

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Thursday, 9th September, 2010.

Present:- Councillors M S Mann (Chair), Haines, Bains (until 9.03 p.m.), Bal, Shine, O'Connor and Walsh

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Anderson, Dodds, Matloob and Parmar

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Basharat and Coad

PART I

16. Declaration of Interest

None.

17. Minutes of the Last Meeting held on 1st July 2010

The Minutes of the meeting held on 1st July, 2010 were approved as a correct record.

18. Census 2011- Presentation by Mr Glen Watson, Census Director (England and Wales) Office of National Statistics

Mr Glen Watson (GW), ONS Census Director, Helen Bray (HB), Head of Communications ONS and Richard Giel (RG), Census Area Manager, outlined a joint presentation to provide an update on the 2011 Slough Census.

(GW) discussed the benefits of a Census, and the impact on the allocation of Council funding. He advised that the Census provided a benchmark for the estimate of the population between Censuses and enabled the collection of detailed demographic information regarding small area populations. The Committee was advised that it was estimated the population would have grown by 3 million since the last Census and in Slough the response rate for the last Census was 84.9%, being the lowest response rate outside of London. The objective for the 2011 Census was to achieve an overall response rate of 94%.

GW highlighted the challenges for Slough in 2011 which included problems associated with a high expected number of annexes/HMOs, difficulties due to Slough's diverse community/ large number of languages and the nature of the town's transient population. Issues which underpinned a high return rate included the existence of an up-to-date and accurate national address register, working in partnership with local councils and community groups to engage with all population groups, a targeted and flexible field force for follow up, an on-line questionnaire and help centre and the provision of quality assurance and coverage adjustment. It was anticipated that a large percentage of the population would complete an online questionnaire form.

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Partnership working between the ONS and the local authority would enable community engagement, support for recruitment, local publicity, and data for quality assurance.

GW highlighted the importance of the national address register which would enable the ONS to match addresses so that these were not excluded. The address register had been developed specifically for the 2011 Census and a data sharing agreement was in place between national address suppliers including the Royal Mail and Local Government. It was acknowledged that local councils were key to success through the provision of an accurate local land property gazetteer database and it was envisaged that the ONS was on course to meet the target of a less than 1% address undercount for England and Wales. In Slough a field check of 7% of the addresses had just been completed and this had demonstrated that residents were often reluctant to disclose additional information. It was important that the Council should add annexes / sheds to their Local Land Property Gazetteer (LLPG) where known and also to convey the message to the public that the data they provided was confidential and would not be shared with other organisations. The Committee noted that the Census data would only be released after 100 years. GW advised that the quality assurance process would enable the Census information received to be adjusted where necessary.

HB discussed the Local Partnership Plan and emphasised that it was important that the Local Area Manager worked closely with the Council's team. RG advised the Committee that he had recently been appointed in August and was working with the Local Authority to prioritise local issues. The local engagement phase would include the frequent review of progress to-date.

RG discussed the typical key population groups which included Black and Minority Ethnic Groups, private renters and people with a second address. The Committee was advised that a Community Plan would be developed for each population group that would have a relatively high impact on the local Census and each plan would include engagement with the population through local intermediary groups, media, and direct communication with the public. RG advised that he was assisted by two special advisers who would co-ordinate plans and carry out engagement with the Pakistani and Indian communities in Slough. It was hoped that community engagement would increase the understanding of the Census and enable communities to trust the process. HB advised that all Census questionnaires would be posted to households and it was envisaged that this would save costs compared to the 2001 Census where questionnaires were delivered to households often by hand. It would then be possible to target homes where the form had not been returned and it was highlighted again that it was important to make sure that all houses appeared on the Council's address register. There was a legal obligation to complete the Census form and there was a process of enforcement where the forms were not sent back. Field staff would be used to target areas which had a lower return rate and procedures were in place to enumerate communal establishments such as hostels and halls of residences. It was important to ensure that a diverse field force was recruited to assist

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with Slough's diverse population and a Census Recruitment Communication Plan contained specific sub plans for local authorities and other authorities such as Health Authorities, Fire and Police. The Committee noted that a meeting had been held recently with the SBC Communications Team who discussed the plans in relation to the help that would be provided for Slough's diverse population. The Committee was advised that there would be translated posters, leaflets and media coverage and questions had been translated into 56 different languages. A telephone helpline would also be provided to cover all languages and assistance would be available through an online help centre. A National Census Campaign would be held from the end of February to April 2011 and would include advertising on TV.

GW discussed the Census coverage survey which was an important innovation introduced in 2001. This would include a large sample survey carried out six weeks after the Census day. Census returns would be compared with the Census coverage survey results and adjustments would be made where it was felt that persons or a household had been missed from the records. The adjustments made would be incorporated into the final Census results. An intensive programme of quality assurance would be carried out before the results were published and the ONS would publish conclusions from recent pilot studies and set out what local authority administrative data would be useful for quality assurance later in the year.

GW advised that the 2011 Census questionnaires would provide a greater range of outputs which would include information on main residency base, the majority of time population, national identity and languages. He discussed the areas in which the Council and Members could assist by encouraging the LLPG custodian to develop the most accurate address database possible, raising awareness and understanding amongst local residents at Ward surgeries, and assisting by publicly supporting the Census in Slough. The Committee was advised that a Councillor Handbook had been produced and this would be circulated to all Members.

In the ensuing debate Members raised a number of questions/comments including the following:- (Responses shown in italics)

- It was felt that the current population survey was incorrect and other records such as the sewage survey had demonstrated this. The current problems faced such as the existence of annexes and sheds did not exist in 2001. There was a concern that if the ONS did not get it right this time, the Council would not be able to deliver its services if the amount of funding it was entitled to did not accurately reflect Slough's population.

GW referred the Member to the detail of his presentation where he had set out the ways in which the ONS would tackle these problems and provide safety nets.

- What lessons had been learnt from the recent pilot scheme?

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GW advised that there had been a full scale rehearsal in some authorities last year and the findings had indicated that the Census process would be challenging. As a result of this resources in the field force had been boosted and other measures had been taken including the intensification of community working. In Slough the ability to collect information from annexes had been tested and it was acknowledged that this had proved to be a difficult task.

- Did the Area Manager for Slough cover other areas?

RG covered Slough, South Bucks, Chiltern and High Wycombe.

- The concern was expressed that the resources were spread thinly.

RG advised that the majority of his time would be spent in Slough. GW confirmed that in 2001 the South Bucks, Chiltern and High Wycombe areas had a return rate in excess of 90% and for this reason RG would dedicate more of his time to the Slough area.

- How would HMOs where the landlord was absent and the property was not on the electoral register be identified?

GW advised that it was the responsibility of the occupier and not the landlord to complete Census documentation. Where it was suspected that information provided was inaccurate, field staff would provide estimates of the number of residents living in a property and this would be fed into adjustments to ensure that the Census statistics were accurate.

- What would the Census questionnaire look like?

Members could view the final questionnaire on the ONS website and it included questions regarding language skills, national ID and short term migration.

- Would the Local Authority be able to appeal against the results of the Census survey?

GW hoped that local authorities would be convinced by the Census results but if this was not the case and there was a significant challenge, the ONS would have to consider this. Some results were amended after the 2001 Census but it was hoped that the quality assurance phase of the process would assist with a high rate of accuracy for 2011.

- There had been speculation recently that the coalition government would scale down the Census operation – was this correct?

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GW confirmed that the next Census had been 'axed'. The 2011 Census would go ahead as planned and this had been confirmed in Hansard.

- Would it be a good opportunity for Councillors to mention the Census when they were campaigning?

GW acknowledged this but emphasised that it was important that the Census remain 'non-political'.

- There were a high proportion of Polish and other nationalities in the town and an ever moving population– was the Census team allowed access to school records to assist with its address database?

School Census data from the Department of Education could be used but not individual records from schools.

- Had the ONS taken full note of the challenge that had been made by SBC to the previous Census figures?

GW advised that this was the opportunity for Slough to present the ONS with supporting information.

- How thorough would the ONS be in the quality assurance stage of the process and when would the results be available?

The results would be published in July 2012 and GW was keen to have an independent review of the quality assurance process by an Independent Academic and the Royal Statistical Society.

- At what stage would the Council be able to challenge the results?

The Council could only challenge the figures after July 2012 when the figures had been signed off.

- It was felt that a satisfactory response had not been given regarding how HMO's would be dealt with?

GW advised that a number of steps would be taken including the issue of further questionnaires. Action would also be taken following the receipt of information from field staff and where necessary adjustments would be made to accurately estimate the number of residents in a household.

- Volunteers had been used for the last Census – how much training would the ONS give for this Census?

GW advised that the process would be conducted differently to the 2001 Census. The recruitment of staff had been outsourced to Capita.

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Staff would be given effective training and the Area Manager would brief teams.

- The Chief Executive, SBC, was concerned that if only one form was returned from an HMO then the property would not be visited and the ONS would record an inaccurate occupancy rate. GW was asked whether something specific could be done to look at the pattern of HMOs in the town and ensure that a doorstep visit was made. Would the Council be able to view the statistics when the returns were received?

It was accepted that HMO's were an area of concern and ONS would monitor the returns on a daily basis. There were no plans to publish the statistics and the ONS was obliged to manage the Census operation.

- It was evident that some sections of the community did not register to vote and it was felt that the same individuals would not want to fill in the Census questionnaire. How would the ONS get around this problem?

Conversations had been held with various groups in the previous two years and one of the measures to assist with this problem would be the publication of leaflets in many languages.

- Would Census staff go to temples, mosques and other venues to give talks on the Census?

Community advisers were now in post and they would be asked to engage with the communities including giving talks at various venues.

- It was felt that illegal immigrants would not want to engage with the ONS – how would this be overcome?

It was acknowledged that this would be a difficult problem but work would be carried out with refugee organisations to overcome this. It was emphasised again that the Address Register was important – provided that the house appeared on the register, an adjustment would be made if the form was not returned.

- It was highlighted that when Councillors were canvassing, it was extremely difficult to get people to open their doors and the canvassing process would be no different. Residents were busy and it was very difficult to find people at homes during extensive parts of the day.

It was felt to be critical that the right assumptions were made during the quality assurance process because there was so much at stake here.

- There was a particular concern regarding “hot bedding” when households were occupied by two sets of residents who worked different shifts. In some cases households could have double the occupancy of what the ONS had recorded. If the information was not

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collected correctly then people would be using Slough's services but the Council would not receive sufficient funding. How would the Ons deal with this problem?

It was acknowledged that the problem of hot bedding existed and it would be important to continue to talk to Slough officials about this problem. It was emphasised that the ONS was under no illusion on how difficult the process would be.

- There was no space on the questionnaire to identify the members of the Sikh community in the religion and ethnicity groups?

GW advised that it was important that people were able to express their identity and the ONS constraints were logistical. It was noted that the questionnaire contained an "other" box and that there were lots of ways for people to express their identity.

- What enforcement powers did the ONS have to ensure that residents completed the returns?

Enforcement allowed for the issue of a reminder letter to the household followed by a solicitor's letter where necessary. Court proceedings could then be instigated for non compliance. It was noted however that during the last Census less than 100 prosecutions were made.

- The Census figures for 2001 were clearly incorrect. When would the correction factor be known and could the council challenge this?

GW stated that the ONS position was that the results for Slough in 2001 were not under estimated and the discussions that had taken place since related to changes that had taken place after the last Census was compiled. It was confirmed that the time to challenge the results would be July 2012.

Resolved –

That the Committee thanks the Census 2011 Director and his colleagues for attending and requests and recommends that:

- 1 The Area Manager focuses his effort and time on the Slough area, in particular due to the extraordinary circumstances of the resident and transient population of the area.
- 2 That additional questionnaires are issued to, and followed-up with, houses of multiple occupations (HMOs) subject to methodology to be discussed and agreed with officers of the Council.
- 3 That the Office for National Statistics (ONS) makes it clear to Slough residents that any data provided by them to Census

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2011 is not supplied to any other agency, government or public body and is only released after 100 years and is, therefore, effectively supplied to the ONS on a confidential basis.

- 4 That the ONS monitors responses during the return period and adjusts the workforce, collector activity and the publicity awareness campaign accordingly.
- 5 That ONS works with officers and elected Members of the Council to maximise response rates to the Census, uses local market intelligence and knowledge, and uses its best endeavours to locate, in particular, those residing in HMO's, those that "hot-bed", those in "sheds" and also potential illegal immigrants.
- 6 That officers are allowed access to and have input into the Quality Assurance Programme.

and that the aim of all of the above is to maximise responses to Census 2011 so that a true reflection of the population of Slough is obtained to ensure fair funding from national government in the future.

19. Performance and Financial Report for 1st Quarter, 2010

Julie Evans, Strategic Director of Resources, outlined a report setting out the details of the Council's performance between 1st April and 30th June 2010 against key areas.

The Committee noted the SBC Corporate Score Card which provided an update on performance and drew attention to areas of exception, improved performance and an assessment of where improvement actions were needed for performance to achieve end of year target. The position with staff appraisals was noted and the rate of completion remained relatively modest with a 22% increase in the number of appraisals completed compared to the 12 month period leading up to the 31st December 2009. It was acknowledged that a greater degree of ownership and responsibility was needed amongst Managers and that steps should be taken to ensure that they were fully committed to the idea of appraisals.

In the ensuing debate Members raised a number of questions/comments including the following:- (Responses shown in italics)

- Members were particularly concerned regarding the reluctance of Managers to take responsibility for staff appraisals and it was felt that this was very unprofessional and unacceptable.

The Director assured the Member that this issue would be addressed in future training.

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- A significant number of people had not received an appraisal and it was argued that the need to carry out appraisals was not an optional part of a Manager's role. It was essential that the Council had confidence that staff were effective in their roles and this was even more important in future when it would be essential in terms of staff selection.

The system clearly required improvement but the Director emphasised that not all of the failings in the system rested with Managers. The Chief Executive commented that the system of appraisals was taken very seriously and there had been a massive drive recently through CMT to improve the situation. Pressure would continue to address this issue whilst maintaining the improvements already carried out.

- Was the current appraisal system inadequate because it did not enable the collection of performance information on staff?

The Director of Resources advised that only evaluated element with the current system related to Manager competencies. The Council's systems operated on an oracle platform and did not have the facility to enable an E-system type of appraisal system. Ruth Bagley welcomed Members views on the content of current appraisal forms.

- Concern was expressed at the proposal to reduce foster carer payments and asked the Officer to explain the rationale behind this.

The Committee was reminded that this matter had been debated extensively earlier in the week at a meeting of the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Panel and the rationale in reducing the payments was to bring SBC closer in line with the payments made by other authorities. The issue would be considered at the next meeting of the Cabinet and the Member was advised to contact the Assistant Director of Children Services for further detail of the proposed changes to the scheme.

- Why had a Britwell Ward Member not been advised that Britwell and Haymill Regeneration Programme, Gold Project was identified as 'going well' when it affected his Ward?

Confidential meetings had taken place regarding funding which was critical to the scheme and the project was in a planning phase where there was nothing substantive to be reported. Ruth Bagley advised that she would ask the project lead to provide a brief update for Britwell and Haymill Ward Members.

- Would the Council be able to sell its waste management skills?

A meeting had recently been held with Enterprise and there was potential for example to share equipment such as gritters across boundaries. This would be considered in future.

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- Did the statistics for children at key stage 2, have any value now that the Audit Commission had been abolished?

It was acknowledged that the value of statistics had diminished but a selective approach retaining some of the indicators would be useful in future.

- Since the Government had indicated cuts should be made to back office services, was it feasible that all savings could be achieved without making cuts to frontline services?

The £3.3m savings in year had been allocated against specific grants but Councils had been tasked to decide where cuts would be made having regard to local priorities. It was questionable however in future years whether cuts being made only from back office areas would be sustainable.

- A Member was concerned about the situation with drugs in Slough and asked when the Chief Constable would next attend the meeting?

It was suggested that the Members questions be sent to the LPA Commander, Slough for response.

Resolved – That the Committee recommends that:

- 1 The proposed reduction in the number of social workers as outlined on page 7 of the report be referred to the Education & Children Services Scrutiny Panel for scrutiny by that body including assessing the various risk assessment thresholds.
- 2 Periodic updates are provided to elected Members regarding the progress of the “Gold Projects” in their respective Wards to ensure that elected members are kept up-to-date on those projects.
- 3 Managers of SBC are required to conduct staff appraisals and accept the responsibility to improve dramatically the staff appraisal completion rate. The Committee thanks the Chief Executive and the Strategic Director for their assurances that the completion rate will be improved.
- 4 A future performance report on Appraisals be submitted to the next Committee and this should include the detail of current appraisal form format and suggested reporting back mechanisms to ensure that Managerial staff are meeting their objectives.

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20. Performance Reporting - Gold Project (Improving Customer Service)

The Committee considered a report providing an update on the progress of Performance Reporting Gold Project. It was noted that in light of budget pressures and the likely outcome of the October 2010 Government spending review, the Council would explore ways to look for improvements and enhancements to its customer service provision. Senior Council staff had met to consider different delivery models for future operation and a detailed business case based on the development of a specialist in-house contact centre had been drawn up and would be considered by Cabinet. Subject to approval, implementation would follow thereafter and this would deliver a dedicated team of specialist advisers answering and dealing with all queries.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

21. Members' Attendance Statistics

The Members' attendance record was noted.

22. Forward Agenda Plan

The Forward Agenda Plan was noted.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 10.00 pm)