

## **Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Thursday, 15th October, 2009.**

**Present:-** Councillors Mann (Chair), Coad, Cryer (until 9.40 pm), Davis and Walsh.

**Also present under Rule 30:-** Councillors Maclsaac, Munkley, O'Connor, Pantelic, Plimmer and Stokes.

**Apologies for Absence:-** Councillor A S Dhaliwal and Pabbi

### **PART I**

#### **34. Declarations of Interest**

None were declared.

#### **35. Minutes**

The minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 3rd September, 2009 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

#### **36. Local Area Commander, Thames Valley Police**

The Chair welcomed to the meeting Superintendent Chris Shead, Slough Local Area Commander for the Thames Valley Police, who made a presentation on crime and policing matters in Slough. He stated that the police's resources were focused on its identified priorities, namely combatting serious acquisitive crime; tackling violent crime; improving the quality of service; and enhancing confidence in the police. He was pleased to advise the meeting that, overall, there had been a 13% reduction in crime compared to the same period last year which equated to some 1,200 less victims. He provided detailed information on various categories of crime, commenting that whilst the crime figures had reduced, the level of crime in Slough was still high as compared with other similar policing areas.

Amongst the highlights in his presentation were the following:-

- The level of burglaries was down but the detection rate was still too low.
- There was a large drop in vehicle crime over last year.
- The number of robberies was down some 22%, reflecting the resources focused on this area.
- There was an increase in assault with less serious injury, both in respect of domestic violence and other assaults. Alcohol played a large part in many of these crimes. It was difficult however to make a judgement in respect of domestic violence as to whether the increased figures reflected more crimes being committed or whether more were now being reported and/or better recorded.

## Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 15.10.09

- There was a small decrease in serious violent crime and serious sexual offences. The levels of criminal damage were similar to last year but the level of hate crimes had increased significantly.

He commented that whilst the overall reduction in crime was to be welcomed, it was still the case that the Thames Valley force suffered from a lack of resources with less officers per head of population and per crime than most similar authorities. He felt that the public's confidence in the police was improving but there was still much work to be done.

Members raised the following issues in the subsequent questioning and debate:-

- A Member made reference to the fact that the new Comprehensive Area Assessment would evaluate not only the Council but its partners and the relationship between those partners, including the police. There had been complaints in the past of "buck passing" between the two organisations in responding to issues and a comment was sought as to whether the position had now improved. Superintendent Shead commented that he believed there was a healthy level of challenge between the two organisations and he did not believe there was any buck passing now taking place. He believed that, whilst there was always room for further improvement, the relationship between the police and the authority was strong and improving.
- There was concern at the level of anti-social behaviour in the Borough and a perception amongst the public that not enough was done by the authorities to tackle it. Superintendent Shead responded that, whilst it was true that the public perception could be ill-judged at times, he agreed that a more joined up approach was required in respect of tackling anti-social behaviour and he believed that good working practices had been established between the police and the authority. Having said that, further work was needed but he believed that good structures and relationships were now in place. Reference was also made to the current massive government interest in anti-social behaviour arising particularly because of the recent tragic case of Fiona Pilkington. Members commented that low level crime of this nature was a real problem as it affected so many people in a neighbourhood.
- The Superintendent was asked whether any additional officers had been obtained for Slough as had been hoped by the Chief Constable when she had attended the Committee earlier in the year. He responded that two additional officers had been obtained for the Slough area.
- Reference was made to the current national financial crisis and the likelihood that the police budgets would be cut in the coming years and the Commander was asked to comment on whether he thought this would have a severe impact on the Force. He commented that there would undoubtedly be a reduction in funding and referred to the fact that savings of some £355,000 had been required in the current year. This had been achieved through efficiency savings without any

## Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 15.10.09

reduction in police numbers. In the future, the police would need to work smarter and more efficiently.

- A Member referred to people's perception of where the police concentrated their resources and referred for example to high levels of anti-social behaviour in some areas, whilst the police appeared to be utilising resources on speed traps. Superintendent Shead commented that it was important to get the balance right and he referred to the fact that traffic and speeding were often cited as a problem by local residents. It was therefore necessary to address the problem, particularly given that people were more likely to be hurt in road accidents than as the victims of violence. In addition, it was also worth remembering that the traffic police were not within his jurisdiction and he did not make decisions about where to deploy such manpower.
- A member of the public had submitted a question for the Commander seeking information on the breakdown of people by ethnicity in Slough that were in rehabilitation, in prison on drug offences, or in prison due to gun crime. The Commander was unable to provide that information at the meeting and suggested that this may be more appropriately addressed to either the Prison Service or the Probation Service. A second question had also been put by a local resident and the Chair suggested that this be forwarded to Slough's MP to respond to.
- Members sought information on how effective the police were in tackling the problem of drugs in Slough. The Commander commented that the benefits of Operation Chester undertaken some 18 months ago were still being felt with the level of trafficking and arrests still down. He believed that there had been a significant reduction in drug pushing in the Slough area and this was borne out both by the reduction in serious acquisitive crime, which was often linked to drug users, and a large reduction in the number of kidnappings which again were often drugs related.
- A Member asked what action the police had taken in respect of the recent martial arts exponent who had visited Slough and had appeared to be suggesting that he could teach people to maim and kill. The Commander commented that he did not believe that the gentleman in question was teaching anything different from that taught in martial arts classes and did not believe that he was breaking the law in any way. Moreover, it was believed that he was licensed to train martial arts.
- A Member asked what training frontline staff received in child protection awareness and was advised that there were various degrees of training in the force. All staff were given awareness training on both domestic violence and child abuse. In addition, some staff underwent a much higher level of training if they were involved with child abuse investigations.
- In response to a question about time saving initiatives, the Commander stated that the Police were endeavouring to work smarter and to reduce the amount of bureaucracy. He gave the example of a much reduced level of paperwork in respect of adult and youth restorative disposal relating to minor offences where a caution was issued and a

## Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 15.10.09

note made in the officer's notebook only. In addition, handheld PDAs were issued to staff on the beat.

- Superintendent Shead was asked to comment on the Fiona Pilkington case and whether he felt that the failings in evidence in the Leicestershire force could be replicated in Slough. He responded that whilst he could not comment on what may have gone wrong in that case, he regularly received data about individuals who were repeat victims of anti-social behaviour and that information was used to ensure that neighbourhood teams addressed any such issues flagged up. Neighbourhood inspectors would be expected to put a plan in place if more than three calls were received from a victim. He had systems in place which he believed were as robust as they needed to be at the present time but he would continue to review and improve them as necessary in the future.
- A Member asked whether any action was taken in respect of the victimisation of disabled people who were often targeted by anti-social behaviour. He commented that he believed that such crimes were greatly under-reported and this was an area that needed more work locally. As an example of this, he did not believe that partnerships with local disability groups were as well established as they could be and he was addressing this. He urged all such organisations to report these crimes to the police.
- Clarification was sought of the number of police officers in Slough and whether this was adequate. Superintendent Shead commented that Slough had 240 officers and there were 4,200 across the whole of the Thames Valley area. He believed that the force was under-resourced and should be treated the same as a metropolitan area. Considerable lobbying continued to be undertaken but it was unlikely that there would be a change for the better in the short term. Accordingly, it was important that he made the best of the available resources.
- A Member asked whether there were any Wards in Slough with particular tensions at the present time. The Commander commented that none were giving great cause for concern at present although there was an emerging problem with anti-social behaviour by groups of youths on Friday and Saturday nights in the Britwell area and the police were monitoring the position.
- Member asked what challenges the diverse and mobile population of Slough caused for the Police. The Commander responded that the police endeavoured to work well with all sectors of the Slough community but he accepted that there were particular challenges where there was a highly mobile population, some sectors of which had different modes of behaviour for cultural reasons. The police needed to be aware of these factors.
- The Commander was asked to comment on whether he believed that the increase in the levels of domestic violence was due to better reporting and awareness or whether there was indeed an increase in such crimes. He stated that it was difficult to be sure about this but that when he had arrived in Slough, he believed that the number of domestic violence crimes being reported was too low. There was

## Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 15.10.09

certainly an increase in referrals and convictions but it was too soon to say yet whether this was symptomatic of an increase in the problem. He should be in a better position to comment in a year's time.

- Reference was made to the problem of young offenders who were not in suitable education, employment or training and whether the police had a role in this. The Commander commented that it was important that, wherever possible, suitable opportunities were provided for such young people to help break the cycle and that sometimes prison was counter-productive.
- A Member asked how the police measured the effectiveness of its strategy to tackle violent extremism. He responded that evaluation was the key to this with the police needing to evaluate the usefulness of the projects being undertaken. This was of necessity of long term issue and it was not always easy to find good methods of evaluating success. However, a programme to support vulnerable individuals was in place to help such individuals from being radicalised. It was also about building resilience within the various communities to identify potential problems and to work with partners wherever possible.
- Reference was made to the problem of prostitution in Chalvey and what action the police were taking. The Commander commented that this was a key issue in the area with some 16 habitual prostitutes operating in Chalvey. Unfortunately, the law was quite outdated and difficult to enforce and the police took what action they could and passed the individuals onto other agencies for assistance wherever possible. Action was also taken against their clients to act as a deterrent but it was accepted that it was a significant issue for the local community and the police would continue to respond.
- A Member referred to a comment made by the Commander regarding the clearing up of a large number of crimes due to confessions made by arrested offenders and sought further information on how the police could be sure that such "confessions" were genuine given that offenders could expect more lenient treatment if they cooperated with the police. The Commander commented that offenders confessing to other crimes had a number of benefits both for the police and for victims and he had rarely come across any examples of offenders admitting to crimes that they had not committed.
- A Member referred to a recent police publication concerning the North Slough Neighbourhood Policing Team and asked whether the police constable had now been removed. The Commander commented that the titles of the various officers had been changed to neighbourhood officers and neighbourhood specialist officers but that they were still police constables and there had simply been a change in terminology. He undertook to have a look at this issue so as to ensure it did not cause confusion amongst the local community.
- In response to a question, the Commander stated that the Force worked very well with its partners in the field of child protection and was involved in the Local Safeguarding Children Board.

## Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 15.10.09

On completion of the questioning, the Chair thanked the Commander for his presentation and input. It was noted that any written questions which had not been responded to at this meeting would be sent to the Commander for him to reply in writing.

**Resolved** - That the position be noted.

### 37. Member Call-in - Child Protection Policies and Practices

The Committee considered a call-in from Councillor Stokes seeking to scrutinise both the Borough Council and all relevant partners in respect of their child protection policies and practices. These partners included the three local health authorities (Berkshire East Primary Care Trust, The Heatherwood and Wexham Park Hospitals Trust and the Berkshire Healthcare Trust), the Thames Valley Police, the local voluntary sector and the Probation Service, amongst others. Councillor Stokes had suggested that all relevant partners be invited to separate meetings to facilitate the scrutiny of individual policies and practices and to assess partner co-ordination.

The Committee was advised that all of these partners are members of the Slough Local Safeguarding Children Board, established arising out of the recommendations of the Lord Laming, and whose role specifically is to ensure that child protection procedures across the partners are fit for purpose and regularly scrutinised. The Board had an independent Chair and had recently been involved in the revision and republication of child protection procedures across Berkshire. The Committee was asked to consider whether the detailed scrutiny as suggested by Councillor Stokes could to some extent duplicate the work already being undertaken by the Safeguarding Board.

The Committee was also advised that, as well as the role of the Safeguarding Board, child protection in Slough has been subject to a number of other forms of scrutiny during the last year. These include:

- External scrutiny from Ofsted, as well as requests from the DCSF and the Government Office of the South-East for information over the last nine months following the death of Baby Peter.
- Report and briefing at Council in December 2008.
- Reports to the Education & Children's Services Scrutiny Panel in June and October 2009 with regard to the recent unannounced Ofsted inspection.
- Three discussions at the Local Strategic Partnership in the last year.
- The considerable amount of officer time dedicated to briefing and training Members on their safeguarding role.

The Committee was offered a number of options if it wished to pursue this call-in. One option was for the establishment of a Task and Finish Group (T&FG) of Councillors with the time to commit to a series of daytime meetings. It was suggested that if a T&FG was proposed, the Committee needed to be very clear about its purpose, remit of timescale, and why it was required outside of the existing inspection, scrutiny and LSCB processes.

## Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 15.10.09

The second option was for a briefing by the Strategic Director of Education & Children's Services on the authority's child protection policies and practices and to outline the role of the Safeguarding Board in engaging all partners in child protection and ensuring that best practice is followed in referral processes and arranging for appropriate training to be undertaken by staff in all agencies.

A third option put forward was to ask this Panel to undertake a detailed scrutiny of child protection procedures to satisfy itself of their robustness. Members of the Committee were unanimous in the view that this was an issue of the utmost importance and that Members should satisfy themselves that appropriate practices and procedures were in place in Slough so that a tragedy such as had happened with Victoria Climbié or Baby Peter could not be repeated in the town. Following considerable debate, the Committee decided that it would be appropriate to pass the call-in to the Education & Children's Services Scrutiny Panel with a view to it establishing a Task and Finish Group to consider the issue. The Committee took the view however that the terms of Councillor Stokes's call-in were extremely wide and that it would be important to focus in on the key areas of the performance of the Local Safeguarding Children Board and how the key partners worked in the field of child protection. The Committee noted that the BILLD Group Members were not currently participating in the scrutiny process and, given that a Member of that Group had submitted the call-in, it would be appropriate to formally invite that Group to be involved in this scrutiny process. Councillor Stokes indicated that he would be prepared to serve on any Task and Finish Group established for this purpose.

Members further suggested that it may be appropriate for consideration to be given to co-opting representation from appropriate external bodies, including for example the NSPCC or Barnardos as they had particular expertise in this field.

A Member referred to a comment made in Councillor Stokes's call-in letter suggesting that the call-in may be "sabotaged" and asked Councillor Stokes to explain this. He commented that he believed the scrutiny system in Slough was politicised and referred to the fact that the Audit Commission had criticised the process in the past. He added that if the call-in was responded to appropriately by the Committee, the BILLD Group may reconsider its previous decision not to appoint Members to the scrutiny bodies in the current municipal year. Following further discussion, Councillor Stokes apologised for his use of the word "sabotage" which he withdrew.

A proposal moved by Councillor Cryer and seconded by Councillor Coad that approval in principle be given to the establishment of a Task and Finish Group, subject to further discussions between the Chair and Vice-Chair and Councillor Stokes on issues such as its functioning and timescale, with proposals presented to the next meeting was put and lost.

## Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 15.10.09

### Resolved –

- (a) That Councillor Stokes's call-in be referred to the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Panel with a recommendation that it considers establishing a Task and Finish Group to consider the issue of Child Protection Procedures and Practices in Slough.
- (b) That the scrutiny concentrate on the role of the Local Safeguarding Children Board and the effectiveness of partner organisations in child protection.
- (c) That the BILLD Group be formally invited to be involved in the Task and Finish Group.
- (d) That the Panel give consideration to co-opting representation from appropriate external bodies such as the NSPCC or Barnardos.
- (e) That the Panel decide the composition, terms of reference and timescale of the proposed Task and Finish Group.

### 38. Performance and Financial Monitoring for 2009/10

The Strategic Director of Improvement and Development introduced the performance and financial monitoring report which focused on performance management, human resources statistics, and the revenue monitoring position to the end of August. He drew attention in particular to the areas of good and less than satisfactory performance in the Balanced Scorecard for the first quarter of the current year. Members raised the following issues:-

- Members requested that, in future, numbers rather than percentages be provided as these were more meaningful.
- The Chair sought further information about the decision of the Employment and Appeals Committee to show Sikhs as a separate category.
- A Member sought further information regarding the "expensive client" (referred to in paragraph 5.31) including an assurance that the action taken was appropriate to their particular needs.
- Members suggested that it would be helpful if the format of the report could be amended to highlight the "red" indicators all in one place.
- The Chair sought further information on the number of black and minority ethnic individuals at the more senior levels in the authority.
- Reference was made to the concerns raised at the previous meeting on the number of appraisals being undertaken within the authority and the Director referred to the steps which had been taken including the launching of a new appraisal scheme in the near future and the requirement that most appraisals take place between May and July so that monitoring was facilitated.

**Resolved** - That the position be noted.



## Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 15.10.09

### 39. Private Sector Housing and Houses in Multiple Occupation - Surveys 2009

The Private Sector Housing Manager presented an information report on the results of the recent private sector housing and houses in multiple occupation condition surveys. She highlighted the main findings and referred to the implications for the authority which included:-

- Reducing the number of dwellings with a Category 1 hazard.
- Increasing the number of households living in decent homes, specifically the proportion of private sector housing in decent condition occupied by vulnerable households.
- Reducing energy consumption and domestic carbon dioxide emissions of private sector stock.
- Reducing the number of vacant properties.
- Licensing HMOs and improving the number in good condition.
- Reviewing all of the Council's policies against the new data to ensure that it targeted and used its resources as effectively as possible, in meeting the needs of the community.

Existing resources and the funding allocated from other resources such as the migration impact fund would be used to address the issues raised.

Members asked a number of questions of clarification of the officer, particularly in regard to the trend for sheds and similar buildings in back gardens to be used as residential accommodation. The officer commented that a multi-agency meeting was to be held with a view to looking at options for tackling this particular issue and gauging the scale of the problem, given that a significant number of such buildings had been identified and there would be implications for homelessness, etc. if they were simply closed down. Examples of best practice by other local authorities were also being examined. Members expressed their considerable concern at this particular issue.

**Resolved** – That the report be noted.

### 40. Forward Agenda Plan

The Committee noted its agenda plan for future meetings.

### 41. Update on Issues Raised at Scrutiny Surgeries

Noted.

### 42. Appointment of Co-Opted Member to the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Panel

The Sub-Committee was asked to formally approve the appointment of Charlie McGeachie, Headteacher of Montem Primary School, as a non-voting

## **Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 15.10.09**

co-opted Headteacher representative on the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Panel.

**Resolved** – That Mr Charlie McGeachie be appointed a non-voting co-opted member of the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Panel.

### **43. Attendance Record.**

Noted.

### **44. Date of Next Meeting**

Thursday, 19th November, 2009.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 p.m. and closed at 10.50 p.m.)