

SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Neighbourhood and Community Services Scrutiny Panel **DATE:** 19 June 2013

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PORTFOLIO: Neighbourhoods and Regeneration – Councillor James Swindlehurst

PART I **FOR CONSIDERATION & COMMENT**

BEDS IN SHEDS (SLOUGH SHEDS)

1 Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to update the members on the progress of the ‘Slough Sheds’ project and to detail the internal and external agency partnerships in tackling the unauthorised outbuildings that are used as accommodation and in turn those landlords who are not compliant with the required obligation in landlord and tenant legislation.

2 Recommendation(s)/Proposed Action

The Neighbourhood and Community Services Scrutiny Panel is requested to:

- a) consider the progress made on the ‘Slough Sheds’ project in relation to the aerial thermal imaging data capture and the resulting for information that will assist in identifying where the unauthorised properties are with a view to tackling owners of these outbuilding through effective enforcement processes; and
- b) nominate a member of the Panel to join the project board to offer political support and to feedback to the Panel in the intervening periods.

3 The Joint Slough Wellbeing Strategy, the JSNA and the Corporate Plan

3a. Joint Slough Wellbeing Strategy Priorities

The quality of and access to housing is a key priority for the council. The Joint Slough Wellbeing Strategy names housing as one of five priorities with the vision that:

“By 2028 Slough will possess a strong, attractive and balanced housing market which recognises the importance of housing in supporting economic growth.”

Housing is central to the health and wellbeing of the population; it gives the ability to access work and assists in providing a safe environment for educational achievement. This project will provide safeguards for the most vulnerable in society, and contributes to other council priorities by generating additional revenue income through council tax from legitimised dwellings and outbuildings.

3b. **Joint Slough Wellbeing Strategy: Cross-Cutting themes**

Residents who are adequately housed and take responsibility for their environment, are able to take pride in their community and work to improve the image of the town as well as improving their own quality of life and life chances and that of those around them.

3c. **Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA)**

Housing is a contributory factor to the wellbeing of Slough residents, and the Sheds with Beds project supports the priorities in the JSNA and contributes to reducing inequalities in health through preventing access to poor quality sub-standard housing.

3d **Corporate Plan 2013/14**

The project contributes to the priorities in the Corporate Plan by improving the customer experience by tackling the perceived degradation of the Slough environment by uncontrolled development and assists in the financial management of the council by identifying dwellings which are eligible for Council Tax.

4 **Other Implications**

(a) Financial

There are no additional financial implications on any Slough Borough Council General Fund Budget. The Communities and Local Government grant of £220,000 has been utilised to secure the required staff support and expertise within the project including trading standards for the Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) enforcement, planning enforcement and building control to establish the legality of outbuilding use through planning legislation, business support to facilitate the administrative and intelligence gathering functions of the project, a lead project manager and funding for the thermal imaging data and associated GIS mapping information. The project lead manager has a budget monitoring and management system that is reviewed monthly with the project sponsor (Neil Aves) and Corporate Finance to ensure financial probity.

(b) Risk Management

Risk	Mitigating action	Opportunities
Legal	Planning enforcement policy has been reviewed and completed but will need to be adopted corporately as an enforcement measure.	
Property	None	
Human Rights	None	
Health and Safety	None	
Employment Issues	None	
Equalities Issues	None	

Community Support	None	
Communications	There have been numerous press releases and coverage regarding the Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) enforcement and the 'Blue Sky' thermal imagery data capture. Once the EPC pilot enforcement project has been completed and the planning enforcement adopted, the Slough Sheds project can be launched through an appropriate press release plan that is being co-ordinated by Leo Tarring (comms).	
Community Safety	None	
Financial	None	
Timetable for delivery	After a detailed planning enforcement policy review and the EPC pilot project findings, the Slough Sheds project should have a hard launch on Monday 17 June 2013.	
Project Capacity	All post requirements have been fulfilled and budgeted for with a project lead, sponsor, Trading Standards, Housing Standards Team and Building Control and Planning Enforcement.	
Other	None	

(c) Human Rights Act and Other Legal Implications

The project has no legal or human rights implications. The intelligence of properties with outbuildings is gathered from aerial images from both the thermal imaging data captured by 'Blue Sky' and by Ordnance Survey who conducted an aerial imagery capture of Slough prior to the London Olympics. The intelligence gathering for the EPC enforcement is drawn from open advertisements in shop windows and the associated public EPC register accessed online.

(d) Equalities Impact Assessment

The Enforcement Policy of private sector housing service has undertaken an Equalities Impact Assessment Initial Screening in September 2008. It also complies with the aims of the enforcement concordat. It includes a range of mandatory and discretionary tools which the council has available for its use.

The equalities impact of Planning Enforcement forms part of the Initial Screening for the Planning Service carried out in September 2008. Planning Enforcement is a discretionary tool. Any action taken would be proportionate to the harm being caused by the independent occupation of the offending outbuildings. Efforts will be prioritised towards the more flagrant breaches of planning control with the potential for greater sensitivity to more minor/technical breaches.

(e) Workforce

This report will reveal that the previous work force implication of staff capacity has been addressed through the current Housing and Environment transformation restructure in that the previous Housing Standards Teams will be replaced by a specific Regulatory Enforcement Team that has responsibility for this project and for houses in multiple occupation licensing and enforcement. The trading standards project is being funded through the sheds with beds budget and already has in place a short term temporary contractor fulfilling the function of Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) enforcement. The planning enforcement officer's post has been agreed and fulfilled with financial support from the sheds with beds budget to enable planning enforcement intervention for an initial 12 month period.

5 Supporting Information

- 5.1 In summer 2009 a successful bid was put in to Government Office South East (GOSE) for £350,000 in funding for a project to establish a multi agency approach to tackling Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO's) and Slough Sheds. The key objectives of the project were to focus on improving standards in HMO's and reduce the number of Slough Sheds as anecdotally it was felt that Sheds were housing illegal workers. In 2010 the change of government meant that there was a reduction in the money available and Slough now has a working budget of £220,000.
- 5.2 The project's initial measurable targets were set to decrease the number of non-decent properties by 2015 to 25% from 28.3% and to reduce the number of sheds by 20% from 300. These targets were not met due to procedural and legal issues surrounding previous planning advice. Revised outcomes and planning enforcement policy and procedures will look at intelligence regarding the number of outbuildings identified by the aerial images against the authorised use and cross referencing the requirement to have an energy performance certificate. Early intelligence evidence reveals that of the 150 identified outbuildings checked against the energy performance certificate register, all were unauthorised for use as accommodation and only one had a valid EPC. This information was forwarded to the Trading Standards Officer to consider enforcement as part of their pilot enforcement project.
- 5.3 Slough Borough Council engaged the services of 'Blue Sky', a thermal imaging data capture organisation who successfully obtained thermal imaging and aerial mapping of the borough in March 2013. The resulting information reveals where there are unauthorised buildings to the rear of properties and where properties have had unauthorised extensions to the main building.
- 5.4 Richard Rollins, a Geographical Information System (GIS) consultant has been tasked with reviewing Slough Borough Council's mapping system and has worked closely with the Slough Sheds project as a core member of the project board. His task is to ensure the data retrieved from the thermal imaging process is more user friendly and has the ability to be more functional to other service users, particularly Planning, Highways and Flood Risk Assessments. Richard Rollins' work with the

Slough Sheds project will be pivotal in understanding the information gathered in a pictorial format and will ensure that the information can be accessed, with the assistance of Blue Sky and additional software, by other council services, including: health and wellbeing in targeting properties with poor heating to screen for respiratory infections; and external agencies such as the Fire and Rescue Service to identify outbuildings that would be difficult to tackle due to their location, and the Police Service due to possible criminal behaviour (cannabis farms in the roof voids of houses). The thermal imagery data has enabled many service delivery areas to take advantage of this unique information to improve council services within the borough, and the costs have been seen as value for money in the savings it has already made. A copy of a thermal image tile (picture) is attached that identifies the properties that have extensions added to them and the additional outbuildings in the rear gardens. Another tile shows a google street view style image of the same area.

- 5.5 Both the project lead (Ray Haslam) and the planning enforcement manager of Slough Borough Council (Gavin Treen) continue to attend the Communities and Local Government (CLG) task group, which has members attending from nine other local authorities. The meetings are held quarterly, the previous meeting listed Slough Borough Council's approach to planning enforcement and tackling of the Sheds in Beds phenomenon as innovative and the CLG Sheds with Beds project lead (Mark Davies) requested that Gavin Treen present Slough Borough Council's revised planning enforcement policy and procedure at the next quarterly task group meeting in Slough to also see the innovative actions to tackle the sheds with beds work through EPC enforcement.
- 5.6 A representative from a neighbouring local authority (London Borough of Ealing) who are attendees of the tasking group visited Slough Borough Council in April 2013 to meet with both Ray Haslam and Gavin Treen to gain a perspective on how we are tackling the sheds with beds work. Other local authorities have also expressed an interest in visiting the council to share in our perceived good practices in our enforcement intentions.
- 5.7 19 June 2013 will see Mark Davies (CLG), representatives from nine other local authorities, the Local Government Association and the Chartered Institute of Housing attend the next task group meeting to be held at the Centre Main Hall at 09.30 am. There will be a presentation by Both Blue Sky and Richard Rollins in relation to the thermal imaging data capture. Other local authorities have expressed great interest in securing the services of Blue Sky to complete the thermal imaging project also. The London Borough of Newham will also be presenting their updated enforcement measures. The meeting is seen as a joining of best practice within this project.
- 5.8 There have been numerous press articles in both the local and national media including a radio interview with Ray Haslam and the Deputy Leader of the Council regarding the use of thermal imaging and the new enforcement project measures and the feedback and associated comments have been very positive. Leo Tarring (Slough Borough Council Communications Officer) is conducting a communications plan to inform the ever demanding media outlets of our progress of enforcement and continued use of the thermal imaging and its additional uses.

6 **Conclusion**

This report provides an update for the Panel on the continued progress of the Slough Sheds project. The revised planning enforcement policy and EPC enforcement pilot will see the main launch of the Slough sheds project on 17 June 2013, after which on

the 19 June 2013, Slough will host a meeting of Central Government departments and associated agencies in sharing good practice in our innovative enforcement measures and presenting our detailed thermal imagery data and the many uses it can have when coupled with effective geographical information systems. The report also requests the Panel nominate a member to become a core member of the Slough Sheds project group.

7 **Background Papers**

None