

**Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Tuesday 17 December 2024 at 6.35pm.**

**Present:** Councillors Stedmond (Chair), Hulme (Vice-Chair), Ajaib, Matloob, Rana, W. Sabah and Tomar

**Also, Present (under Rule 30):** Councillor Manku, Shaik and Smith

**Apologies for Absence:** Councillor O’Kelly.

**PART 1**

**83. Declarations of Interest**

No declarations were made.

**84. Minutes of the Last Meeting**

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting held on 29 October 2024 be approved as a correct record.

**85. Attendance Report**

**RESOLVED** that the record of Members’ attendance for the 2024/25 municipal year be noted.

**86. Budget Management Report: Quarter Two Outturn**

The Committee considered a report, which set out the Council’s current and forecast financial performance for the financial year 2024/25 as at the end of Quarter 2, 30 September. The report also contained relevant information relating to management controls and activity that supported current financial resilience and longer-term financial sustainability.

A member said that this was a challenging period for the Council having a significant overspend and not yet aware of the Government’s settlement figure for the coming financial year.

A member asked how the budget for next year would link to the Corporate Plan.

A member asked whether £5.9m of the £9.47m debt had been written-off and whether the Council was back up to target with regards to business rates. In response, it was confirmed that all other Berkshire local authorities were behind on collection rates compared to this time last year.

A member asked if the Council had in place a plan or was there a need to improve assumptions the Council made. In response, it was noted that the cost of employing temporary staff had gone up although the Council was

growing its own workforce and investing in staff. Also, a proper demand management strategy was required since data had not been as robust as would have been expected. There had been an increase in what the Council had been paying providers. There were, however, several savings opportunities which had been identified for next year.

In response to a member query around the use of technology and the retention of staff, it was reported that staff were not clear on which technologies were at their disposal and cited how would using technology differently or better, meet care needs. Further, there was an ongoing recruitment campaign and longer-serving staff were being asked what it was that motivated them to stay with the Council.

Members asked general questions around financial thresholds as these related to purchase order minimum values.

In response to a member question in relation to whether the Council was delivering upon its Affordable Homes Strategy, it was reported that the Council was delaying the acquisition of taking on new properties, but this would take effect next year. It was noted that acquiring the correct housing stock and making it available could take some time.

A member spoke on the Council's temporary accommodation provision and said that issues there would not go away anytime soon.

**RESOLVED** that the Budget Management Outturn for Q2 2023/24, be noted.

**87. General Fund Revenue Budget 2025/26 and Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2025/26 to 2028/29**

The Committee considered a report, which set out the draft budget for 2025/26 and Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) for 2025/26 to 2028/29, which was put before Cabinet on 18 November 2024 in accordance with the Council's budget process as set out in the Constitution. Cabinet's responses were set out in Appendix A to the report.

The Council's S151 Officer acknowledged that now was a very challenging financial environment for the Council. She said that whilst a complete review of the Base Budget had not been carried out, officers had not sat back on this report and that it was much closer to bridging the gap and a deliverable budget.

In response to a member question as to what scale had assumptions been made on this, the S151 Officer said that officers had gone through a process of working with services to identify where growth should be. She said that solutions were long-term and could not address the scale referred to until the Government's settlement figure was announced.

A member referred to Slough's demographics and that 25% of its population, was under the age of 15 and that, on average, Slough residents earned, on

average, around £29 less than those in neighbouring boroughs. It was hoped that the right pathway could be created for the people of Slough to stay in Slough through provision of good jobs and good schools etc.

In respect of asset sales, a member asked what the Council's position was in respect of market conditions, disposals etc. given that asset sales had recently slowed down.

In response, officers advised that the property market was two-tier. It was noted that, due to occupancy demand being low and current interest rates, the disposal of large industrial office assets was slow. In terms of maintenance, it was reported that most were cost neutral. It was noted that this did not cover major capital works however, none were forecast at present. It was noted that there had been a huge demand in buying and developing properties in Slough up to £1.5m. It was recognised that there was a need to prioritise high maintenance properties and to get the very best value that the Council could.

In response to a member question in respect of St. Martin's Place and whether it was costing the Council money or, if the Council could not sell it, could it be leased longer term, it was reported that St. Martin's Place was not on the market yet as legal input was being finalised but would go out to market in the new year.

**RESOLVED** that the draft budget for 2025/26 and revised MTFS 2025 to 2029, be noted.

#### **88. Review of the Council Tax Support Scheme for 2025/26 Financial Year**

The Committee considered a report, which reiterated that the Council had a responsibility to make a Council Tax Support Scheme (CTS) that specified the reductions which were to apply in respect of dwellings by people or classes of people who were considered to be in financial need. For each financial year, the Council had to consider whether to revise its scheme or to replace it with another scheme. If proposing to revise or replace the scheme, the Council had to follow a statutory process, which included consulting interested parties and considering what transitional arrangements should be in place if the new scheme had the effect of reducing or removing a reduction.

Members asked that the calculation of household income for those in receipt of benefits be clarified and raised concerns about the incomplete EIA in that it meant that the consultation lacked a key element of background information.

**RESOLVED** that:

1. The proposals contained within the Review of the Council Tax Support Scheme for the 2025/26 Financial Year, be noted.
2. The final proposed scheme (post consultation) be brought back to the committee prior to it being put before Cabinet.

**89. Refresh of CISC Forward Plan**

The Committee considered its forward plan. It was reported that, following a workshop review in November of the Committee's January to April 2025 Forward Plan and consideration of new scrutiny proposals by officers and Members, two health-related agenda items had been added to the meetings of the Committee to be held in February and March 2025. Further, it was noted that an item on waterways pollution (originally planned for March) would be postponed and re-considered again in May 2025.

**RESOLVED** that the revised Forward Plan, be approved.

**90. Date and Time of Next Meeting**

**RESOLVED** that the date of the next meeting of the Committee be Tuesday 28 January 2025 at 6.30pm.

The meeting was declared closed at 21.12pm

Chair