

COUNCIL – 23 JANUARY 2025

MEMBER QUESTIONS

From Cllr Hulme to the Lead Member for Equalities, Public Health and Public Protection

What plans are in place to renew the Landlord Licensing Scheme across the Borough. When will the new scheme be implemented?

Discretionary property licensing is a valuable tool that local authorities can use alongside their regular enforcement powers to address specific issues affecting the community. By implementing licensing, the Council can more effectively regulate private landlords and manage the housing sector.

Licensing clearly distinguishes between licensed and unlicensed properties, clarifying ownership and responsibilities. This simplification enhances enforcement efforts. When a landlord operates without a license, inspections may reveal further violations.

Additionally, licensing fosters effective communication between landlords and local authorities, increasing landlord awareness of their responsibilities. It encourages the development of intelligence-gathering mechanisms to support compliance by identifying unlicensed properties and targeting problematic ones. This system promotes collaboration among the Council and other agencies, such as fire and rescue services, police, immigration border control, social services, and HMRC.

From June 2019 to June 2024, discretionary additional and selective licensing designations were active in the Borough.

The additional licensing designation was a borough-wide scheme that covered smaller Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs) accommodating three or four people. The Council implemented this scheme because it identified a significant number of mismanaged HMOs that were causing or likely to cause issues for the residents or the public.

The selective licensing designation focused primarily on the Chalvey and Central wards. It required all accommodations rented under an assured shorthold tenancy or license that were not classified as HMOs (i.e., let to a single household) to be licensed. This scheme aimed to address poor housing conditions and high levels of antisocial behaviour (ASB).

While each scheme had its unique objectives, the primary goal was to create a framework for more effective private rented sector regulation that did not rely solely on reactive regulatory actions.

Although these designations ended on 1 July 2024, individuals holding unexpired licenses under either of the expired designations must continue to comply with the conditions outlined in their licenses. While some local authorities have managed consecutive licensing designations, this is uncommon. When consulting on future

designations, local authorities must demonstrate the performance of previous schemes, assess whether they achieved their aims and objectives, and identify any lessons learned to improve future schemes.

There is both political and administrative interest in exploring future licensing designations. The first step in considering these designations is for the Council to validate that the conditions for property licensing exist. For additional licensing, the Council must prove that a significant proportion of HMOs in the Borough are being managed ineffectively, leading to actual or potential problems for occupants or the public.

For selective licensing, the Council must demonstrate that an area faces one or more of the following issues:

- Low housing demand (or is likely to develop into such an area)
- A significant and persistent problem caused by antisocial behaviour
- Poor housing conditions
- High levels of migration
- High levels of deprivation
- High levels of crime
- A high (more than 20%) proportion of private rented housing

As the draft report for the September 2024 Cabinet meeting progresses through the Forward Plan process, it was determined that a stock modelling report for the private rented sector is necessary to provide an evidence base for identifying whether the conditions for discretionary property licensing exist.

The procurement process to obtain a robust stock modelling report has been initiated and is moving forward swiftly. Once completed, this report will identify whether any of the conditions for licensing have been met and which areas may warrant licensing as a solution to the identified issues.

Following the completion of this report, a recommendation will be presented to the Cabinet for approval based on the findings. If the conditions for additional and/or selective licensing are met, and pending the outcome of statutory consultation, the Council aims to implement new designations in the fourth quarter of 2025/26.

From Cllr Matloob to the Lead Member for Lead Member for Equalities, Public Health and Public Protection

We are increasingly concerned that Equalities Impact Assessments, required by law, are routinely being treated like a formality/tick box exercise. Can you advise your plan for ensuring this completed with the diligence it deserves?

The Public Sector Equality Duty requires all local authorities to consider the impact of their policies on individuals who share protected characteristics (staff and residents). While Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) are not legally mandated, they are valuable tools that help us understand how policies might affect different groups. They also demonstrate compliance with the legal duty to show "due regard" to the following areas in decision-making:

- Eliminating unlawful discrimination, harassment, and victimisation.
- Advancing equality of opportunity between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Fostering good relations between individuals who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

The council is developing an Equality Plan, which will be presented to the Cabinet in April. This plan includes actions aimed at improving evidence-based decision-making and integrating the reduction of inequalities into both leadership and decision-making processes. A key focus will be enhancing equality impact assessments' quality and consistency.

Specifically, our actions will include:

- Conducting an in-depth review of the data that services currently hold, examining what information is collected about the protected characteristics of service users.
- Developing a standardised template for collecting equality data across services and establishing systems to collect this data in a relevant and proportionate manner, acknowledging that certain areas may require more focus than others.
- Redesigning templates and guidance for conducting EIAs.
- Delivering training sessions led by officers to support service managers in completing high-quality impact assessments, utilising national proxy data when local data is unavailable.
- Providing training sessions for members to enhance their understanding of the impact of equality and how to scrutinise these effectively during the decision-making process.
- Agreeing on a council-wide approach for the quality assurance of EIAs in committee reports to improve overall standards and consistency.

The independent Local Government Association (LGA) Equalities Peer Review recognised the commitment of both senior officers and the Lead Member for Equalities, Public Health and Public Protection. The review recommended that the council establish an Equalities Board to enhance corporate governance of equality efforts and ensure compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty. This board was established in December 2024 and includes senior representatives from all service areas, chairs of staff networks, and Trades Union representatives, with Will Tuckley, the SBC Chief Executive, serving as chair. Progress and updates are reported to Councillor Shah, the Lead Member. Improving equality is a key component of the broader Improvement and Recovery Plan.

From Cllr Gahir to the Leader of the Council

As the library service to be decimated and another manifesto promise, can the leader advise if his coalition intends to keep any of the manifesto pledges that got them elected?

The Administration I lead is not a coalition; it is a single party, the Conservative Administration, which got elected in May 2023 on the back of the previous Labour Administration's out-of-control spending and borrowing, bankrupting the council. The

then Labour Administration was halfway through putting up Council Tax by 20% over two years. This left the local electorate with a lack of confidence in Labour and the council under government intervention with Best Value Commissioners who were saying we had to sell everything the council owned "except schools, parks and highways".

I do not accept that my Administration has "decimated" the library service; we are committed to providing an effective and useful library service. The Cabinet is currently consulting on the service after seeing its struggles after significant cuts made by Labour, including on staffing levels, the opening hours, and the publication budget. We currently have 7.39 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff members rotating across three libraries on a daily basis just to maintain basic operations. Consulting on the service allows Cabinet to really assess these libraries; we need to see what the data is saying at the sites, and feedback will come to Cabinet in the Spring.

During the 2023 local election campaign in Slough, the Slough Conservatives issued a borough-wide leaflet which made six promises forming our manifesto; the six promises were:

1. No New 10% Council Tax Hike
2. Conduct an inquiry to find our missing millions
3. Ensure better value for your money
4. Protect Slough Cemetery and Crematorium from sale
5. Bring a university campus back to Slough
6. Review the operation of Slough's "Bus Lanes".

On the first matter, we did not go ahead with Labour's planned 10% increase in Council Tax for 2024. Instead, we proposed an increase at the government cap level. However, because our multi-year Improvement and Recovery Plan, which the government has approved, requires us to request "exceptional financial support", we face the possibility that the Local Government Minister may direct us to increase Council Tax beyond our planned amount. This was the Minister's opinion last year, but I convinced him that we could manage with an 8.5% increase in Council Tax, keeping in line with our promises.

Our 2024 Budget has appropriately allocated funds for council departments, and it has proven to be sustainable. Our Section 151 officer has confirmed that we are on track to balance the budget and achieve our required savings targets by the end of the year. This also demonstrates that my Administration is fulfilling our third manifesto promise of ensuring better value for money. In fact, the January Cabinet has just approved an Improvement and Recovery Action Plan, which aims for Slough Borough Council (SBC) to become a "Best Value Council" by the end of 2026.

By the end of December, the council was able to clear its four-year backlog of unsubmitted accounts, covering the period leading up to the issuance of the 114 (bankruptcy) notice and the subsequent intervention by our Best Value Commissioners. These accounts are currently with our external auditor, Grant Thornton, who has contributed significantly to fulfilling our second manifesto promise.

This Administration successfully removed the Slough Cemetery and Crematorium from the council's asset disposals list by adding new income streams to our 2024 Budget. We have also mitigated the threat of capital sale for several key council assets, including Arbour Park Stadium, The Curve, The Britwell Hub, and Observatory House. We are working on taking additional critical assets off the disposal list with the agreement of our Best Value Commissioners, which satisfies our fourth manifesto promise.

As Leader, I have consistently expressed my commitment to restoring a university campus to Slough (fulfilling manifesto promise five). I believe this initiative will not only address Slough's skills shortage but will also provide more residents with access to higher-paying jobs, thereby aiding the regeneration of our town centre. So far, several universities and higher education course providers have engaged with the council to make this happen, including the University of West London, which has indicated its desire to reintroduce nursing training to Slough starting in 2026. This project is ongoing.

Our sixth manifesto promise was to conduct a review of bus lanes. This has led to the removal of unused bus lanes (where no bus services exist), changes to bus lane markings, particularly at road junctions for improved safety, the removal of 24/7 bus lanes, and the standardisation of bus lane operations during peak hours on weekdays only, along with standardising exceptions for bus lanes. This work is also still in progress.

From Cllr Mann to the Lead Member for Lead Member for Equalities, Public Health and Public Protection / Leader of the Council

Following responses to previous written questions, can the Lead Member please provide an update on a) when members can expect the updated Play Strategy which was promised this municipal year and b) what the administration plan to do to progress Slough's Local Plan following the publication of the updated NPPF.

A) As part of our ongoing efforts to address physical inactivity in the borough, a Physical Activity Health Needs Assessment (HNA) was completed in September 2024. The assessment revealed that the percentage of physically inactive adults in Slough was 30.7% in 2022/23, which is significantly higher than the national average of 22.6% for England.

Public Health is actively working to create a strategic framework aimed at reducing physical inactivity across Slough, with contributions from the Parks and Open Spaces team. The development of the upcoming Play and Pitch Strategy will take place after this framework is established, ensuring it aligns with the strategic priorities identified in the Physical Inactivity Strategic framework. The objective is for the updated Play and Pitch Strategy to be a concise, one-page plan that is in harmony with other related strategies. This work is expected to be completed by summer 2025.

B) Work has already begun on gathering evidence for a renewed local plan, and there is now a new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) that will guide this process.

From Cllr Gill to the Lead Member for Finance, Council Assets and Transformation

Please update on how many assets have been sold since the Conservative Party have been in power and what is the value of these assets that have been sold. Also are there any assets that are pending sale and when will these be finalised, and what is the value?

Since May 2023, there have been 27 real estate asset sales, generating a total of £37.1 million in sales proceeds. Notable sales include SUR Haymills, Merry Makers, SUR Montem, 3 Bath Road (Buzz Bingo), and Upton Lodge.

Currently, there are eight significant real estate asset transactions underway, along with approximately ten smaller deals in preparation. These are expected to generate an estimated £30.5 million in sales proceeds. Key projects in this pipeline include SUR Stoke Wharf, Hatfield Road Car Park, St Martins Place, a portfolio of retail parades, and land at Trelawney Avenue.

The Asset Disposal Team is actively preparing additional real estate assets for sale, ensuring that the transactions currently in progress will continue to be supplemented by new ones as properties are disposed of. This approach aims to maintain ongoing momentum in the market.

From Cllr Parmar to the Lead Member for Education and Children's Services

What steps are being taken to prevent vulnerable children from becoming the victims of criminal exploitation?

Criminal exploitation and all forms of exploitation against children are considered child abuse, as clearly recognised in our "Safeguarding Children, Young People, and Young Adults from Exploitation and Harms Outside the Home Strategy 2024-2026," which was approved by the Cabinet in October 2024. This strategy was developed in collaboration with the Serious Violence Strategy created by the Community Safety Partnership, emphasising the protection of our children from exploitation as a top priority for the council and our partners. The strategy was informed by the voices of children and young people who shared their experiences in Slough, along with insights from recent Safeguarding Practice Reviews.

The strategy is implemented through the Safeguarding Partnership Board, which includes a dedicated strategic group composed of senior leaders from various sectors, including the Police, the Integrated Care Board (ICB), the Community and Voluntary Sector (CVS), Slough Children First (SCF), and Slough Borough Council (SBC). Our Operational MACE Panel, responsible for planning and supporting children identified as being at high risk of exploitation, reports to the Strategic Group on a quarterly basis regarding tactical responses related to identified themes and locations.

The operational delivery of support for children and young people (including those with care experience) is led by a dedicated Head of Service within the newly formed

Adolescent Support Service. Starting in January 2025, the Head of Service will chair the Exploitation Strategy Implementation Group, which will work on an action plan for the new strategy. This group will include multi-agency partners from various sectors, including faith and community organisations.

We acknowledge the national challenges in combating the exploitation of children, young people, and young adults and are committed to protecting and supporting them while addressing the individuals who exploit them.

Additionally, we are undertaking broader partnership efforts to prevent exploitation, focusing particularly on children at risk of missing out on school. A sub-group of the Safeguarding Partnership Board, titled "Keeping Children Safe in Education," monitors various data to ensure we effectively support children's school attendance and assist those missing out on education. We closely track exclusion rates and attendance rates, as well as children whose parents have chosen to educate them at home, to ensure that partners collaborate to keep children safe. The "Team Around the School" approach, developed in alignment with our Early Help Partnership Strategy 2023-2025, is another method through which we work with schools to identify and respond to challenges children face, including those harms occurring outside the home.

The Early Help Strategy Group leads on the Early Help Strategy and has produced an action plan to enhance collaboration among partners in providing timely and appropriate support to children. Early intervention is actively encouraged and promoted across the partnership. A new Early Help practice framework will soon be published as a tool and guideline to assist all partners working with children and young people in delivering support when it is most needed, thereby preventing issues from escalating.

From Cllr Mohammad to the Lead Member for IT, Customer Services, Revenue & Benefits, Procurement and Performance

The Cabinet decision to cut the Council Tax support scheme based on inaccurate EIA, will most likely now lead to vulnerable residents being penalised with no fault of their own, can the Lead Member advise if they will do a real EIA using the data available from previous years of council tax support scheme, the ward profile deprivation report the council completed a few years & any other related data held by relevant teams in council, so that the council tax support decision is based on accurate data?

The Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) included in the Cabinet report from November was an initial evaluation intended to inform the decision to consult on a proposed change to the scheme. This assessment was conducted at a high level, with the expectation that more detailed data would be gathered through the consultation process, as well as from other Council and national datasets.

The EQIA attached to the Cabinet report recommending changes to the Full Council is based on a combination of data from the Academy processing system and proxy data designed to identify groups most likely to be on low incomes. This data enables us to assess which groups are more likely to be affected by the proposed changes.

The Chair of the Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee attended the Cabinet meeting and acknowledged the improved EQIA.

If the new scheme is implemented, we will continue to monitor the impact and strive to collect information that provides a more detailed profile of those claiming Council Tax Support. We will also develop a profile of low-income groups and those living in poverty to ensure we effectively target support to the right individuals. This effort aims to support the proposed mitigations outlined in the report and the EQIA, as well as to identify potential additional mitigations. This work will build on existing data, including the 2021 ward profiles.

Furthermore, this initiative will help ensure that the Council Tax Support Hardship Fund Policy, which will be developed and presented to the Cabinet for approval in March 2025, incorporates valuable insights from the Council's Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee. The goal is to target support specifically to those households directly affected by the proposed changes.

From Cllr Escott to the Leader of the Council

There is news that ADIA are planning on selling Queensmere Observatory shopping centre, where will that leave the redevelopment plans for the high street?

The Administration has been working diligently behind the scenes to urge the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA) to either begin work on the scheme that has planning permission (pending the signing of the section 106 agreement) or to sell the site to a UK-based developer. This developer would be better equipped to tackle the viability challenges and advance the development.

We believe that several top-tier UK developers are interested in the site and are in active discussions with ADIA following a marketing process that took place late last year. If the site is sold—potentially before the end of this financial year—it will represent a significant step forward for Slough. The inflated land value will effectively be reset by the sale, and the new owners will likely want to move quickly to develop the property in order to capitalise on their investment.

Having an existing planning consent provides a framework for new owners to work within, allowing the Council to collaborate with them to refine and enhance the current scheme and kickstart the building process.

ADIA has done a commendable job preparing the site for redevelopment by vacating large portions of it and rationalising leases, which will greatly facilitate development once a new owner is in place. This new owner will not be burdened by ADIA's original acquisition costs and will likely either have their own contracting team or a well-established UK supply chain.

While the Observatory and Queensmere centres are likely to be sold together, the former is almost certain to continue operating as a shopping centre. This will allow existing retail from Queensmere to be concentrated around it, maximising its commercial performance while enabling the demolition of the latter.

Completing a sale to new owners will enable the Council to apply maximum legal pressure on the owners of other undeveloped high-value sites, encouraging them to either redevelop the sites or sell them to parties who can.

From Cllr Carter to the Lead Member for Housing, Highways, Planning and Transport

The recent cold weather and snow alerts, does SBC have the quantity of Gritting Salt needed to ensure the roads are gritted for this period?

We currently have a large reserve, and our water usage is significantly lower compared to historical levels, meaning our barn capacity is more than sufficient.

From Cllr Anderson to the Lead Member for Housing, Highways, Planning and Transport

The flood alerts by environment Agency have led to resident concerns about surface flooding, are you able to advise if Street gullies have been checked & cleared proactively?

There is a planned program for gully emptying and cleaning, with high-risk areas prioritised for regular inspections. We have recently acquired a second gully tanker, which has doubled our capacity.

From Cllr Instone to the Lead Member for Housing, Highways, Planning and Transport

The government announcement of more than £2.5mil to Slough Borough Council thus year to stop families becoming homeless, are you able to advise how this will be used?

Areas under consideration:

- Provide short-term funding: Help people secure or keep a safe place to live.
- Support our frontline: Provide care to people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness.
- Create local schemes: Establish programs to prevent homelessness in the local area.
- Implement mediation services: Help landlords and tenants prevent evictions.
- Identify root causes: Help identify the reasons why people become homeless.