building. The CAT policy should have been developed sooner, which would have benefitted voluntary groups. The CAT policy would work well with the estates strategy;
- How would applications be prioritised?

The Executive Director stated that the sale of the car park was a good example of best value and this was supported by the figures. There was an over-proliferation of car parks in the town centre, some of which were underpriced. There was good data available regarding operational assets and their usage, however, information regarding community use was incomplete as often there were no formal lease or other agreements in place, no clear paper trail and the prevalence of historic occupancy, all of which would take time to clarify.

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The Executive Director advised that it was important to distinguish between community assets where voluntary groups operated and commercial buildings leased on commercial terms – the martial arts school was an example of a commercial client.

The Executive Director advised that work on the asset register was ongoing. Currently there were resource issues to check each individual. Each building, its current usage and application would need to be assessed on its merits and on the basis of the CAT policy. The estates strategy would include a complete list of assets and discussions at the scrutiny meeting and additional feedback from scrutiny members would inform the principles of the CAT.

- How would landmark buildings such as the Curve be dealt with, - would the size, social value and impact residents be taken into consideration?
- Members sought clarification regarding plans for the Curve and other landmark buildings;
- How loss of council services and facilities at the Curve would be mitigated against.
- Eqias (equality impact assessments) best value, social & community value, impact on communities and service provision should be taken into consideration when transferring assets;
- The Curve, despite its design flaws, was currently the only entertainment venue in the town centre and therefore should be retained.

The Executive Director advised that the Curve generated a marginal income and cost approximately £1M p.a to maintain it. There were a number of design-related issues which put constraints on its usage, this coupled with high maintenance costs meant that it was not a commercially viable asset. There was an aspiration to get an arts, educational or cultural organisation to take it on (an expression of interest had been received). Specialist organisations with experience in running such venues were better placed to run it and could draw on additional funding.

Council services provided at the Curve could remain there or be relocated elsewhere in the town centre. All possible options would need to be weighed up. The Council did not necessarily plan to sell the Curve, but its intention was to cease running it in the current financial year (this had been identified as a saving in the budget) and it hoped to transfer the lease to an organisation capable of running it.

The Executive Director re-iterated that every bid and asset would be judged on its individual merits and on the capacity and expertise of the bidding organisation, and the protocols in the CAT policy once finalised. He advised that the sale or transfer of some assets required consultation of users, however, others such as car parks did not.

A Member speaking under rule 30 stated that the Commissioners had emphasised the importance of best value and this should be a key basis of any CAT policy. Corporate, social and statutory considerations should also be

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taken into account. It was crucial that a CAT policy and data regarding current community use of buildings and the services they delivered should inform the CAT, however, the resource to undertake this assessment was not currently available.

Actions: the following action was agreed:

1. Eqias (equality impact assessments), the possible use of covenants, best value, social & community value, impact on communities and service provision should be taken into consideration when transferring assets.

Members made the following recommendations to the Executive Director, which were seconded and agreed.

1. the committee be given a pre-decision opportunity to review a draft CAT policy and the wider estates strategy once they are sufficiently developed and before it was too late to influence the outcome;
2. current community group occupiers should generally be given first right of refusal (provided that they could demonstrate that they had been paying rent, maintaining the building and delivering reasonable services and subject to market considerations).

Resolved – That:

1. the committee be given a pre-decision opportunity to review a draft CAT policy and the wider estates strategy once they were sufficiently developed and before it was too late to influence the outcome;
2. current community group occupiers should generally be given first right of refusal (provided that they could demonstrate that they had been paying rent, maintaining the building and delivering reasonable services and subject to market considerations);
3. the report be noted.

52. Attendance Report

Resolved – that the attendance report be noted.

53. Date of Next Meeting

23 April, 2024.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 7.00 pm and closed at 9.11 pm)