

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Wednesday, 8th January, 2014.

Present: Councillors Dar, M S Mann, Plenty, Shah and Sohal

Non-voting Co-optees: Vivianne Royal (Customer Senate)

Also present under Rule 30: Councillors Strutton

Apologies for Absence: Councillor Minhas, Malik and Wright

PART 1

32. Election of Chair for Meeting

The nomination of Councillor Dar was proposed and seconded. There being no other nominations it was:

Resolved – that Councillor Dar be elected as Chair of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel for the duration of the meeting.

Councillor Dar in the Chair

33. Declarations of Interest

None.

34. Minutes of the meetings held on 30 October and 6 November 2013

The minutes of the meetings of the Neighbourhood and Community Services Scrutiny Panel held on the 30 October 2013 and 6 November 2013 were agreed as a correct record.

35. Member Questions

None received.

36. What impact has the introduction of the new benefits system had in Slough

Roger Parkin, Strategic Director Customer & Community Services, introduced the report, setting out the impact that had been seen from the introduction of the new benefits system. Members also received information from Neil Aves, Assistant Director Housing & Environment, and Jackie Adams, Service Assurance Technical Specialist.

In April 2013 the new localised council tax support scheme had been implemented, and it was confirmed to Members that, to date, there had been

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a limited impact on residents. In addition, the previous concern regarding the 'London Effect' had not materialised.

The Panel discussed three individual elements of the new system: council tax support; housing benefit cap; and the under occupancy (bedroom) tax.

Of particular concern, was the impact on residents who needed to downsize due to the bedroom tax. Approximately one third of residents impacted had registered to downsize, and the new Allocations Policy prioritised these groups, however, with limited voids available for allocation, there was a delay in moving these residents. Officers confirmed it could take approximately four to five years to complete the reallocations, which Members expressed concern about.

The Panel discussed the use of 'hardship' payments to support residents, and noted that many of those in receipt of these payments used them for the bedroom tax. In addition, the Panel discussed the Local Welfare Provision, which had consolidated two schemes into one, and aimed to support social care clients through life events such as moving, leaving care, financial crisis, disasters e.g. fire, waiting for benefits claims to be settled or travel expenses for job interviews. There was a risk attached to this funding, as it was not ring fenced.

The Panel noted that the limited impact of the new benefits system indicated that Slough had been successful, previously, at ensuring that residents were accessing the benefits they were entitled to.

Resolved –

- 1) to note the report; and
- 2) to add an agenda item to a future meeting looking at how the council can encourage more people to move, freeing up properties for those who wish to downsize.

37. The Voids Process and the Re-allocation of Empty Council Homes

Neil Aves, Assistant Director Housing & Environment, introduced the report providing an overview of the current service performance in relation to the repair, clearance and reallocation of council houses. Vivianne Royal, Customer Senate Chair and co-optee on the Panel also provided information on the Senate's work looking at this service.

The Panel noted that voids process was seen as the weakest element of the service, with Slough coming in the bottom quartile in terms of performance against equivalent authorities. The key issue was that the current contract did not include enforceable performance standards, with the contractor reviewing their own performance. This issue had led to a difficult relationship with the contractor, Interserve.

The current contract had 18 months left on it, and the lesson had been learned, with the procurement process for the new contract looking to include

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stronger performance measurements with which the council could hold the contractor to account for the quality of the work provided.

The Panel noted the steps to be taken to protect the council from a similar situation in the future, but also felt more should be done now to improve the service with the current contractor, using spot checks to pressure Interserve over basic lapses in quality and timescales for work.

Resolved –

- 1) that the arrangements for the new contract are reviewed by the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel before being signed;
- 2) that the current performance data for the voids contract be made available for the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel on it's next agenda as an 'information only' item; and
- 3) that the Panel receive an update on the performance of the voids contract in nine months, including input from Housing Services, Property Services and Interserve.

38. Estates Services Review

Resolved – that the report setting out details of the current Estates Services Review be noted.

39. Forward Work Programme

Resolved – that the work programme be noted.

40. Attendance

Resolved – to note the attendance record.

41. Date of Next Meeting - 27 February 2014

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 27 February 2014.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.55 pm)