

Cabinet – Meeting held on Monday, 18th December, 2023.

Present:- Councillors Smith (Chair), Chahal (Vice-Chair), I. Ahmed, Bedi, Manku, Muvvala and Wright

Also present:- Councillors Iftakhar and Tomar

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Kelly

PART 1

69. Declarations of Interest

No interests were declared.

70. Minutes of the Meeting held on 20th November 2023

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting of the Cabinet held on 20th November 2023 be approved as a correct record.

71. Budget Management Quarter 2 2023/24

The Lead Member for Finance, Council Assets, Procurement and Revenue & Benefits introduced a report that set out the forecast position of the Council for the 2023/24 financial year as at the end of the second quarter to 30th September 2023.

The forecast overspend at the end of the second quarter was £8.2m, which was a significant increase from the £5.3m at the end of quarter one. The Lead Member stated that whilst the current administration had not set the budget for 2023/24 the Cabinet was committed to owning it and a significant amount of work was taking place to deliver the savings programme. The legacy of poor record keeping, delays in closing prior years accounts and the historic failure to fully utilise the accounting system meant that it remained challenging to present reliable financial information. However, the work being undertaken to address these issues was summarised as was the process of 'Star Chambers' to seek to identify further in-year savings.

Two of the main areas of overspend were in adult social care and temporary accommodation, both of which had been reviewed at the end of November by the Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee. It was noted that many other local authorities faced pressures in these areas. The Lead Member commented that the budget inherited for temporary accommodation had been totally inadequate. The Cabinet discussed the reasons for the overspend, including significant demand and cost pressures given the current housing market conditions, and the measures being taken to address the overspend. Assurance was sought that the use of hotels for temporary accommodation was minimised and the Executive Director responsible for housing confirmed

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that it was only used as emergency accommodation in very specific circumstances, for example families with young children.

At the conclusion of the discussion the report was noted.

Resolved – That the following be noted:

- (a) The Council's forecast overspend at the end of Quarter 2 was £8.2m, up considerably from £5.3m at the end of Quarter 1. The risk was therefore high that without significant reductions in spend over the remainder of the financial year, the Council would be unable to balance its budget within the Capitalisation Direction.
- (b) Service revenue budgets were forecast to overspend by £15.6m in 2023/24. There were Corporate underspends in respect of interest costs and receipts (£5.7m) and the Corporate Contingency budget (£5.4m) totalling £11.1m. However, the Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) was showing an overspend of £3.7m. Service and Corporate budgets combined were showing an overspend of £8.2m.
- (c) If drastic reductions were not made in the remainder of the financial year, the Council would be unable to balance its budget within the current Capitalisation Direction.
- (d) Medium Term Financial Strategy Savings (MTFS) of £20.5m were expected to be delivered in 2023/24 against planned savings of £22.4m.
- (e) That the Capital programme was forecast to underspend in 2023/24 by £25.5m. Requests for slippage would require separate authorisation and are assumed here for the sake of clarity. A formal request for approval would form part of the Q3 Budget Management report to Cabinet in February.

72. **General Fund Revenue Budget 2024-25, and Medium Term Financial Strategy 24/25 to 27/28**

The Lead Member for Finance, Council Assets, Procurement and Revenue & Benefits introduced a report that set out the draft revenue budget proposals for 2024/25, the draft Medium Term Finance Strategy (MTFS) for 2024/25 to 2027/28 and the Council Tax base for 2024/25.

A supplementary agenda was considered that included a revised Appendix C and an additional recommendation (d) relating to the Council Tax base breakdown for parishes. This was noted and agreed.

The budget proposals had been developed following service reviews, savings proposals, assessments of pressures and growth in each directorate and a series of 'Star Chambers'. The Cabinet thanked the finance team, executive directors and the finance commissioner for the significant amount of work that

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had gone in to developing a draft budget and MTFS as a basis for consultation.

It was recognised that the Council remained in a very challenging financial position and there were significant risks that would need to be carefully monitored and managed. The Local Government Finance Settlement had been published earlier in the day and the finance team would be assessing the impacts of any of the assumptions in the Council's financial model. The Lead Member summarised some of the key headlines in the draft budget which included a proposal for a Council Tax rise of 4.99% and additional resources for adult social care, temporary accommodation and customer services. The draft budget was balanced by utilising one-off smoothing reserves and also required exceptional financial support through the Capitalisation Direction. The use of one-off resources in the smoothing reserve meant that there was an underlying gap to carry forward to future years and work was taking place to identify further savings which could be delivered on top of those included in the draft budget.

The Leader of the Council updated the Cabinet on a letter he had received from the local government minister, Simon Hoare MP, earlier in the afternoon that stated that Slough, and some of the other councils in receipt of exceptional financial support, were being advised by the Government to set a higher Council Tax than the 4.99% included in the draft budget. The Government was taking the necessary steps to raise the cap that would normally trigger a local referendum to enable this. A meeting had been arranged to discuss this matter with the Minister and the Leader highlighted that he would use the opportunity to set out the rationale for the draft budget as proposed with a 4.99% rise. The issue would then be carefully considered as the budget was finalised in early 2024 prior to consideration by Cabinet in February and Council in early March.

The Cabinet discussed various aspects of the draft budget, including the additional funding for adult social care, and how the adult social care precept which had by raised in each of the previous years had been used given the apparent funding gap for the service. At the conclusion of the discussion it was agreed that the draft budget was a sound basis for consultation and the recommendations were agreed.

Resolved –

- (a) That the draft budget proposals for 2024/25 be agreed as the basis for consultation with the Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee and other interested parties.
- (b) That the draft Medium Term Financial Strategy for 2024/25 to 2027/28 be agreed as the basis for consultation with the Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee and other interested parties.

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- (c) That the Council Tax Base be set at 44,358.44 (Band D equivalents) for 2024/25 as outlined in Appendix C in the supplementary agenda be agreed.
- (d) Noted that the Council Tax base is broken down as follows between local parishes and the rest of Slough:

Area	Band D Equivalent Dwellings CTB1	Band D Equivalent Dwellings Budget	Increase
Parish of Britwell	855	855	0
Parish of Colnbrook with Poyle	1,867.60	1,867.60	0
Parish of Wexham	1,425.10	1,425.10	0
Slough (unparished)	39,628.60	40,658.80	0
Council Tax Base	43,776.30	44,806.50	1,030.20

73. Slough Learning Disability Strategy 2023-28

The Lead Member for Adult Social Care, Mental Health & Learning Disabilities introduced a report that sought approval of the Slough Learning Disability Strategy 2023-2028.

The strategy set out how the Council, working with its partners, would seek to reduce health inequalities for adults with learning disabilities so that more people could live a good quality of life as independently as possible within the local community. It highlighted the ambitions to further join up services, with health and social care professionals working together in an integrated way to identify solutions that improved lives.

The strategy was supported by an action plan and delivery would be overseen by a Steering Group that included people with learning disabilities, family members and the Co-production Network as well as Council officers and partners. The Cabinet particularly welcomed the fact the strategy had been developed with the direct involvement of service users and agreed their continued involvement was important. The Executive Director, Adult Services commented that this was one of a number of strategies coming forward that all sought to put people at the centre of the service. This approach was endorsed by Lead Members who commented that resident and service user engagement was a key priority for the administration.

The Cabinet noted the Commissioners comments, specifically that future reports should include information on both the outcomes achieved and effective use of public money. It was proposed and agreed that a progress report be brought back to Cabinet annually.

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After due consideration, the Cabinet agreed the recommendation to approve the strategy and thanked all those involved in its development.

Resolved –

- (a) That the Slough Adult Learning Disability Strategy 2023-28 set out at Appendix 2 be approved.
- (b) That it be noted that a report would be brought back to Cabinet annually setting out the progress against the Action Plan and recommending any amendments to the Strategy.

74. Services to support those experiencing domestic abuse

The Lead Member for Community Cohesion, Public Health, Public Protection, Leisure and Planning introduced a report on the services that the Council commissioned for victims/survivors of domestic abuse and the wider partnership support in Slough. This included the important role of independent domestic violence advocacy services, and it was recommended that a short term extension be agreed with the current provider, Hestia, pending a more detailed review of provision.

Officers highlighted the relatively high levels of demand for such services in Slough and the short extension would provide the opportunity for a review.

The current contract would be extended by one year to 31st December 2024 with a view to the recommissioning of a new service from 1st January 2025. The extension would be on the current agreed contractual rate. A further report would be provided to Cabinet in March 2024, together with a Safer Accommodation Strategy.

The Cabinet approved the recommendations.

Resolved –

- (a) That the work taking place in respect of domestic abuse, the council's statutory responsibilities and a summary of an overarching needs assessment completed earlier this year be noted.
- (b) That it be agreed to extend the period of the existing contract for domestic abuse service by Hestia for one year until 31st December 2024, as part of a wider strategic approach to domestic abuse at the same value as the current agreed contractual rate.
- (c) That it be agreed that officers bring a further report to Cabinet in March 2024 to provide an update on progress, together with a completed Safer Accommodation Strategy and other linked strategies to enable a decision on further recommissioning of the independent domestic violence advocacy (IDVA) service to commence on 1st January 2025.

75. Approval of annual Business and Improvement Plan for Slough Children First Limited (SCF)

The Lead Member for Education and Children's Services introduced a report that sought approval of the Slough Children First (SCF) Business and Improvement Plan for 2024 to 2025. The background to the company and current status of the business plan was summarised.

The plan was a crucial document that set out the company's strategic priorities and financial strategy. It governed how SCF conducted its business, and it was not permitted to enter into transactions, agreements or contracts unless they were in accordance with the plan. The Cabinet welcomed the fact that for the first time the plan focused on improvement as well as the financial aspects of a business plan.

The Executive Director of Children's Services/Chief Executive of SCF highlighted the importance of developing good quality social care services for children whilst achieving best value. The Cabinet was being asked to approve an amended suite of contractual key performance indicators which focused on areas such as workforce strategy, ensuring effective participation of children and young people and financial performance, in addition to some existing indicators around quality of practice.

The Cabinet was also asked to note that the contract sum of 2024/25 would be considered and approved as part of the Council's budget setting process and that it had been agreed by the Strategic Commissioning Group that the requirement for SCF to submit an annual report for 2022/23 be waived to enable the new leadership of the company to focus on future performance.

The Cabinet approved the recommendations.

Resolved –

- (a) That the SCF's Business and Improvement Plan for 2024 to 2025 as at Appendix A to the report be approved.
- (b) That the amended contractual key performance indicators at Appendix B be approved and delegated authority be given to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Lead Member for Children's Services, to make minor amendments to these indicators, including agreeing changes to the measures.
- (c) That delegated authority be given to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Lead Member for Children's Services, to make amendments to the Articles of Association in relation to the board composition, quorum and reserved matters.
- (d) That it be noted that the contract sum for 2024/25 would be considered and approved as part of the Council's budget setting process.

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- (e) Note that it has been agreed that SCF would not submit an Annual Report for 2022/23.

76. Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Update

The Lead Member for Education and Children's Services introduced the quarterly update report on the progress on the key actions taken to address the priorities identified by Ofsted and the CQC in their inspection report on SEND services in Slough in 2021.

It was noted that significant progress had been made since the Department for Education (DfE) monitoring visit in July 2023 and the first full monitoring report for the Safety Valve Agreement / High Needs Deficit Recovery Plan was completed in September. The Executive Director of Children's Services gave a verbal update on the most recent DfE monitoring visit which took place in November. Feedback was awaited but it was considered to have gone well with the service on the cusp of making significant improvements. One of the key measures that Cabinet was monitoring was the number of Education, Health and Care plans completed and it was noted that there had been an increase each month since July with further acceleration of progress expecting in the coming months.

Members of the Cabinet welcomed the progress being made to date and asked questions about the key performance indicators and access to educational psychologists.

It was recommended that the formal quarterly updates be provided to Cabinet for the remainder of the municipal year with future updates beyond that outside of formal Cabinet meetings. This was agreed.

Resolved – That the progress be noted and that it be agreed to continue receiving quarterly updates for the remainder of this municipal year.

77. Housing Resident Involvement Strategy

The Cabinet considered a report that sought approval of the newly developed Housing Resident Involvement Strategy to ensure meaningful opportunities for more tenants and leaseholders to influence housing services, policies and strategies that impacted on them. It was also required to ensure compliance with the new Consumer Standards from 2024.

The strategy had been developed in partnership with the Resident Board and shaped by feedback from other residents through survey responses and drop-in sessions. The consultation feedback was summarised and noted. The strategy highlighted the importance of a culture that embedded resident involvement, which was a principle welcomed by the Cabinet. The Executive Director, Regeneration, Housing and Environment explained how the strategy fitted into the wider set of improvement being made to the Council's housing services. The key aspects of the strategy were outlined and Lead Members

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asked for more detail about how the new strategy would improve communication and engagement with residents. It was highlighted that additional staff would be recruited to focus on resident engagement, from within the existing budget, and this team would lead on a number of projects and means of communication to improve engagement and the responsiveness of housing services.

A Member asked whether the service could be provided to private sector tenants in the future. In response, it was noted that the service was funded from the Housing Revenue Account which could only be used for services for Council tenants and leaseholders.

At the conclusion of the discussion the strategy was welcomed and approved by the Cabinet.

Resolved –

- (a) That the Housing Resident Involvement Strategy as at Appendix 1 to the report be approved.
- (b) That it be agreed to receive an annual report on the implementation of the strategy.

78. Options Appraisal re Procurement of the repairs maintenance and investment (RMI) Contract

The Cabinet considered a report that set out the various options and approaches to the re-procurement of the Repairs, Maintenance and Investment (RMI) contract for housing. The Council needed to procure a new RMI service to ensure improvements to the overall service offer, delivering a more responsive and customer orientated service.

Various procurement and contract options were available and a specialist consultancy had been brought in to carry out the detailed options appraisal which meant the Council had received a professional and independent view on the process and market considerations. The Executive Director Regeneration, Housing and Environment outlined main options which included a three-year extension with the existing contractor; procurement of a single integrated contract or a variant which separately procured for specialist works; or a more traditional multi-contract approach with selective internalisation of customer services. The latter option was recommended, subject to a soft market testing exercise, as it would provide a more balanced approach, spread risk and provided greater flexibility.

The current RMI contract would expire in 2024 and a four-month extension to 31st March 2025 with the existing provider was recommended to align the contract period to the Council's financial year and avoid a handover to a new provider over a Christmas period. This would ensure a smoother transition to the new arrangements and was agreed by Cabinet.

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The Cabinet welcomed the proposed approach and agreed the recommendations with a further report to Cabinet scheduled for November 2024.

Resolved –

- (a) That a short extension period of 4 months from December 2024 to 31 March 2025 to the current provider be approved.
- (b) That a soft market testing exercise to inform the procurement methodology for the future procurement of services be approved.
- (c) That delegated authority be given to the Executive Director of Regeneration, Housing and Environment, in consultation with the Lead Member for Highways, Housing and Transport, to determine the procurement route to secure best value and commence procurement, noting that a future report will be brought back to Cabinet in November 2024 to award any contracts.

79. Procurement of Replacement Fleet Vehicles

The Lead Member for Environment, Environmental Services and Open Spaces introduced a report that set out the preferred medium term options for the sourcing of essential vehicles for the Direct Services Organisation (DSO) to undertake grounds and highway maintenance, and street cleansing services. The Council had a statutory duty to provide such services.

The Council currently leased all its vehicles for these purposes and a Leader's Urgent Action decision was taken on 30th October 2023 to approve a 12-month lease agreement and provide time for officers to seek medium term options to deliver savings and reduce revenue pressures. The proposed approach was to review all its fleet to determine the number of vehicles required and then proceed with the incumbent or other providers to seek to purchase second-hand vehicles to reduce the revenue leasing costs.

After due consideration, the Cabinet agreed the recommendations.

Resolved –

- (a) Approved the procurement of a replacement fleet of vehicles for use within the Environment directorate in the following order of priority:
 - (i) outright purchase of second-hand vehicles capable of suitable adaptation and deemed available for a minimum of five years;
 - (ii) outright purchase of new vehicles deemed available for a minimum of five years;
 - (iii) procurement by lease for a maximum period of five years
- (b) Delegated authority to the Executive Director for Regeneration, Housing and Environment, in consultation with the Lead Member for

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Environment, Environmental Services and Open Spaces, Lead Member for Finance, Council Assets, Procurement and Revenues & Benefits and the Executive Director Finance & Commercial, the procurement and award of contract for acquisition of fleet vehicles in line with recommendation a) and for procurement and award of contract for associated maintenance, ensuring value for money is secured when selected the most appropriate method;

- (c) Delegated authority to the Executive Director for Regeneration, Housing and Environment, in consultation with the Lead Member for Finance, Council Assets, Procurement and Revenues & Benefits, Lead Member for Environment, Environmental Services and Open Spaces and the Executive Director, Finance & Commercial, the procurement and award of contract for the Fleet Management Routing software system.
- (d) Approved that the capital programme be amended to include acquisition of the DSO fleet with funding being from DfT grant and where possible specific programme grants to where possible preserve the more adaptable DfT grant funding for other critical purposes. The programme to be profiled across 2023/24 and 2024/25 as appropriate to available second hand vehicles balancing the need to come within revenue budget.

80. Estate Strategy - Phase 1

The Cabinet considered a report that sought approval for the proposed conceptual model of a Phase I Estate Strategy and to agree to SBCs continued occupation of Observatory House. An initial report had been provided to Cabinet in September and the Lead Member and Executive Director summarised the rationale for and key aspects of Phase I of the strategy.

The Estate Strategy Phase I was a high-level conceptual framework about how the Council would better manage its portfolio of assets in the future. It was aligned to the asset disposal strategy. No decisions were sought in Phase I about individual buildings with the exception of Observatory House and the Council's continued occupation as its 'central' building was recommended. The proposal was for it to become a central Public Services Centre with back office services to be centralised in Observatory House and a customer access point be created. A full report and outline business case would be presented to Cabinet in March 2024.

The Cabinet discussed the report in detail and particularly considered the options for working with community organisations and stakeholders. Options for several specific buildings were raised, including The Curve, and it was reiterated that decisions on individual buildings would be for future phases of the strategy.

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An elector question had been submitted by Mr W Strutton on the adequacy of the property insurance for assets covered by the Estate Strategy given the statement made by a Lead Member at a recent full Council meeting that the bus station had been 'under-insured'. The Lead Member responsible for Council assets responded to the question and a supplementary question. Assurance was provided that work had been undertaken to correct any instances of under-insurance and the Estate Strategy would help the Council strengthen the management of its assets in future by improving the data available on which take such operational decisions such as insurance coverage.

At the conclusion of the discussion the recommendations were agreed.

Resolved –

- (a) That the proposed conceptual model (Phase I) for the Operational and Community Estate be approved to enable the development of Phase II of the strategy. The model was described in detail in the report.
- (b) That SBC's continued occupation of Observatory House as its 'Central' building be approved. Back office services would be centralised in Observatory House and a customer access point would also be created. The basis of this occupation would be set out in a separate Cabinet report that would contain an Outline Business Case. This would be presented to Cabinet in March 2024.

(During consideration of the report the Cabinet agreed to extend the meeting beyond the guillotine of 9.00pm to complete the business for the meeting).

81. References from Scrutiny

There were no references from scrutiny.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 9.02 pm)