

**Place Scrutiny Panel – Extraordinary Meeting held on Wednesday, 1st December, 2021.**

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

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

**Apologies for Absence:-** None

## **PART 1**

**9. Declarations of Interest**

Councillor Bal declared that his daughter worked for Slough Borough Council and that in relation to Minute 11 – A4 Experimental Bus and Cycle Lane that he was a taxi driver. Having declared the interest, Councillor Bal remained in the meeting and participated in the discussion on this item.

**10. Initial Budget Proposals 2022/23 - Place**

The Executive Director of Place & Community gave a presentation on the in-year budget position for 2021/22 and initial savings proposals for 2022/23 in what was formerly the Place Directorate. It was noted that from 1<sup>st</sup> October 2021 a new Place & Community directorate had been established with Community services joining the Place directorate. Customer services had become part of Corporate Resources. The presentation related to services in the former Place directorate with scrutiny of community services being undertaken by the Customer & Community Scrutiny Panel.

Further work would be carried out over the next month to refine the 2022/23 budget proposals with an update to come back to the Panel in January 2022.

The 2021/22 savings assigned to Place were on track to be delivered and included £3.2m savings from the Our Futures restructure and £645,000 from cross-cutting corporate savings allocation. There were also a series of income generation activities noted including rent from the Moxy Hotel (£179,000); bus shelter advertising (£75,000); additional parking income (£208,000); and increased weighbridge and bulky waste collection charges (£98,000).

The savings target for Place & Community in 2022/23 was £5.75m from a net budget in 2021/22 of £9.75m. The net budget for 2022/23 would therefore be reduced to £4m and the savings proposals were outlined. The proposals included income from the Moxy Hotel (£821,000), digital street advertising, the new parking contract, increase in charges for waste services (£132,000), street cleansing service reductions (£400,000), grounds maintenance service reductions (£450,000), allotments (£20,000) and removing the subsidy for the

## Place Scrutiny Panel - 01.12.21

bus station (£42,000). There would also be a further directorate restructure which aimed to save £1.1m from the General Fund, and £2.4m overall, and further detail would be provided to the Panel at its meeting in January.

Members noted the key pressures and risks relating to the savings programme and had had the opportunity to review the detailed business cases and equality impact assessments.

The Panel asked a number of detailed questions and raised queries about various proposals which are summarised as follows:

- *What were the income projections from Moxy Hotel investment?* The hotel development had been completed ahead of schedule and occupancy was high. The contract fixed the income returns to the Council for the first three years rising from £179,000, to £1m then £1.5m followed by index link increases.
- *What would be level of service reduction from the savings from grass and hedge cutting?* The proposal for grass cutting was to reduce the current level of 15 cuts with a cylindrical mower to circa 10 cuts with a flail cutter. Hedge cutting would depend on the location with priority given to cutting hedges where they obscured sight lines from the highway or caused an obstruction. A Member highlighted some of the operational issues involved in a move from rotary to flail cutting, which the Director recognised and confirmed that the changes would require detailed consideration prior to being implemented.
- *What were the reductions in play equipment?* It was possible that some play equipment would be removed if the cost of repair was too high. This saving applied to equipment maintained from the General Fund only not Housing Revenue Account play sites.
- *What was the likelihood of being able to rent out space at Observatory House as had been set out in the original business plan?* The office market had been significantly impacted by Covid-19 but the prospects for renting out space would improve as the economy recovered. It was envisaged that 3 or 4 of the 6 floors of Observatory House could be available for rent, depending on the outcome of the independent evaluation of best consideration for all Council assets due to take place early in 2022. Asked about the cost of external valuations and support, the Director commented that the scale of the asset disposal programme and the specialist skills required meant that external capacity and capability would be justified to ensure best consideration could be achieved.
- *How would the increased income from allotment holders be achieved?* It would be to charge for water usage and the anticipated £20,000 income would recover the costs.
- *What different level of service would be delivered with the £400,000 reduction in the street cleansing budget?* The saving was expected to

result in a reduced number of operatives and vehicles but that changes to the cleansing regime could minimise the impacts. For example, mobile crews could be deployed rather than fixed barrow beats.

- *Would increased waste disposal charges and reduced staffing levels lead to an increase in fly-tipping?* The Director commented that the evidence was that when prices had risen in the past it had not resulted in increased fly-tipping as it was generally commercial waste that was illegally disposed of rather than bulky household waste.

Members asked about the reasons for the proposed restructure given the Our Futures process that had only just been completed. The reasons included the fact that the current structure of some teams was based on high volumes of regeneration construction which would not now happen; and the fact the Council's financial situation meant that it needed to find the right approach to deliver acceptable levels of core services for the minimum resources. There would be significant savings requirements for several years beyond 2022/23, therefore further restructures were possible, although it was noted that a number of the proposals were to generate more income rather than simply reduce staffing or services. It was also noted that it was essential for the Council's finances that the savings target was achieved and alternative savings would need to be found if the proposed items were changed or could not be delivered.

A Member asked about whether the problem of the closure of the public convenience in the bus station would be addressed. It was responded that it not effected by the proposals as the model since the new bus station opened was for it to be managed by the retail operator.

Councillors Gahir and Matloob raised further issues under Rule 30 which included whether some of the savings could lead to higher costs in the future if service standards were lowered and generate more casework and complaints from residents. The Director responded that there was a balance with all the proposed savings in seeking to provide adequate core services whilst significantly reducing the Council's costs and expenditure. In response to a question from Councillor Gahir about digital advertising it was noted that several initiatives were proposed to increase income and that in this case the Council would not be liable for the maintenance costs and the sites would be subject to planning permission. Lead Members with portfolio responsibilities for services in Place responded to several of the points raised during the course of the discussion.

At the conclusion of the discussion the Panel noted the presentation and that further proposals would come to the next meeting in January 2022.

**Resolved –**

- (a) That the presentation on the 2021/22 budget position and 2022/23 savings proposals be noted, with the comments of the committee being taken into account as the budget was refined.
- (b) That a further update be provided to the Panel at the next meeting on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2022.

**11. A4 Experimental Bus and Cycle Lane**

The Panel considered a report on the experimental A4 bus and cycle lane and was invited to submit comments to Cabinet prior to a decision on any permanent scheme being made. The report was summarised by the Associate Director of Place Strategy and the Lead Member for Sustainable Transport & The Environment responded to a number of questions and comments from members of the Panel during the course of the discussion.

The bus and cycle lane scheme was initially introduced under an Experimental Traffic Regulation Order (ETRO) in 2020 to allow for social distancing and to reprioritise road space to for pedestrians and cyclists as outlined in the Government's Emergency Active Travel Fund guidance. The scheme initially introduced operated 24 hours in designated sections of the A4 between Dover Road and Uxbridge Road. There were a significant number of objections to the scheme including a petition which received 5,272 signatures. A number of changes to the scheme were made following a review by scrutiny and Cabinet which changed the operating hours to peak time only and enabled a range of authorised vehicles such as Hackney carriages, private hire vehicles and e-scooters to use the bus lane. The proposal was to make the peak time experimental scheme permanent and the report set out the monitoring data, consultation responses and information on issues such as air quality and journey times. The alternative options, including removing the bus and cycle lane, were summarised in the report.

Councillors Gahir, Matloob and Sharif addressed the Panel under Rule 30 and made a number of comments during the course of the discussion.

The Panel asked a number of questions about the monitoring data, including both the practical difficulties of collecting reliable and comparable data due to Covid-19; and whether the data collected supported the recommendation in the report that the bus lane be made permanent. For example, the data showed that average car journey times had increased; whilst air quality in the A4 corridor had improved the evidence could not directly attribute this to the bus lane; the consultation showed a majority of respondents were opposed to the scheme; and there were no evident improvements in public transport services and usage arising from the bus prioritisation. The Lead Member for Sustainable Transport highlighted that the scheme had improved the reliability of bus services and the bus priority measures were an important step as part of a wider strategy to work with bus operators to improve services over time. The Bus Service Improvement Plan and Enhanced Partnership with bus

operators considered by the Panel in September provided the platform for this and more radical measures to promote sustainable transport in other towns and cities across the country were noted, such as ultra-low emission zones. It was stated that the air quality data would require significant recalibration to determine the direct impact of the bus lane, but the evidence clearly showed major improvements in air quality during the period the scheme was in place.

Members raised a number of other issues including the ability of taxi drivers to stop in the bus lane to pick up fares; the ability of electric vehicles to use the bus lane; and the issues caused by the additional traffic movements at Salt Hill Activity Centre which was being used as a temporary vaccination centre for Covid-19. A member also highlighted the need to address localised congestion on the A4 in Colnbrook to improve the reliability of bus services between Heathrow and Slough. Whilst this particular issue was outside of the experimental scheme it highlighted the importance of addressing the wider transport issues in the corridor to make public transport as reliable and attractive as possible to promote modal shift.

Councillor Gill proposed a number of points to recommend to Cabinet which were refined during discussion, seconded and agreed by the Panel. The proposals were designed to ensure the scheme maximised capacity, ensured the bus lane led to improvements in bus services and promoted other modes of sustainable transport. They were that if the scheme was to be made permanent the Council should:

- “Ensure the scheme was part of a broader strategy to improve bus services and public transport provision for Slough residents”;
- “Maximise capacity by using the existing service road as the bus lane where practicable between Huntercombe roundabout and The Three Tuns junction”;
- “Explore localised measures to widen any sections of carriageway where appropriate, to increase capacity to provide the bus lane and relieve traffic congestion, subject to securing external funding.”
- “Standardise the rules and regulations for the operation of all bus lanes across the borough”;
- “Take forward plans to segregate the bus lane from the cycle lane to make cycling as safe and attractive alternative mode as possible”;
- “Recognise that existing public transport provision required significant improvement and therefore work with bus operators through the Enhanced Partnership/Bus Service Improvement Plan to seek to lower fares and improve the frequency and reliability of services both on the A4 and elsewhere in the borough”;
- “Promote the take up of Electric Vehicles by making the bus lane available to use for zero emission vehicles.”

At the conclusion of the discussion the above points were agreed to refer to Cabinet.

**Resolved –** That the following comments on the A4 bus lane be referred to Cabinet:

That if the A4 bus and cycle lane was to be made permanent the Council should:

1. Ensure the scheme was part of a broader strategy to improve bus services and public transport provision for Slough residents;
2. Maximise capacity by using the existing service road as the bus lane where practicable between Huntercombe roundabout and The Three Tuns junction;
3. Explore localised measures to widen any sections of carriageway where appropriate, to increase capacity to provide the bus lane and relieve traffic congestion, subject to securing external funding.
4. Standardise the rules and regulations for the operation of all bus lanes across the borough;
5. Take forward plans to segregate the bus lane from the cycle lane to make cycling as safe and attractive alternative mode as possible;
6. Recognise that existing public transport provision required significant improvement and therefore work with bus operators through the Enhanced Partnership/Bus Service Improvement Plan to seek to lower fares and improve the frequency and reliability of services both on the A4 and elsewhere in the borough;
7. Promote the take up of Electric Vehicles by making the bus lane available to use for zero emission vehicles.

## 12. Digital Signage Policy

A report was considered on the Digital Signage Project which had been referred to the Panel by Cabinet at its meeting on 15<sup>th</sup> November 2021. Digital advertising provided an income generating opportunity for the Council which had been discussed earlier in the meeting during consideration of the 2022/23 Place budget.

The Cabinet had agreed the policy in principle but sought the views of scrutiny, specifically on the type and appropriateness of advertising. It was

## **Place Scrutiny Panel - 01.12.21**

noted that the policy included a provision that the necessary authorities, such as the Advertising Standards Authority, to monitor the type of advertising.

In response to comments from the Panel it was confirmed that planning permission would be required. Members sought assurance that the Council wouldn't be exposed to any maintenance costs and it was confirmed that maintenance would be the responsibility of the provider. The Council would receive a licence fee. One suggestion from a member of the Panel was to seek to explore the possibility of ensuring the Council could maximise its income for advertisement placed in the most commercially advantageous sites and whether advertising income was being maximised from facilities such as Arbour Park. The Leader of the Council and Executive Director would consider this suggestion as part of the delegation to implement the project.

The Panel noted the report and did not make any further specific comments on the policy over and above those from Cabinet.

### **Resolved –**

- (a) That the report be noted.
- (b) That no further additions or amendments to the policy be referred back to Cabinet.

### **13. Date of Next Meeting - 12th January 2022**

The date of the next scheduled meeting was confirmed at 12<sup>th</sup> January 2022 at 6.30pm.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 9.45 pm)