

Cabinet – Meeting held on Monday, 16th December, 2024.

Present:- Councillors Smith (Chair), Chahal (Vice-Chair), E. Ahmed, Kelly, Manku, Shah (from 6.46pm), Shaik and Wright

Also present:- Councillor Muvvala

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Bedi

PART 1

82. Declarations of Interest

No interests were declared.

83. Minutes of the Meetings held on 14th and 18th November 2024

Resolved – That the minutes of the meetings of the Cabinet held on 14th and 18th November 2024 be approved as a correct record.

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

The Leader of the Council introduced a report that sought approval of the Slough Children First (SCF) Business Improvement Plan for 2025 to 2028. The document was both a business and improvement plan to ensure alignment between financial performance and service improvement.

As SCF was wholly owned by the Council, it was bound by its Articles to submit its draft Business Improvement Plan for approval. The plan was a critical document governing how SCF conducted its business, and it was not permitted to enter into transactions, agreements, or contracts unless they were in accordance with its Business Improvement Plan. The Leader commended the company for the progress it made in a number of areas during the year including the development of a new Corporate Parenting Strategy and a number of service improvements. The priorities for the coming year included youth justice following the recent inspection; family help to promote early intervention and prevention; and the Slough Academy to support staff recruitment and retention.

The Business Improvement Plan included information on the financial performance of SCF and demonstrated that the company had reduced its costs since 2023/24 and was projected to deliver under its originally agreed contract sum in 2024/25. The contract sum for 2025/26 would be finalised and approved as part of the Council's budget setting process.

(Councillor Shah joined the meeting)

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The Cabinet agreed that the engagement of children and young people was crucial in the development of the company's plans and strategies. Members asked how best value was being achieved. In response it was noted that a number of additional processes and controls had been introduced to ensure financial governance was robust, for example, panels had been established to review the cost of placements and a 'grow your own' approach was being taken to social workers to mitigate the cost of agency staff. Lead Members commented on the importance of having contingency plans in place if projected savings weren't achieved.

At the conclusion of the discussion the Cabinet welcomed and approved the SCF Business Improvement Plan.

Resolved –

- (a) That the SCF's Business Improvement Plan for 2025 to 2028 at Appendix 1 be approved.
- (b) That delegated authority be given to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Lead Member for Children's Services, to agree minor amendments to the Business Improvement Plan before final presentation to the Board for approval and publication and during the financial year.
- (c) That it be noted that the contract sum for 2025/26 will be finalised and approved as part of the Council's budget setting process.

85. Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Update

The Leader of the Council introduced a report that provided the latest quarterly update on the actions taken to address priorities identified by Ofsted and the CQC in their inspection report from 2021.

Good progress was being made in a number of areas and the Department for Education (DfE) had confirmed that 24 of the 94 actions in the Written Statement of Action (WSOA) had been closed following a robust monitoring process. The service had been stabilised and good practice was being embedded. Work was ongoing to reduce the backlog in Education, Health and Care Plans and complaints had been reduced significantly. It was recognised that the range of scale of the weaknesses identified meant there was much more work to do. The Director of Children's Services summarised the key priorities, current actions and challenges that were being faced. These included relationships with schools and parents, and staff recruitment. A further inspection was due imminently.

The Cabinet welcomed the progress that was being made in improving the service. A number of questions were asked including about the engagement with families. In response it was noted that officers aimed to improve the proactive communication with families and a strong participation model was now in place, although it would take time for the direct benefits of

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improvements to be seen. A number of other issues were discussed including the position on the Safety Valve Agreement with DfE.

At the conclusion of the discussion the report was noted.

Resolved – That the quarterly SEND update be noted.

86. Library Services consultation

The Leader of the Council introduced a report that sought approval on the proposed future operating model for library services for the purpose of public consultation.

The Council had a statutory duty to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient' library service. The current library service was delivered from four buildings (The Curve, Britwell, Langley and Cippenham), with no mobile service, although it was recognised that the library service was not dependent on specific buildings. Significant changes had been made following the library service plan that had been approved by Cabinet in March 2022, which followed a detailed needs assessment and public consultation. This included a reduction in library hours and staffing with a shift towards a self-service model whilst keeping all four buildings open.

The report and appendices set out the performance against the service plan priorities since 2022. In particular it was noted that library footfall had reduced significantly at all sites since 2019. Footfall data was included in the appendix to the report. The Council had also recently agreed changes to the delivery of services with customer services delivered from fewer buildings, with these being Observatory House, The Curve and Britwell. There was therefore no operational need for Cippenham and Langley libraries for other service delivery. It was therefore appropriate to review the library needs assessment carried out in 2021 against the current delivery model.

The options in paragraph 1.3 of the report were reviewed. The recommended proposal was to consult on closing Cippenham and Langley library buildings and to re-design the service offering across The Curve and Britwell with a staffing resource reflecting the removal of two vacant posts. In summarising the proposals the Leader emphasised that the Cabinet was committed to providing a comprehensive and efficient library service but that the limited resources available needed to be used in the most effective way and respond to the evolving way people used the service in recent years. The consultation would last for 10-weeks and a report would then come back to Cabinet for decision in Spring 2025.

Following a request to speak, Councillor Muvvala addressed the Cabinet and set out his concerns about the proposals, particularly the option to close Langley library. He highlighted that the library was a vital facility for residents in the east of the borough. He queried the consultation process; stated that the reduction in opening hours was a key reason for the reduced footfall; and commented that the anticipated £86,000 saving by closing Langley library was

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relatively small in relation to the Council's overall financial position and alternative savings should be identified from other areas of the budget. Other options should be considered including exploring the potential of crowdfunding and staffing libraries through a volunteering programme with businesses as part of any corporate social responsibility activity they may have. The Leader thanked Councillor Muvvala for his comments which were noted.

The Cabinet raised a number of issues during the course of the discussion, including the underlying factors behind both the changes to library service provision post-Covid and with increased use of digital technology; and the importance of the Council taking the decisions necessary to move towards a sustainable financial position and make best use of its asset base. The consultation process was discussed and Lead Members highlighted the importance of a meaningful consultation to better understand residents usage and views on how best the library service could be delivered. Following the consultation any decisions would need to be evidence based and take account of the feedback received.

At the conclusion of the discussion the recommendations were agreed. Following a request submitted, the Chair of the Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee had agreed that scrutiny call-in could be waived to enable the consultation to commence immediately, noting that any decisions on the future of the service would come back to Cabinet in Spring 2025 and be open to scrutiny.

Resolved –

- (a) That the proposed future operating model for Library Services for the purpose of consultation be approved.
- (b) That public consultation on the future delivery of library services for a period of 10 weeks from 17 December 2024 be approved.
- (c) That it be noted that a report will be brought back to Cabinet in Quarter 4 of 2024/25 recommending a proposal for the future delivery of library services.

87. Removal of vehicles from the public highway

The Lead Member for Housing, Highways, Planning & Transport introduced a report that sought approval for the authority to remove vehicles from the highway in specific circumstances to comply with its traffic management duties. The circumstances included where a vehicle was creating a hazard or obstructing the highway, an abandoned vehicle and a 'persistent evader' with multiple unpaid penalty charge notices.

The new policy aimed to improve traffic flows and reduce congestion on the highway by ensuring effective enforcement of parking contraventions and would allow a clear road network to vehicles, cyclists and public transport. It

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was envisaged that between 100-150 vehicles would be removed each year and cost to the Council was circa £150,000 which would be offset by the expected £165,000 generated through the scheme.

The Cabinet asked about the potential use of removal powers and in response it was noted that vehicles parked on the public highway/footways could be removed if they were a persistent evader, dangerously parked or where there was abuse of the disabled blue badge parking scheme. It was noted that similar policies were widely used by authorities in London. If the policy was approved a report on the contract award would come back to Cabinet by April 2025. Lead Members queried the controls the Council would have on the contractor and it was responded that contractors operated under a Code of Conduct. Information about the new policy and how it would work would be widely communicated through the press and on the Council's website.

The Cabinet welcomed the policy which would strengthen the Council's ability to effectively manage the highways and the recommendations were approved.

Resolved –

- (a) That the new policy – Vehicle Removal Parking Contraventions and Persistent Evaders at Appendix 1 to the report be adopted.
- (b) That delegated authority be given to the Director for Regeneration, Housing and Environment with consultation with the Lead Member for Highways, Housing and Transport and Lead Member for Finance and Procurement to commence procurement of a removal and disposal provider.
- (c) That it be noted that a contract award report would be submitted to Cabinet for approval to appoint new suppliers by April 2025.

88. Energy Contracts 2025/26

The Lead Member for Finance, Council Assets and Transformation introduced a report that sought approval of the Council's energy contracts for 2025/26.

The wholesale energy markets were relatively stable after a period of significant volatility with price fluctuations following the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The wholesale cost of energy for 2025/26 had reduced by approximately 10% over the past 12 months. Gas prices were starting to increase over the Winter 2024 period as demand increased. The Council was in the final year of its flex and fixed rate energy contracts which would all expire on 31st March 2025.

To limit the Council's exposure to potential future energy price fluctuations during 2025/26, and to avoid 'out of contract' rates being applied by suppliers for 'lapsed energy contracts' and also to provide opportunity to obtain market value in 2025/26, the Cabinet was requested to delegate authority to the

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Executive Director of Regeneration, Housing and Environment, in consultation with the Executive Director of Finance and Commercial and the Lead Member to purchase energy below an approved cap price.

The Cabinet was also recommended to approve the procurement of new energy contracts to start on 1st April 2025 for a period of 1-year. Cabinet was requested to approve the extension of the Councils existing energy procurement service contract with Equity Energies Limited for the maximum period allowed, which was 1-year. It was also proposed that energy procurement and management would move under the Corporate Landlord (Property Services) and a longer-term energy strategy would be developed for Cabinet to approve next year.

It was recognised that energy costs remained unpredictable and it was important to agree arrangements for 2025/26 to mitigate the financial risks. The recommendations were agreed.

Resolved –

- i. That the extension of the energy procurement contract with Equity Energies Limited for the maximum period of 1 year (1st April 2025 to 31st March 2026) be approved, to continue to provide energy procurement services to the Council.
- ii. That the procurement of new fixed and flex energy supply contracts using the OJEU compliant Gwynedd Dynamic Purchase System (DPS) at a maximum value of £3.453 million (exclusive of VAT) for the 2025/26 period be approved.
- iii. That the Gas & Electricity Risk Management Strategy for the Flex energy supply contracts be approved as follows:
 - a. Approve the purchase of electricity on a 'month ahead' basis and gas on a 'day ahead' basis on the open 'wholesale energy market spot price'.
 - b. Set wholesale energy market price caps for power for the summer 25 period (April 25 to September 25) to £97/MWh and the winter 25 (October 24 to March 26) to £102/MWh.
 - c. Set wholesale energy market price caps for gas for the summer 25 period (April 25 to September 25) to £43/MWh and the winter 25 (October 25 to March 26) to £42/MWh.
- iv. If the wholesale energy markets price exceeded or was likely to exceed the maximum value cap contained in Recommendation 1.1 (iii) then Cabinet delegated authority to the Executive Director of Regeneration, Housing and Environment, in consultation with the Executive Director of Finance and Commercial (the S151 officer) and the Lead Member for Finance, Council Assets and Transformation to purchase energy in a manner which would seek to limit further cost exposure.

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- v. That delegated authority be given to the Executive Director of Regeneration, Housing and Environment, in consultation with the Executive Director of Finance and Commercial (the S151 officer) and the Lead Member for Finance, Council Assets and Transformation to procure energy contracts and purchase energy in line with the Gas & Electricity Risk Management Strategy.
- vi. That delegated authority be given to the Executive Director of Regeneration, Housing and Environment, in consultation with the Executive Director of Finance and Commercial (the S151 officer) and the Lead Member for Finance, Council Assets and Transformation, to award contract(s) to successful bidder(s) subject to the bid(s) as a total being no more than the maximum value specified in Recommendation (ii).

89. Slough Urban Renewal - Update on progress against Partnership Plan

The Lead Member for Finance, Council Assets & Transformation introduced a report that provided an update on the Slough Urban Renewal (SUR) joint venture partnership as of August 2024.

The report updated against the previously approved Business Plan 2023-2028 which would enable the disposal of key sites to generate capital receipts for the Council, reduce the Council's financial commitments and secure best value in accordance with the Council's Asset Disposals Strategy and statutory obligations. The aim was to wind up the joint venture by the end of the business plan period.

The report had a Part II appendix which contained exempt information. The Cabinet briefly agreed to exclude the press and public to ask any questions on the exempt information and then reconvened in Part I to take the decision to note the update.

Resolved – That the updated Slough Urban Renewal (SUR) Business Plan 2024 – 2028 and Appendix 1 be noted, including that the Partnership Objectives and the business of SUR remained unchanged, as set out in Clause 5 of the Partnership Agreement from March 2013.

90. Exclusion of Press and Public

Resolved – That the press and public be excluded from the meeting during the consideration of the item in Part II of the agenda as it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information relating to the financial and business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information) as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 the Schedule 12A the Local Government Act 1972.

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Below is a summary of matters considered during Part II of the agenda.

91. Slough Urban Renewal - Update on progress against Partnership Plan - Appendix

That the Part II appendix be noted.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.47 pm)