Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Tuesday, 24th October, 2023.

Present: Councillors Manku (Chair), Escott, Hulme, Iftakhar, Matloob, Mohindra, O'Kelly and Stedmond

Also present: Councillors Chahal and Smith

Apologies for Absence: Councillors Shaik and Mann

1.   **Declarations of Interest**

No declarations were made.

2.   **Minutes of the last meeting, held on 26 September 2023**

Members asked that it be noted that the CISC tracker only covered the 26 September Committee, with a recommendation that the tracker should cover all actions and recommendations, including those prior to September 26. There was also a request for a separate tracker to cover further requests for information.

The Scrutiny and Governance Officer gave an update on the Action Tracker (Appendix A to the minutes), which he explained included requests for further information. There were 6 actions, Action A003 on monies carried forward was outstanding and it was agreed to extend the deadline for this, which the Scrutiny and Governance Officer would follow-up and update the action tracker ASAP. The remaining actions had later deadlines .

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 26 September be approved as a correct record.

3.   **ICT & Digital Update**

The Chair welcomed to the meeting Committee Members, Lead Members for Financial Oversight, and Improvement and Recovery, and officers. He invited the Lead Member for Financial Oversight, in the absence of the Lead Member for IT, to speak about the ICT and Digital Update Report.

The Lead Member outlined the main points of the report, which provided an update on the progress of the ICT and digital modernisation and remediation work approved by Cabinet in March 2022. Overall the work on ICT resilience and security was progressing, the pace of work was linked to the need to balance driving change while managing risk. The Lead Member outlined the highlights detailed in the report including the move to a cloud-based system, significant progress on cyber-resilience, replacement of the telephony system and the rollout of Microsoft 365. Further planned changes in the months ahead included moving to a new core data centre. The Lead Member

emphasized that IT underpinned everything the Council did and needed to be robust, this was a key driver going forward.

The Executive Director for Strategy and Improvement explained that it had been agreed that officers would report every 6 months to Cabinet on the ICT transformation programme. CISC members were being given the chance to challenge and make recommendations to Cabinet as part of this process.

The AD Chief Digital & Information Officer re-emphasised that the programme was a delicate balance of pushing for change but also managing and mitigating risk. Progress had been made in improving the digital presence for residents. There were 2 core areas of focus; the move to an area-wide network, and the move to a new data centre which was scheduled for November, both of which would make savings.

The Chair appreciated the introduction and outlined that CISC members had held a pre-meeting during which they had identified key lines of enquiry on the ICT report as:

- Outcomes and impact on people;
- Action plan and financial implications; and
- Resilience and cyber-security.

3.1 On outcomes and impact on people the Chair asked what the desired outcomes of the strategy were in terms of the improvements residents and workforce members would experience, as the corporate indicators were very much output indicators rather than outcome indicators.

In answer the AD Chief Digital & Information officer advised that ICT formed part of the customer service improvement group, so one outcome would be through improved ICT to directly impact on the efficiency of the customer service and lower waiting times for residents. This would however be heavily dependent on services residents received matching what was offered through the digital services, and the customer experience needed to meet expectations to enable residents to trust ICT. In terms of action plans and timescales some of the work associated with this was imminent, eg the introduction of a 'chatbot' facility on the website, which was anticipated within a few months, and the move to a new datacentre in November.

3.2 In answer to questions on what checks were undertaken, recovery of data loss, and the datacentre move, the AD assured members that all processes involved checks and balances, eg on moving to the cloud a testing regime had been implemented to ensure best practice was being followed. Risks were carefully managed to ensure any potential issues were highlighted. In terms of data loss there were technical tools to manage this, plus ensuring back-up facilities were kept up-to-date. Challenged on why a number of planned cyber security and resilience works were rated red on the milestone chart (Appendix A), the AD explained that there had been some delays and the need to get the right people on board to take this area of work forward, but this was now moving in the right direction. In terms of the datacentre move

and difference in tiers, the AD advised that he would need to come back with clarification on this, but that moving to a cloud-based disaster-recovery system would also give more resilience and better value.

3.3   Members recommended a further report on <u>how</u> ICT improvements would impact residents, with more detail on how it would enable the council to improve services for residents, including those with wider IT-accessibility issues who may not fit the norm in terms of customer services. In reply the ED agreed that a resident-focused IT report could be included in the forward plan, also explaining that the two main issues for ICT transformation were core corporate functions, and how improved technology could be used to help other departments; this report focused on the first of these.

Asked about further phases to the strategy, the AD agreed to provide further detail on subsequent phases, and also in sharing results of SBC website use monitoring, of which a limited degree of monitoring had been undertaken. In terms of strategic services the AD reported that as part of business continuity plans the ICT team were reviewing their approach to disaster recovery at the current time.

3.4   At the conclusion of discussions the Scrutiny and Governance Officer summed up the action points:

- To provide further detail on the data centre supplier refresh, including the Ark data centre suppliers
- To have a separate report to the task group on public engagement on the impact of the ICT strategy on residents and how it would enhance customer service delivery
- More detail to be provided on Phase 2 & 3 projects
- Bring back to Committee in January a refresh of the IT strategy
- An update on progress of ICT digitisation and modernisation work to be provided at a future Committee
- To share information on resident interactions with online services and forms

4.   **Public Sector Equality Duty and SBC (Slough Borough Council) Equality Objectives**

The Lead Member for Improvement and Recovery introduced the report which provided details on the proposed 2023-2027 statutory equality objectives for SBC in line with the Public Service Equality Duty. The council was committed and had a desire to improve collection of data around individual employees and equality. The purpose of this was so that SBC could become more data-driven and data-led in its actions, and to improve inclusion and equality in the workforce. The Lead Member was pleased that SBC leaders worked to ensure that diversity in the workforce was valued and was representative of the diverse local community. The Lead Member also drew members' attention to para 3.8 of the report which provided a quote from the Equality and Human Rights Commission which had written acknowledging the council's progress in

this area in difficult circumstances. This showed that through incremental progress, SBC was delivering important improvements for the benefit both of staff and for local residents.

The ED added that the objectives outlined in the report flowed on from the Corporate Plan objectives agreed by Council and Cabinet. These were being brought to CISC at this formative time for members' thoughts and input.

The Chair stated the Committee was happy to receive the report and was pleased with the commitment of SBC to improve equality in terms of services and workforce in line with its public service equality duty, and putting inclusion at the heart of policy. The Committee's key lines of inquiry centred around workforce diversity and residents and services.

4.1 Members appreciated the report and areas of improvement, but considered that it might be better to have two separate strategies, with one for the workforce and the other for residents, as they had different, albeit related outcomes, and as the report concentrated mainly on the workforce with too little detail on the impact for residents. The ED explained that it was common practice to have a workforce objective alongside an objective focussed on residents, as the workforce needed to reflect the community it served. Members appreciated this point but requested to see more focus on the marginalised residents in the community, which could need a different type of report in the future. The Lead Member and ED agreed that they could try to reflect this in future reports, and also clarified that census data had led the report, and this would be made clearer going forward.

4.2 There were questions on whether property implications should be included in the report, and on the key indicators for early years outcomes for children. It was explained that the report outlined how the council used the objectives to target services, with the corporate plan focusing on children and health inequalities. While housing could be seen as being related to children, this particular report was neutral in terms of the impact of housing on the policy. With regard to the below-average statistics for Slough in terms of the percentage of early years children with SEND support, it was explained that this was part of the evidence-gathering that had formed the objectives for improving outcomes for disadvantaged children and health inequalities.

4.3 On equality data collection for residents, it was acknowledged by ED Strategy and Improvement that this had been patchy and was an area for improvement. Data was not normally collected at point of contact though this was being worked on, with a note of caution that any statistics also had to be mindful of the data gap, ie people who were not accessing or able to access the services. All council decisions also required an equalities impact assessment, and performance on filling these out was not where it should be, with members encouraged to challenge any reports they encountered which fell short in this area.

The Chair asked what steps were being taken to create the culture change needed to meet equality objectives. The ED and Chief Executive explained

that this formed part of a culture-change programme, with workshops about to take place to discuss what kind of culture SBC wanted within its workforce, working with recruitment consultants on how to reach out to as diverse a range of candidates as possible for recruitment.

4.4   The Lead Member and ED summed up that SBC was in the initial stages of a journey in terms of its equality impact, with roadshows for staff, leaders listening more to staff, more access for staff with special needs and valuing respect and inclusion. Council leaders were also committed to providing every member of staff with an annual appraisal going froward. Significant progress had been made since January in this area as recognised by the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

At the conclusion of the discussions members made two recommendations, as noted by the Scrutiny and Governance Officer:

a. To increase the data collected on PCs of services users on a priority basis to enable better understanding of whether services carried unconscious bias for example to the detriment of any communities of place, interest or association (including PCs as a priority). This should be reflected as an equality objective in the strategy.

b. That future reports on PSED offered greater emphasis/detail about objectives and work carried out in relation to residents and services. Officers would reflect and come back to members on the frequency of future reports to Committee.

5.   **Update on Procurement and Contract Management**

The Lead Member for financial oversight, council assets, procurement and revenues & benefits introduced the report, emphasising that strong governance in this area was critical. The report updated the Committee on the improvements implemented to procurement and contract management at SBC over the last 2.5 years; on the implementation of the recommendations from the overview and scrutiny task and finish group on contract management; and on further planned improvements in this area. Challenges that remained included recruitment, development of regional networks, ensuring the social value policy was fit for purpose for Slough residents, and ensuring the contract management strategy was tailored correctly.

The Head of Commercial Services outlined that improvements were reported to Cabinet in October 2022, since then the focus had been on embedding the improvements and developing regional networks and relationships. Now that the basics were right, the focus going forward was on contract management and giving staff the framework and toolkit to enable them to work effectively, as well as looking for innovative ways to recruit to vacant positions.

The Chair thanked both for the update and agreed that procurement and contract management was an essential tool in delivering the council's wider

financial, social, economic and environmental aims and objectives. The Chair then invited members to ask questions and discuss the report.

5.1 Questions from members included what steps were taken to scrutinize contracts to check that work had been done satisfactorily, as there had been complaints from residents on maintenance contracts, and also what risk assessment was done regarding contracts. The Head of Commercial Services and Lead Member explained that, while they could not comment on individual cases, a number of contracts including the maintenance contract in question had been reviewed recently including at the overview and scrutiny task and finish group, and recommendations would be made to December Cabinet. On risk assessments, this was acknowledged to be an area of development, and officers were establishing a toolkit on contract management which would include a risk assessment framework.

5.2 In answer to further questions from members the Head of Commercial Services confirmed that finance training was in-house training on council financial policies and procedures, and benchmarking was undertaken on contracts, including on joint network contracts. Iin terms of how SBC measured up to the national procurement strategy, the HCS acknowledged that the council had undergone self-assessment on this which showed that it was moving in the right direction, with work still to do. The council's procurement strategy was also currently being re-written according to national strategy guidelines. Questioned on the statistics given in Appendix A on Quarter 1 Performance Indicators, the HCS explained that this table only showed new procurement activity for that quarter, and did not include existing activity or contracts entered into before that period. HCS agreed to ensure this was clarified in future reports.

5.3 Members raised further questions on progress against the task and finish group's recommendations detailed in the report; on shared contracts; and on adding value. In answer the Head of Commercial Services confirmed that the recommendations on development of key performance indicators (KPI's) for contracts, and implementation of a standardised framework for contracts were both on schedule to be in place by the end of March 2024. On shared contracts this was a work in progress, and in the early stages. There had not been an appetite historically to work collaboratively in the region, but work had recently been done to develop regional contacts. On adding value to contract management the Finance Director explained that procurement could be done quickly with the right information, but it had to be born in mind that implementation of contracts was often the part that took more time. The FD could not comment on the specific contract example given but would follow up with the member concerned.

5.4 Finally the Chair asked what importance was given to social value in tendering contracts and the HCS explained that this was another area of work the finance team were developing. A social value policy was being piloted within the procurement team, with the aim of ensuring that any social value built into a contract would benefit the residents of Slough specifically, and

would also need to be measurable in order to follow up on progress and results.

At the conclusion of discussions the Scrutiny and Governance Officer summed up the action points:

- future procurement reports or updates to clarify the context of reports and whether new or existing contracts are included.
- Cllr Iftakhar to provide details of the procurement issues and possibilities of in-cab IT
- Cllr Stedmond to provide details regarding outstanding issues with a number of housing repairs for residents in his ward.

3. **Verbal Updates from Chairs of Task & Finish Groups**

A verbal update was provided by Cllr Hulme, Chair of the Task and Finish Group on ASC preparedness. She explained that the group were still waiting for the draft report, they had held their final meeting on 28 September. Cllr Hulme had also attended a webinar which highlighted a number of issues to be aware of prior to the inspection, and which would feed into the draft report.

4. **Forward Work Programme**

The Scrutiny and Governance Officer suggested two changes to the forward work programme. With regard to the 30 January Committee, he suggested the Adult Social Care Transformation Programme item be deferred to a later Committee with the agreement of the ED Adults as this item would not be ready for the January Committee. This meant the full 30 Jan meeting could be spent on scrutiny of the Council's draft budget proposals 2024/25.

The second possible change related to the SEND item for the 22 February meeting, which in consultation with ED Children's Services could be subject to change

A member also suggested that discussion of the housing maintenance programme contract should also be included in the forward work programme, and the Scrutiny and Governance Officer agreed to follow-up this issue offline with the member.

Resolved: That the suggested amendments to the forward work programme be agreed and noted.

5. **Attendance Report**

Resolved – That the attendance report be noted.

6. **Date of Next Meeting - 28 November 2023**

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 28th November 2023.