

## **Cabinet – Meeting held on Monday, 17th March, 2025.**

**Present:-** Councillors Smith (Chair), Chahal (Vice-Chair), Bedi, Kelly, Manku, Shah, Shaik and Wright

**Apologies for Absence:-** Councillor E. Ahmed

### **PART 1**

#### **123. Declarations of Interest**

No interests were declared.

#### **124. Minutes of the Meetings held on 17th and 24th February 2025**

**Resolved –** That the minutes of the meetings of the Cabinet held on 17<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> February 2025 be approved as a correct record.

#### **125. Improvement and Recovery Action Plan – full two years 2024 –2026**

The Leader of the Council introduced a report that provided a full two-year action plan showing how the Council would take action to become a Best Value Council by November 2026. The Cabinet was asked to agree the action plan, approve the aspects that related to executive functions and refer the plan to full Council for endorsement and to approve the actions relating to non-executive functions.

The document built on the 6-month action plan previously agreed by the Cabinet and included key measures for success and set out the main programmes for improvement and recovery such as vision and evidence-based decision-making; strengthening political leadership and governance; developing a high performing workforce and culture; and financial improvement. Regular updates would be provided to Cabinet and Council at least every six months.

The Cabinet welcomed the comprehensive action plan which was a significant milestone in the Council's recovery and improvement programme. Lead Members asked about the alignment with the Council's existing corporate plan, transformation programme and operational plans. The Director of Strategy, Change and Resident Engagement explained the relationship between the various strategies and plans and highlighted the update in the report on the development of the future operating model of the Council.

The Chief Executive stated the importance of having clear milestones and measures of success on which progress could be monitored. It was also noted that some investment in the programme would be required to help the Council make the necessary improvements.

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At the conclusion of the discussion, the Cabinet agreed the recommendations.

### **Resolved –**

- (a) That the action plan as provided in Appendix 1 be endorsed.
- (b) That the aspects that relate to executive functions be approved.
- (c) That it be agreed that the action plan would be taken to Council to endorse and to approve those actions that relate to non-executive functions
- (d) That it be noted that regular updates, at least every 6 months, would be presented to Cabinet and Full Council on progress against the plan.

### **126. Council Tax Support Hardship Fund Policy**

The Lead Member for IT, Customer Services, Revenues & Benefits, Procurement and Performance introduced a report that sought approval for the Council Tax Support (CTS) Hardship Fund Policy.

The revised Council Tax Support Scheme for 2025/26 had been approved by full Council on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2025. Cabinet had previously agreed that if the revised scheme was adopted by Council an increased CTS Hardship Fund of £0.350m would be made available to support residents in receipt of CTS who were struggling due to financial hardship. Approval was now sought for the Hardship Fund Policy, which had been reviewed by members of the Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee.

The Director of Revenues and Welfare Services summarised the key aspects of the policy which would come into effect from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2025 if agreed by Cabinet. It was emphasised that the fund was to support residents facing genuine hardship, not to fund individuals lifestyle choices. The policy gave discretion to officers to consider all the relevant circumstances of those applying for support and each case would be determined on its own merits. If all the funding was allocated it may be possible to top up from the Household Support Fund and a report would come back to Cabinet if required.

The Cabinet welcomed the policy which would provide a clear framework and criteria on which to allocate the £0.350m to support residents facing hardship. The changes to the Council Tax Support Scheme brought Slough Borough Council into line with the level of support provided by neighbouring authorities and the additional funding for the Hardship Fund would provide help to those most in need. Monitoring of the scheme was discussed and a request was made for members of the Cabinet to be updated after the first two months of implementation of the policy and regularly thereafter. The Director confirmed updates would be provided to both member of the Cabinet and scrutiny members.

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A Lead Member queried the process for assisting residents in accessing the fund and the advice that would be made available. The Director responded that the scheme would be administered by the debt and welfare team and they could provide face to face support to individuals if needed.

After due consideration the recommendations were agreed.

### **Resolved –**

- (a) That the CTS Hardship Policy outlined in Appendix A of the report be adopted.
- (b) That delegated authority be given to the Executive Director of Corporate Resources, following consultation with the Lead Member for IT, Customer Services, Revenues and Benefits, Procurement, and Performance, to review the scheme on an annual basis and propose any changes to Cabinet for approval.

### **127. Approval to write-off individual debts greater than £15,000**

The Lead Member for IT, Customer Services, Revenues & Benefits, Procurement and Performance introduced a report that sought approval to write-off individual uncollectable Business Rates debts that exceeded £15,000.

The aggregate total value of the debts was £0.0382m from seven accounts. The businesses involved had either been dissolved or gone into liquidation in 2023 and early 2024. The Director of Revenues & Welfare Services stated that a lengthy and thorough process was undertaken to recover outstanding monies but in these cases all avenues had been exhausted hence the request to write-off the debt.

In response to points raised by Cabinet members during the course of the discussion it was noted that the Business Rates collection rate was circa 98.7%, which was above the average collection rate across local authorities. Only a small fraction was written off and this was always after a lengthy process to recover the money. A provision of £7.8m had been made for bad debt.

The Cabinet recognised that the sums being written off were a considerable amount, albeit a small part of the overall amount to be collected. Lead Members asked about the robustness of collection processes in the past and whether improvements had been made. The Director highlighted that the high level of collection demonstrated that the Council was performing well and the process was set out in legislation.

The Cabinet authorised the write-off requests.

**Resolved –** That the write-off of those debts identified in the report be authorised.

## **128. Recycling & Borough Wide Food Waste Collection**

The Lead Member for Environment, Environmental Services and Open Spaces introduced a report that sought approval for a range of new projects to increase recycling and a proposal undertake weekly borough wide food waste collections, following a successful trial.

Slough had one of the lowest recycling rates in the South East at 25%. The Council ranked 330<sup>th</sup> out of 343 authorities. As part of the government's initiative that taxed retailers that used plastic packaging, a new grant would be provided through Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) funding. A range of initiatives totaling £0.738m were proposed including a recycling campaign, additional enforcement support, mobile CCTV to tackle fly-tipping and separate collection of household card and paper. Lead Members welcomed the new funding and approved the additional measures that would help improve recycling rates.

The Council had launched a pilot food waste collection initiative in five wards in July 2024. The Lead Member summarised the key outcomes of the pilot and highlighted that there had been a steady increase in the levels of activity. It was a requirement of the Environment Act 2021 for local authorities to undertake weekly borough food waste collections by the end of March 2026. New Burden Funding had been allocated from DEFRA to support the roll out of food waste collections. Capital funding of £2.1m was expected to be spent on 7 food waste collection vehicles and 85,000 caddies and containers. The options were set out and Option B was recommended which was to deliver the phased, borough wide approach through a third party, preferred provider. The roll out would commence from November 2025 with all households and flats offered a weekly service by 31 March 2026. Lead Members discussed the findings of the trial and emphasised the importance of incorporating the lessons learned into the roll out, including the importance of a strong communications plan.

At the conclusion of the discussion the recommendations were agreed.

### **Resolved –**

- (a) That the range of recycling promotion activities commencing from April 2025 be agreed.
- (b) That Option B be agreed for a phased borough wide, weekly food waste collection service to commence from November 2025, ensuring that all households and flats were offered a weekly food waste collection by 31 March 2026.
- (c) That the commencement of a competitive procurement process (through the Open Procedure) be agreed to identify, procure and enter into a five-year contract (plus an extension of up to two years) for an

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external provider to carry out the collection and disposal of weekly food waste borough wide.

- (d) That the one-off purchase of 85,000 indoor and outdoor food waste caddies and containers for households and flats, conducted in accordance with the Open Procedure be agreed.

### **129. Pan-Berkshire (Slough) Locally Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education 2025-2030**

The Lead Member for Education & Children's Services introduced a report that sought approval of the revised Locally Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education, as recommended by the Agreed Syllabus Conference from its meeting held on 6 November 2024. If agreed, the pan-Berkshire syllabus would be launched on 27<sup>th</sup> March 2025 and be active for a period of five years from 2025 to 2030.

The Cabinet thanked the members of the Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) for the work they had done to develop the syllabus and for engaging with all faiths in developing the document which was titled 'Pathways to Understanding'. Lead Members commented that the syllabus was particularly important in Slough given the high level of religious observance.

The Cabinet agreed to adopt the document as at Appendix A to the report.

**Resolved –** That the draft revised Locally Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education 2025-2030, as submitted, be adopted as the Agreed Syllabus for use in Slough Community and Foundation schools for a period of five years from its' launch on 27 March 2025 for a period of five years.

### **130. Recommendations of the Cabinet Committee: James Elliman Homes Limited (JEH) – Company update and Business Plan**

The Cabinet considered a report that updated on the current position of James Elliman Homes (JEH) and sought approval of the interim business plan for the company for 2025/26.

The Cabinet Committee had considered the report at its meeting held on 13<sup>th</sup> March 2025 and discussed the update in detail. Approval of the company business plan was a function reserved for Cabinet. JEH was a company limited by shares and was wholly owned by the Council.

The Lead Member for Finance, Council Assets and Transformation summarised the background and current financial and governance issues facing the company. The Council had provided a loan to the company of £51.7m which was repayable, including interest, by October 2028. The company continued to make losses and the cumulative retained losses were £8.8m, although it was noted that the company had significant assets. The

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business plan for 2025/26 was a one year plan to enable a full options appraisal to be completed to determine the medium term strategy for the company. The Council as shareholder would need to consider its future strategy in the context of both the Council's finances and the broader homelessness pressures on Slough. The options for the company would therefore need to best meet the council's strategic objectives and minimise the financial risk exposure held within the company.

Lead Members noted the update and requested that the work on the options appraisal come back to Cabinet at the earliest opportunity. The 2025/26 business plan was approved.

### **Resolved –**

- (a) Approved the JEH business plan for 2025/26, including updates to the strategic objectives noting it is a one year business plan;
- (b) Approved the council's underwriting of the financial operating risks;
- (c) Noted the undertaking and progress of an options appraisal for JEH future strategic direction; and
- (d) Noted that a further report will be presented to Cabinet early in the 2025/26 municipal year to approve a medium term business plan and future strategic direction for JEH.

### **131. Exclusion of Press and Public**

All business was conducted during Part I of the meeting, therefore it was not necessary to exclude the press and public.

### **132. Recommendations of the Cabinet Committee: James Elliman Homes Limited (JEH) – Company update and Business Plan - Appendix**

**Resolved –** That the Part II Appendix be noted.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 7.49 pm)