

Place Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Tuesday, 28th September, 2021.

Present:- Councillors Mohammad (Chair), Strutton (Vice-Chair), Bal, A Cheema, H Cheema, R Davis, Gill and Grewal

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Ali

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Minhas

PART 1

1. Declarations of Interest

No declarations were made.

2. Minutes of the Meeting of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel held on 21st April 2021

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel held on 24 March 2021 be approved as a correct record.

3. Member Questions

None received.

4. Bus Service Improvement Plan

The SBC Principal Transport Strategy Officer presented a report which set out the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) which had been created in partnership between the Council and the bus operators of registered local services in Slough, and the new Enhanced Partnership with the operators (EP).

He advised that the Plan was a living document and that there was the opportunity to both comment on and propose amendments to it, adding that it would be reviewed following analysis of consultation results and comments from both Cabinet and Scrutiny and subsequent discussions with the bus operators. The final version of the Plan would be submitted to the Department for Transport on 31 October 2021.

Panel Members made the following comments and asked the questions below which were responded to by officers as set out:

A Member stated that in the past, bus operators had declined to cover some areas of Slough despite requests from the Council. He asked whether the partnership would ensure that operators would be more responsive to residents' requests for bus services in particular areas. With regard to plans to reduce fares, in his experience, lower fares attracted lower government

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subsidies. How, therefore would it be possible to persuade bus operators to lower their fares?

The Transport Lead responded that the introduction of bus priority measures which would lead to a reduction in congestion would result in lower operating costs for the operators and the Council could then negotiate a reduction in fares. However, the Council would be required to subsidise those routes considered not to be commercially viable by the operators, because the need for these would be based on resident demand and fulfilling a social need. However, any subsidy would need to be balanced against current spending protocols related to the Section 114 notice. She added that the operators were willing to join the enhanced partnership, but it was important to note that the bus industry nationally was in decline. Central Government had indicated its willingness to invest in them to ensure their continuity and currently the Council was in good position to negotiate a reduction in fares on behalf of residents.

The SBC Principal Transport Strategy Officer advised that the Council, in its role as the local traffic authority, had no power to compel operators to provide specific services. The operators were commercial entities, and were driven by commercial interests. However, the BSIP would allow both parties to work in partnership and enter negotiations. For example, the Council could undertake highways improvement and the operators could implement other measures. Central Government expected both operators and local authorities to contribute to the BSIP process and policy formulation, the details of which were yet to be finalised.

A Member stated that in the past bus operators had turned down requests to provide a service to Wexham Park Hospital from a particular road, and in his view, operators should be willing to take on board the Council's requests for additional bus routes.

The Transport Lead stated that the above comments were noted, adding that operators were now more willing to engage in negotiations and recognized the new opportunities that the BSIP would afford them.

A Member stated that the outcomes listed in the report stated that there would be an improvement in air quality due to a reduction in CO2 emissions, however, no figures regarding these had been included in the report. In his view, these should be included because detailed figures regarding emissions and air quality would strengthen the Council's case.

The Transport Lead advised that she would need to consult colleagues in the Environment team regarding the matter as there were a number of different measurement methods involved. She added that figures regarding emissions could be included in the report because diffusion units had been installed along bus routes.

A Member asked about outcome 4 listed in the report - the provision of high quality transport links to both existing and new areas of housing development.

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He stated that following the completion of the Kings Reach development, a proposal to install a bus stop there had been agreed, however, to date none had been installed.

The Transport Lead advised that she was not familiar with the proposal in question. It may be that a section 106 agreement relating to the development was in place which meant funding for the bus stop would be available. She undertook to look into the matter and report back to the Panel. She added that, to date, no funding had been identified by the Government for the BSIP. If, in the future, the Council could demonstrate it could provide match funding for the installation of bus stops or for example s.106 funding was available then the Council would be able to access DfT (Department for Transport) funds.

A Member asked whether the agreement with the operators was conditional on funding being secured? What would happen if funding could not be secured and how would that impact the viability of the BSIP?

The Principal Transport Strategy Officer advised that the majority of funding had not yet been identified. The Government had identified a pool of £3bn in funding for the BSIP nationally for the lifetime of the national bus strategy. Local authorities had been invited to bid for funding as part of the more scheme specific plan, namely the BSIP enhanced Partnership Plan when the Government would consider funding bids from local authorities. There would be an initial funding allocation as part of the BSIP, however, no figures had been provided. If no monies were forthcoming from these, the partnership would still continue and other funding streams would be explored.

A Member stated that the TfL weekly cap figures quoted in the report were inaccurate and should be amended. An Transport Lead undertook to review and amend these.

A Member stated that if the Council requested a reduction in fares then the financial implications of this should be included in report. The report was lacking in TfL data even though comprehensive data was available on the TfL buses app. He also could not easily find information regarding single journey fares, which needed to be emphasised in report. Most buses only offered a one day pass and single journey fares were not currently available to passengers. The report omitted to state that single journey fares should be available in the future. With regard to bus service outcomes, the report stated that traffic congestion in some areas was largely due to traffic to and from industrial estates, but it was worth emphasising that the daily school run in Langley and other areas also contributed to traffic congestion. He asked why the Council contributed approximately £177,247 to bus routes 4, 5 & 6.

He added that with regard to bus journey times, the report stated that the introduction of bus priority lanes would reduce journey times by two minutes, whereas the tap in and out system would save two and a half minutes. The latter measure may prove more cost effective than implementing bus priority lanes (as these would need to be enforced).

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The SBC Principal Transport and Strategy officer advised that currently there was no intention to commit to any further subsidies on any routes. He could not at this stage provide figures regarding any potential subsidies as much depended on the final form of the partnership. The Council had been in discussions with TfL and his comment regarding single journey fares would be discussed. As for reducing bus journey times, the cumulative effect of implementing both highways measures and a tap in and out system would be the best overall solution. The Council contributed approximately £177,247 towards those routes deemed not to be commercially viable by the bus operators. He added that all the Members' comments and suggestions had been noted.

A Member stated that the report contained several omissions, for example, there was little information about the tap in and out system or about the removal of bus lay-bys which contributed to traffic congestion. If the Council wanted to reduce congestion then bus journey times needed to improve drastically to offset the increased pollution as a result of introducing bus lanes. The closure of public toilets and specifically disabled toilets and baby changing facilities at the bus station had been a long standing issue and he could confirm that these were still closed. Supporting facilities and amenities were a crucial part of passenger engagement and experience and he asked whether relevant local partners and the assets team had been consulted.

Transport officers stated that they had been unaware of the situation regarding the closure of toilets at the bus station and undertook to look into the matter.

A Member stated that following the implementation of bus lanes, data regarding improvements in air quality along main routes had been gathered but that this data had not been included in the report. The report also discussed improving passenger satisfaction and participation, however, journey times and cost were an issue for passengers. He also noted that additional bus lanes were proposed and asked whether the relevant local Ward Councillors had been consulted about the matter?

The Transport Lead advised that the consultant who had prepared the bus network was familiar with issues regarding networks but may be less familiar with local issues. He would welcome the opportunity to speak to Ward Councillors. Bus station facilities had been deemed to be outside the scope of the review in terms of being able to action any issues there. The Transport Lead undertook to investigate the closure of public toilets at the bus station with view to rectifying the situation.

The Member asked why bus station facilities had been deemed to be outside the scope of the review. Resident and commuter engagement would only be possible if there were supporting facilities. The Council should be in a stronger position to re-negotiate its agreement with the provider of the bus station. He added that the some areas of the bus station did not provide proper egress and access for wheelchair users and double buggies. A transport review had

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been undertaken just before the covid outbreak regarding bus stop accessibility. In his view, the funding application should include the outcomes of this review. Furthermore, buses were lacking in safety harnesses for securing wheelchairs and buses should be legally compliant. He also called for improved journey times and accurate live bus journey information.

The Transport Lead stated that she welcomed his comments and that all the above points were valid. Officers would include all his suggestions into the BSIP, but he should note that there was no guarantee that they would be delivered as there was currently no funding available. The issue of closed toilets at the bus station would be dealt with immediately.

A Member asked which partners had been consulted as part of the review?

The Transport Lead advised that an online consultation targeted at bus users and non-users had received 300 responses to date. With regard to partners, her team were working mainly with bus operators and had had discussions with neighbouring authorities. Consultation with relevant local partners would take place later on in the process once the Government provided more information regarding the BSIP.

The Member responded that some of these issues had been promised in previous transport plans and were included in the Council's strategic transport plans. For example, smaller buses had been trialled on some of the less commercially viable routes. He asked why these were missing from the report.

The Transport Lead replied that any implementation of demand responsive transport would have been focussed on reasons of economic growth eg getting residents to work rather than social need. However, if such a scheme for smaller buses had been piloted before, then this could be extended out and trialled elsewhere.

The Member responded that the trials had targeted areas with older communities and pockets of deprivation and had not been based on economic growth. In his view, the Council had a duty to its residents and their needs were being overlooked.

The SBC Principal Transport Strategy Officer stated that with regard to an earlier question about timescales for formulating the BSIP, his team had been aware of it since March 2021, however, national Government guidance had only been made available in July 2021 with the Government indicating its intention to issue further guidance and information in September 2021. His team had been actively working on the report since May/June 2021 within the constraints of extremely tight timelines, with the submission date being end of October. This, along with capacity issues in the team was the cause for some of the omissions in the report raised by Members. His team had been obliged to follow timetables in submitting the report to both Cabinet and the scrutiny panel. He confirmed that there would be further detailed engagement with community and partner groups. He concluded by saying that he welcomed

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all the comments and suggestions made by Members at the meeting and that many of these would be incorporated into the final version of the BSIP.

As for carbon emissions, both the BSIP and the Council's Local Transport Plan would have to be aligned with its Carbon Strategy and measures would be implemented to achieve targets set in the Strategy. He confirmed that the implementation of safety measures for wheelchairs on buses would be included in the BSIP.

A Member stated that some of the suggestions made by Members at the meeting had previously been agreed at various transport working groups.

A Member asked about bus services connecting Slough to Heathrow airport.

The Transport Lead explained that the services to Heathrow had declined due to the Heathrow expansion project and the impact of covid. Transport officers were working with Heathrow colleagues to improve transport to and from the airport, however, the Council alone was not able to increase bus services to Heathrow.

Following a suggestion from a Member, the Transport Lead advised that route he would look into whether bus 459 to Iver through Slough could be part of a trial, and he would report this back to the Panel.

A Member speaking under Rule 30 stated that analysis in the report suggested fares in Slough were significantly higher than in neighbouring towns. He asked how this would be tackled. He added that currently there were no zero emissions buses in the fleet, there was currently no bus service from the bus station to Wexham Park Hospital covering the Uxbridge road area. He asked if the operators could be requested to consider implementing a route there.

The Transport Lead replied that all of the above issues were connected to commercial viability and operators' commercial interests. The Council was committed to working with operators as part of the overall plan and reiterated that there were no plans to subsidise routes. Nevertheless, the Council would continue to negotiate and work in partnership with operators.

He added that it was not commercially viable for operators to change their current fleet to zero emission buses, however, they had stated an intention to do so in the next few years. With regard to the comment about a bus service to the hospital, he undertook to look into the matter.

A Member stated that the Council received significant revenue from parking charges. She asked whether the increase in bus use and corresponding decrease in car use would impact on parking revenue.

The Transport Lead responded that it was important to strike a balance between the two. If modal shift, decarbonisation objectives and improved pedestrian and road safety could be achieved then the implications of fewer

car journeys and improvements to air quality would need to be weighed against lost parking revenue and this data would need to be analysed.

Resolved: That the report be noted

5. Slough Local Plan - Proposed Consultation on the Release of Green Belt Sites for Family Housing

The SBC Planning Policy Manager presented a report that set out the Slough Local Plan – proposed consultation on the release of green belt sites for family housing. He advised that appendix 1 of the report set out the basis for the proposed consultation document. The final form of the consultation was yet to be decided and therefore extensive delegated powers for officers had been agreed. The report had been agreed at the Cabinet meeting of 21 September 2021. He concluded by saying that Members would have the opportunity to comment on the proposals and input into the process.

A Member expressed concerns about the possible effects of additional building works on the Wexham Hospital nursing accommodation, on its A&E services, staff recruitment and on health service delivery generally and asked whether any of this had been assessed. With regard to other proposed sites, in his view, environmental and ecological impact assessments should take place at the right time.

The SBC Planning Policy Manager advised that the Wexham Hospital site was being promoted by the Hospital and not the Council. Further assessments would take place during the consultation phase and environmental and ecological assessments would be done at the right time in the proper way.

A Member asked how the traffic light system of assessing each site been drawn up. The SBC Planning Policy Manager advised that no technical work had been carried out to date. Each site had been assessed at the broad policy level and the sites were being recommended on policy grounds and strategic gaps and took into account any loss of open space or possible impacts on the historic park and gardens.

A Member asked whether high density housing was being proposed. The SBC Planning Policy Manager advised that the proposed sites on the green belt could only be released as part of the Local Plan Process, which meant the proposed sites would be examined by a planning inspector and that it would be necessary to specify that they would only be developed for houses. Therefore, it would not be possible for developers to submit plans for high density developments. The sites would comprise family housing, a high proportion of which would be affordable housing.

A Member asked about the consultation process, and asked that if for example 80% of consultees were against a particular development, whether that proposed development would still go ahead.

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The SBC Planning Policy Manager explained that a planning related consultation was not a referendum or a vote, and it would depend on the reasons for the objections and that these would need to be related to planning issues rather than say something like loss of views. The results of any consultation would influence the decision-makers.

A Member stated that it was his understanding that developing the green belt should be a last resort measure. The SBC Planning Policy Manager confirmed that use of the green belt was the last resort. He added that whereas nine thousand flats had been identified around the square mile around the Town Centre and other brownfield sites, there still remained a shortage of five thousand houses. Because of the cost and nature of the high rise brownfield developments in the Town Centre, it was not possible to develop family housing there. It would be possible to provide good quality, affordable family housing greenfield sites which were also located on the Green Belt. Both the Government and the Council wanted to optimise brownfield sites whilst maintaining existing suburbs and striking a balance between the two.

A Member asked about the submission of representations and asked whether residents could ask their Ward Councillors to represent them.

The SBC Planning Policy Manager advised that residents were free to consult their Ward Councillors, however, the Local Plan process required residents to make formal representations individually.

Following a question from a Member, the SBC Planning Policy Manager advised that the green and amber sites could accommodate up to 700 dwellings, others would have up to 30. He emphasised that no targets had yet been set and no final decision had been made regarding the number of dwellings because detailed planning and assessments were yet to be undertaken.

A Member asked whether the area of unused land on the Bath Road in Taplow (just before the railway bridge) had been considered for development. The SBC Planning Policy Manager advised that this was horticultural land though not situated in Slough, it could be considered as part of the wider Growth Area Study in collaboration with Windsor and Maidenhead Councils (and formerly with Buckinghamshire County Council).

A Member asked whether it would be possible to bid for the land where the Muddy Lane sports centre was located – could it be taken out of the green belt. The SBC Planning Policy Manager advised that it had been possible to give planning permission for the sports centre as its use was ancillary. He added that if, in the future, it could be shown that activity on an area of green belt land was being used for an ancillary activity then it could be approved as an exception to the Green belt policy without having to be removed from the green belt.

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A Member asked whether all the suitable sites would be developed. The SBC Planning Policy Manager replied this had yet to be decided and that all suitable sites were currently under consideration.

Following a question from a Member, the SBC Planning Policy Manager advised that the Council would impress on developers that their proposals should be for family houses, though these may not all be detached houses and the dimensions and proportions of which had not yet been decided.

A Member asked whether this would include affordable housing. The SBC Planning Policy Manager confirmed that in accordance with the Council's policies there would be a requirement that 35-40% should be affordable homes. He concluded by saying that the advantage of releasing green field sites was that developers would not be able to claim that the sites were not viable for affordable housing.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

6. Asset Disposal Update

The SBC Associate Director Place, Strategy and Infrastructure presented a report setting out the Council's Asset Disposal Strategy Programme which was initially presented to Cabinet on 21 June 2021. Since that date the Programme had grown due to the need to dispose of significant Council assets. Cabinet had agreed the Recovery and Renewal Plan and the Asset Disposal Strategy Programme was a key element of this Plan. Cabinet had then referred the decision to Council.

The Cabinet decision was as follows:

- 1) Officers conduct a procurement exercise in line with the Public Contracts Regulations 2015, to obtain the support of external organisations that can assist the Council with a programme of asset disposals to generate capital receipts.
- 2) Cabinet was also requested to agree that:
Income generated from asset disposals will be used in the first instance to finance any Capitalisation Directions received from the Government, and that Additional sale proceeds thereafter will be used to repay existing external debt.

Following a question from a Member, the SBC Associate Director advised that no assets had yet been sold. His team were in the process of undertaking early valuations of non-controversial assets valued at under £1M as part of an initial contribution to the programme. The larger assets valued up to £600M would take longer to finalise. There S.151 officer was assessing if there were any assets that could be disposed of before Christmas 2021 as this would boost the Council's cash reserves. He confirmed that although some firm

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offers had been received for the five properties which were on the market, none had yet been sold.

A Member stated that it was his understanding that some apartments had been sold as part of an ongoing programme of sales. He stated that, for each asset sold, he would expect to see a report setting out its valuation, where it was advertised, details of agency fees, the final sale price, and an attached value for money statement.

The Associate Director confirmed that all of the above information would be provided. In terms of achieving best value, the Council had taken a pragmatic approach, and allowed timelines to be flexible as this would ensure best value. He added that it would be commercially advantageous to procure a commercial partner to work with the Council on this and this would ensure best value for all disposals.

A Member asked whether the assets of limited companies would be listed separately. He added that he expected Nova House to make a loss, however, he expected the Council's other rental properties to achieve market value and make a profit.

The SBC Associate Director advised that some of the early reviews undertaken by the MHCLG had highlighted governance issues at the Council relating to the operation of its committees and its commercial arrangements. The review of the asset holdings of those companies was a core part of the Programme. There would be options for disposing of all assets in their entirety or selling them separately.

A Member asked whether anything valued at over £1m would be subject to Cabinet approval and anything less than that figure had been delegated to officers. In his view, all sales should be subject to Cabinet approval.

The SBC Associate Director responded that as the number of assets exceeded 600 in number, referring each sale to Cabinet would be time consuming. He added that Cabinet had already reached a compromise decision regarding the means for approving the disposal of assets and had agreed that the relevant Executive Director, the S.151 officer and the relevant lead Member make the decision and this would ensure political oversight and provide assurance.

A Member asked where the five properties had been advertised with the same agent. How would best value be ensured. How far had the analysis progressed? Would any properties be auctioned?

The Associate Director advised that the properties were being marketed by a number of different agents. He added that there was an in-house assets team, who had in the past been focussed on regeneration and acquisitions and had since moved from acquiring assets to their disposal. There was also a team that specialised in commercial negotiations with agents in the property market to ensure best value. However, the team were limited in what they

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could achieve in terms of disposing of small focussed group of assets. Meanwhile a procurement exercise was underway to secure a partner to deal with the larger assets. He concluded by saying that his team were well placed in terms of local knowledge and experience of the Slough property market, but they were working at full capacity hence the need to bring in external expertise.

He added that given the number of the assets, their disparate nature and the level of returns the Council needed to achieve, it would not be possible to prioritise the disposal of assets until an option appraisal and prioritisation had been undertaken for each asset. Auctioning the properties had not been discounted as an option. A broad range of options would be recommended.

Following a question from a Member, the Associate Director stated that the table in the report set out the estimated value of all the Council's assets, nearly half of which were made up of HRA (housing revenue accounts) assets and these had a range of conditions attached to them. This would be explored as an option, however, tenants would have to agree to any transfer of ownership. Some assets had planning conditions attached to them. The Council may opt to remove some of those conditions to ensure best value. He added that some buyers would be more risk averse than others. For example, registered housing providers and housing associations would likely be more risk-averse. He assured the Panel that any disposal would be subject to pre-scrutiny before any commercial decision was made.

A Member asked whether the Council had a policy of not selling all these assets to single buyer. The Associate Director stated that he was not aware of any such policy but he would consult commercial experts in his team. In any case, in his view, it was unlikely that a single buyer would bid to buy large numbers or all of the assets.

Councillor Bal proposed the following motion, which was seconded by Councillor Strutton:

I agree with the Cabinet Recommendation of option 2. I further recommend that Cabinet:

- A. Lists out all current assets proposed for disposal together with independent values, in part 2 of the Cabinet meeting.
- B. Advertising assets for disposal locally and nationally in established industry print and online platforms. Once the final offer is received, that it is clearly advertised to ensure no better offer is missed out.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

7. Forward Work Programme

The forward work programme was noted.

8. Date of Next Meeting - 8th November 2021

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 29 September 2021 at 5pm.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.52 pm)