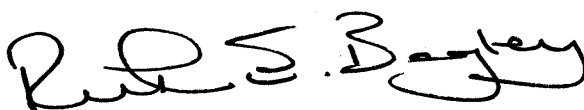


Date of issue: Tuesday, 24 December 2013

<b>MEETING:</b>	<b>NEIGHBOURHOODS AND COMMUNITY SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL</b> (Councillors Minhas (Chair), Dar, Dhillon, Malik, M S Mann, Plenty, Shah, Sohal and Wright)  <u>Non-Voting Co-Opted Members</u> Naomi Owens (Leaseholder Forum Representative), Terry Conroy (Slough Federation of Tenants and Residents) and Vivianne Royal (Customer Senate)
<b>DATE AND TIME:</b>	WEDNESDAY, 8TH JANUARY, 2014 AT 6.30 PM
<b>VENUE:</b>	MEETING ROOM 3, CHALVEY COMMUNITY CENTRE, THE GREEN, CHALVEY, SLOUGH, SL1 2SP
<b>SCRUTINY OFFICER: (for all enquiries)</b>	SARAH FORSYTH 01753 875657

NOTICE OF MEETING

You are requested to attend the above Meeting at the time and date indicated to deal with the business set out in the following agenda.



**RUTH BAGLEY**  
Chief Executive

AGENDA

PART I



**AGENDA**  
**ITEM**

**REPORT TITLE**

**PAGE**

**WARD**

**Apologies for absence**

**CONSTITUTIONAL MATTERS**

**1. Declarations of Interest**

*All Members who believe they have a Disclosable Pecuniary or other Pecuniary or Non Pecuniary Interest in any matter to be considered at the meeting must declare that Interest and, having regard to the circumstances described in Section 3 paragraphs 3.25 – 3.27 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, leave the meeting while the matter is discussed, save for exercising any right to speak in accordance with paragraph 3.28 of the Code.*

*Members are asked to confirm that they do not have a declarable interest.*

*All Members making a declaration will be required to complete a Declaration of Interests at Meetings form detailing the nature of their interest.*

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

**1 - 8**

**SCRUTINY ISSUES**

**3. Member Questions**

*An opportunity for Panel Members to ask questions of the relevant Director/Assistant Director, relating to pertinent, topical issues affecting their Directorate – maximum of 10 minutes allocated.*

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

**9 - 22**

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

**23 - 26**

**ITEMS FOR INFORMATION**

**6. Estates Services Review**

**27 - 38**

**7. Forward Work Programme**

**39 - 42**



8. **Attendance**

43 - 44

9. **Date of Next Meeting - 27 February 2014**

**Press and Public**

You are welcome to attend this meeting which is open to the press and public, as an observer. You will however be asked to leave before the Committee considers any items in the Part II agenda. Special facilities may be made available for disabled or non-English speaking persons. Please contact the Democratic Services Officer shown above for further details.

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**Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Wednesday, 30th October, 2013.**

**Present:-** Councillors Minhas (Chair), Dar, Dhillon (from 6.40 p.m.), Malik, M S Mann, Plenty (until 8.33 p.m.), Shah (from 6.35 p.m.), Sohal, Wright (Vice-Chair)

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

**Also present under Rule 30:-** Councillors Mittal, Smith (until 7.55 p.m.) and Strutton

**PART 1**

**20. Declarations of Interest**

Councillors Malik and Dar declared personal interests in Agenda Item 2, as each had a member of their family working at Heathrow.

**21. Slough's Relationship with Heathrow Airport**

Ruth Bagley, Chief Executive of Slough Borough Council, presented the findings of a recent resident survey and economic and health research which looked at the relationship between the borough of Slough and Heathrow Airport.

The Panel noted the key messages coming out of the resident survey:

- that the resident survey had received 62 responses, of which 85% were Slough residents (71% of whom had lived in the borough for more than 10 years);
- that 55% of those who responded felt Heathrow was a benefit to Slough;
- that 68% of respondents were affected by aircraft noise, 25% finding it very disruptive; and
- that a quarter of respondents were concerned about the environmental impact of Heathrow and thought steps should be taken to mitigate this, with a third feeling that the impacts were worth the price being paid.

In reviewing the results of the economic studies that had been undertaken by the Thames Valley Local Enterprise Partnerships and the consultant commissioned by Slough Borough Council to look at Slough's specific economic relationship to the airport, the Panel commented on the importance of Heathrow to the local employment market, especially when looking at a potential loss of approximately 17,000 jobs should the decision be taken to close the airport. The importance of Heathrow economically was clear when it was calculated that 32% of Slough residents' employment was either directly or indirectly linked with the borough's proximity to the airport.

However, whilst recognising the economic importance of Heathrow's proximity to Slough, the Panel were concerned that, as yet, little detailed information

**Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel - 30.10.13**

was available on the noise and other environmental impacts of the current arrangements at Heathrow, concerns that would increase should a decision be taken to expand the airport's capacity.

Members felt that regardless of the future configuration of Heathrow there were environmental impacts under the status quo arrangements which were of concern and required mitigation. Specific discussion focused on the noise levels and late night flight timetable, and the need to improve the level of aircraft noise through the continued improvements in the design of aeroplanes to limit the impact on residents in the local area.

The Panel concluded that future discussions would be based on the economic arguments versus noise and environmental arguments in order to fully understand the positive and negative impacts of Slough's proximity to Heathrow. Members discussed the likely timeframe for such a discussion, and noted that until the Davis Commission formally issued its short list of options for the future of aviation in the UK and the impact this would have on the future of Heathrow a number of options from expansion through to closure were still possibilities.

**Resolved** – that, once the Davis Commission has announced its shortlist of options for the future of aviation in the UK and specifically options for the future of Heathrow, that the Cabinet oversee the collation of all relevant data relating to the impact of Heathrow on Slough now and in the future, and that this information is then presented to the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel before consideration by Cabinet.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.35 pm)

**Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Wednesday, 6th November, 2013.**

**Present:-** Councillors Minhas (Chair), Dar, Malik, M S Mann, Plenty, Shah, Sohal and Wright (Vice-Chair) (until 8.00 pm)

**Also present under Rule 30:-** Councillor Parmar

**PART 1**

**22. Apologies**

None.

**23. Declarations of Interest**

None.

**24. Minutes of the last meeting held on 5 September 2013**

The minutes of the last meeting held on 5<sup>th</sup> September, 2013 were approved as a correct record.

**25. Member Questions**

None received.

**26. Call in: Management of Environmental Services Contract (Line Painting Element)**

**The Head of Highways introduced a report in response to the request submitted by Councillor Plenty, to scrutinise the management of the line painting element of the Environmental Services contract.**

Councillor Plenty had raised concerns regarding the management and control of the yellow no parking line contract (including disabled bay painting). He felt that there had been little or no control of the contract and in some cases lines had not been painted 3 months after a request had been made. He advised that Member casework had indicated dissatisfaction and Stage 1 complaints had not achieved a satisfactory outcome.

The Panel was advised that yellow line and road marking painting was dealt with under the 15 year Environmental Services Contract and had operated since 2002. Quarterly strategic meetings were held and monthly meetings considered programmed work and general performance of the contractor (led by the Head of Highways). The operation of road markings (yellow no parking line painting) within the contract was a transport operation.

Members noted that an Officer of the Council would design a particular scheme and issue the works order to the contractor with a time limit for completion. The Officer would monitor the work to ensure timely completion,

and sign off the work when completed to a satisfactory standard. It was highlighted that the Council only paid for lines laid and not for the cost of return visits (maximum 3).

It was noted that works for the provision of road marking, including new or the refreshing of double yellow lines, were ordered by the council's Parking Team in the Transport Division. Due to the nature of these works the contractor sometimes had difficulty painting the yellow lines due to parked cars on the street. When this happened the contractor would visit the site in conjunction with other local works to try and complete the outstanding job. The contractor could not issue an invoice for lining works until the scheme of works was completed.

The Contractor addressed the Panel and accepted that better communication was needed to overcome problem areas. This would be achieved through closer monitoring and development of a spreadsheet which identified all ordered and outstanding lining and signing works from the Parking Team. This had led to some improvements but required a concerted effort by the Contractor to keep this spreadsheet constantly updated. This would ensure that any updates were passed to the Parking Team, allowing greater control.

Members raised a number of concerns/ questions during the ensuing debate including:

- It was thought that the work completed in the Foxborough Ward on the previous day would not have been completed had the matter not been referred to the Panel for scrutiny.
- No typical timescales were provided for completion of works from the order date. Why did it take 3 months to complete a job?
- What reassurances could the Contractor give that the problem areas would improve?
- Some corner areas of a road were reported as incomplete and remained so even though an Officer had advised it would be completed after a week.
- In relation to a pilot scheme in the Central Ward, why had boxed areas been created where people had previously paid to have a dropped kerb installed? (It was agreed that the Member would give details to the officer to investigate).
- Was the Contractor penalised for not completing the work within an agreed timescale?

In response, the Contractor discussed the process for line painting and explained that often multiple visits to the site were needed due to parked cars and other obstructions. He accepted that the Contractor had been at fault in not replying back to the Client Officer and multiple visits to the site had not been recorded. It was confirmed that payment was made for each metre of the job completed. In future steps would be taken to prioritise and programme work better and the possibility of putting down temporary road markings would be investigated. The Officer explained that it would be unfair to penalise the



Contractor if roads could not be completed due to parked cars. The Officer was unable to confirm whether a penalty notice had ever been issued.

**Resolved-** That the report be noted and that an update report be submitted to the Panel in September 2014

## **27. Star Survey Results**

The Head of Housing Management introduced a report detailing the findings of the Star Survey, which was used by social landlords to measure residents' satisfaction with service provision.

It was noted that the cost of the survey was £20,000 and was covered by existing funds within the Housing Revenue Account. The survey would be repeated every year to test resident satisfaction and look for continued improvement.

Members noted that the Housing Service carried out the survey of all tenants and leaseholders between April and June 2013 and the Slough Customer Senate selected questions to be added to the core questions in the survey to support their scrutiny review programme. CR Market Research was selected to undertake the survey and 1,794 responses were received, representing a 26% return rate from tenants. The Committee noted that a 95% confidence rate was indicated but only 80 responses were received from leaseholders.

It was highlighted that residents of Langley St Marys and Kedermister were generally less satisfied than residents living elsewhere in Slough. There was also room for improvement in residents perceptions of the Housing Service when listening to and acting on resident's views and value for money with service charges. A project to consider service charges was underway.

The Officer discussed planned improvements and joint working with the Senate and local Area Panels.

Members raised a number of comments/ questions in the ensuing debate:

- Was the questionnaire available to view as it was not included in the report? The Officer advised that this would be forwarded to Members.
- How were the questions formed? The Office advised that the questions were open ended and he felt that they needed to be more Ward specific.
- Were there different questions for leaseholders? It was confirmed this was the case.
- In relation to service charges the Officer advised that work was needed to look at the levels of charges but currently there were no resources to do this.

- Who had paid for the survey? The Officer advised that the costs were covered by the Housing Revenue Account and the survey would continue to be conducted annually on an independent basis.
- In response to a question on tenant input with questions, Members were advised that some of the questions were relevant nationally but others were particularly relevant to Slough tenants.
- There was evidence that residents living in Langley and Kedermister were generally less satisfied than residents elsewhere in Slough. What was the reason for this? The Officer advised that there could be issues with management and this would be addressed. He welcomed the suggestion that Members contribute to a workshop session.
- In response to a further question the Assistant Director advised that the restructure in Housing had been delayed. He was confident that this would be finalised by December and a new Neighbourhood Service would be created by 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2014.

**Resolved-** That the report be noted and that a working group be convened to work with the Senate and Council members to review the survey content in future. (Councillors Malik and Shah agreed to represent the Panel)

## **28. Older People's Housing Offer**

The Assistant Director, Housing and Environment, outlined a report to provide members with an overview of the current services provided by Housing in relation to older people's accommodation and recent changes.

The Officer discussed the history of the Sheltered Housing Service and the introduction of the Supporting People initiative which had removed care and support charges from basic housing benefits. The Panel noted that there were nine operational complexes providing accommodation and following a review some units had been released to general needs housing, which meant that for example the dwellings could be let to a person of any age. Due to the specific nature of their design the supported housing complexes remained designated as such and except in very rare cases, individual dwellings were retained solely for those over the age of 60.

It was highlighted that the nine sheltered schemes which had one bed or bed sit flats all had common rooms and laundry facilities. Members noted the availability of community alarms and provision of housing for frail residents. The Officer advised that with the increasing need for extra care provision, it was anticipated that in future, some of the existing complexes would be assessed for the potential to extend or convert into extra care facilities. Residents would be consulted on any changes.

The Panel was reminded that the Council was no longer the provider of supported housing services but merely one of many landlords across the Borough who could provide accommodation to clients in need of support.

Members raised a number of questions/ comments in the ensuing debate, including:

- Were there any blocks that catered for those aged 60 years or over? The Officer advised that some outlying properties were removed from stock as their location was not convenient for older tenants. The Member highlighted that it was important to retain a sense of community for older residents and this could be achieved by moving older tenants from higher to lower floors.
- A Member questioned the use of facilities within the accommodation and whether residents were consulted. He was advised that consultation did take place.

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

## **29. Management of Houses of Multiple Occupancy**

The Housing Standards Manager introduced a report to update Members on the management and licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) in Slough.

It was highlighted that the HMO licensing function supported the priorities in the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and contributed to reducing inequalities in health through preventing access to poor quality sub-standard housing whilst achieving the required mandatory licensing conditions.

The Panel noted that 2 full time vacancies existed within the team that managed the licensing of HMOs but it was hoped that two interim Officers would be appointed in the near future.

The Officer discussed the number of HMOs in the Borough and the cost of obtaining a licence. In November, 2011, additional authority had been approved to allow Officers to tackle problems linked with poor HMO's in the Chalvey area, relating to anti-social behaviour taking place in and around the location of HMO's. Residents at a recent Chalvey Community Forum meeting had indicated that they had noticed improvements in the area, with landlords doing more work to improve their properties.

The Officer discussed targets for service delivery and advised that the appointment of further staff together with the arrival of neighbourhood enforcement teams into the proposed neighbourhood services directorate would enhance the ability to licence further HMO properties.

A number of questions were raised in the ensuing debate, including:

- What was the incentive for a landlord to become licensed? The Officer advised this was mandatory and a landlord would be prosecuted if he/she did not hold a licence.
- How was the estimate of 2199 HMOs in the Borough calculated? The Officer advised this was estimated from a stock condition survey.

- Were all premises inspected prior to being licensed? Yes-this was a mandatory requirement.
- Did Officer's have powers of entry? This was the case and authorisation could be requested through the Magistrates Court.
- Was the register of HMOs available on line? A Member thought it would be useful if Members could access this so they could report any properties which they felt should be considered for inclusion in the register. The Officer advised that it was available online and it could also be forwarded to Members.

It was agreed that a copy of the licensed HMO register be forwarded to all members for information.

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

**30. Forward Work Programme**

**Resolved-** That the work programme be noted.

**31. Date of Next Meeting - 8 January 2014**

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 8<sup>th</sup> January 2014.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.40 pm)

**SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**REPORT TO:** Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel

**DATE:** 8 January 2014

**CONTACT OFFICER:** Roger Parkin – Strategic Director Customer & Community Services

**CONTACT NO:** (01753) 875207

**WARD(S):** All

**PORTFOLIOS:** Councillor Anderson – Finance and Strategy  
Councillor Munawar – Social and Economic Inclusion

**PART I**  
**CONSIDERATION & COMMENT**

**What impact has the introduction of the new benefits system had in Slough?**

**1 Purpose of Report**

To provide the Panel with information on the impact of the new benefits system in Slough.

**2 Recommendation(s)/Proposed Action**

That the Panel consider the information provided and plans to ensure that residents are provided with support to ensure they receive their correct benefit entitlement.

**3 Slough Wellbeing Strategy Priorities**

To enable residents to access their correct Housing and Council Tax benefits, Neighbourhood Benefit officers have been introduced, who assist both the housing service in terms of housing benefit applications and ensure the maximisation of benefit take up in the borough by providing a more local accessible and tailored service

**4 Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA)**

Slough's Housing Benefits Service is provided in partnership with Arvato and joint liaison meetings with Housing have been convened to consider the implementation of an escalated benefits processing service for Slough's more vulnerable residents. This will be further supported by the introduction of Neighbourhood Benefit officers who will be targeted to work in the more deprived neighbourhoods of Slough to generate additional income within the community. The main function of these posts will be to work with community groups and the Third Sector to increase awareness of all benefits and grants available. As well as working at a community level, these officers will be responsible for working with individuals to advise and help with claiming benefits.

## 5 **Other Implications**

### (a) Financial

There are no financial implications of proposed action.

### (b) Risk Management

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Mitigating action</b>	<b>Opportunities</b>
Legal	None	None
Property	None	None
Human Rights	None	None
Health and Safety	None	None
Employment Issues	None	None
Equalities Issues	None	None
Community Support	None	None
Communications	None	None
Community Safety	None	None
Financial	None	None
Timetable for delivery	None	None
Project Capacity	None	None
Other	None	None

### (c) Human Rights Act and Other Legal Implications

There are no Human Rights Act Implications relating to this report.

### (d) Equalities Impact Assessment

There is no identified need for the completion of an EIA related to the content of this report.

## 6 **Background – Council Tax Support Scheme**

- 6.1 The Local Government Finance Act 2012 paved the way for the implementation of localised council tax support schemes in England from April 2013. This requires local councils to design their own schemes to administer council tax support, working within a framework set out in legislation. The Government has been clear that the elderly and the vulnerable should be protected, and that the changes should support incentives for people to find and stay in work.
- 6.2 The Finance Act also provides for local retention of business rates, and a number of technical reforms to council tax, including powers to reduce certain discounts and exemptions.
- 6.3 The Government's key aims are to:
- give local authorities a greater stake in the economic future of their local area which supports the Government's wider agenda to encourage stronger, balanced economic growth across the country;

- provide local authorities with the opportunity to reform the system of support for working age customers;
- reinforce local control over council tax (local decisions about what support is given e.g. council's are free to establish whatever rules they choose for working age customers);
- implement new schemes by April 2013 and;
- provide local authorities with a financial stake in the provision of support for council tax (the fixed grant will not be ring-fenced).

6.4 This is part of a wider set of reforms to the welfare system, designed to improve the incentives to work and ensuring resources are used more effectively, so reducing worklessness and ending a culture of benefit dependency.

6.5 If the local authority does not adopt a local scheme then the default scheme, as prescribed by the Secretary of State will take effect. This scheme leaves the existing complex regulations in place and will be the worst case situation for the council as it will be left with the current financial costs and significant administration costs.

## **7 Local Council Tax Support Scheme**

7.1 The Government is undertaking a major set of welfare system reforms which support the new Council Tax Support Scheme adopted by Slough Borough Council. One of these was the replacement of Council Tax Benefit (CTB) with a local Council Tax Support (CTS) scheme from 1 April 2013.

7.2 It is estimated that the proposed funding mechanism for CTS will create a shortfall in funding of at least £1.1m, based on the 10% cut of the 2011/12 Council Tax benefit expenditure by the DWP.

7.3 In addition to this shortfall we estimate that the introduction of Universal Credit, the identification of CTS as a discount instead of a benefit, and the processing of new housing benefit claims by Government will mean that, once this is introduced, Slough's benefit administration grant will reduce, and this is likely to result in an additional cost to the council which is as yet unknown.

7.4 The shortfall in funding will be greater than the publicised 10% base cut because the reduction is based on the 2011/12 subsidy expenditure. Caseload is estimated to have grown by the end of 2013/14 due to the current economic situation.

7.5 The impact of council tax changes, increased discount applications, lower collection rates caused by a reduction in CTB to customers, and the reduced administration grant have the effect of this change being nearer to a real cut of 15% by the end of 2013/14.

7.6 The basic eligibility criteria based on the level of income is not proposed to change as this protects low income households whenever possible; and also prevents future challenge on equality grounds on this aspect of the proposed new local scheme.

## **8 New Funding Arrangements for Local Council Tax Support Scheme**

8.1 Local authorities will be paid a grant to enable them to offer support for Council Tax, allocated in advance. The grant will be paid to the billing and major precepting authorities using existing powers. This grant will be set at 10% less than the amount

of Council Tax benefit paid out in 2011/12. More detail has been received and modelled on the likely funding, and in total equates to a potential reduction of c£1.1m in funding for Slough per year based on 2011/12 council tax benefit. Grant allocations will be set on an annual basis for the first two years.

- 8.2 The Government will consider whether a new basis for distributing the funding grant, other than previous expenditure, is required from 2015/16 and if multi-year allocations would be better for local authorities. At this stage the suggestion is that this would form part of the Revenue Support Grant (RSG) from 2015/16.
- 8.3 As opposed to a subsidy, the system will create a position whereby the Local Authority is responsible for any spending in addition to the grant provided by Government. The risk attached to this is that once Slough Borough Council has set the criteria for the delivery of this benefit, if the social demographic position of Slough changes during the year, creating an increase in customers, the grant could be overspent. This will place pressure on the services delivered by the council. It also means that the funding model adopted will require close monitoring and potentially altering year on year to reflect possible social demographic changes e.g. an increase in the proportion of pensioners or vulnerable people in the population.

## **9 Impact of Changes – Council Tax**

- 9.1 In April 2013, Slough Borough Council implemented its own local council tax support scheme and policy. The policy is attached as Appendix A.
- 9.2 The Council Tax Support (CTS) caseload has not changed that much over the year. In March 2013 the Caseload was 11,800, and we expected this to drop with the implementation of CTS as it took some people out of the scheme.
- 9.3 The Council Tax collection rate is similar to last year at this time but the number of reminders summonses and liability orders issued has increased three fold which could suggest more people having problems and trying to defer payments
- 9.4 Pensioners who are already customers are not affected by the cut (they are protected under the new scheme from losing any benefit), as are any new pensioners applying for support. The percentage of the benefit loss to working age customers therefore will be much higher than 10%.
- 9.5 Many of the customers who previously received Council Tax Benefit may also be affected by the changes to housing benefit announced by the Government. The majority of Benefit customers claim both Council Tax and Housing Benefit.
- 9.6 Welfare reforms also potentially hitting this same group of people are:
- Benefits Cap
  - Under Occupancy
  - Local Welfare Assistance
  - Universal Credit – to be implemented in October 2013
  - Personal Independence Plans

## **10 Housing Benefit**

- 10.1 Social Housing Tenants – although the spare room subsidy or ‘bedroom tax’ was introduced in April 2013 it is still too early to draw any conclusions as to its impact on household income and the ability to pay rent. There has certainly been an increase



demand for affected tenants seeking to downsize into smaller properties but total rent arrears do not appear to have been disproportionately affected although we may still be in a 'honeymoon' period as tenants make up their rental shortfall by dipping into savings.

- 10.2 Private Sector Tenants – again there is no direct evidence available to us, but we have had more applicants for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) than in previous years. We have spent £314,322 as at the end of November and £419,528 has been approved for payments to the end of the financial year. This time last year we had only spent £112,505.86 with £70,000 approved for future payments.
- 10.3 The Government will increase DHP by £40 million in both 2014-15 and 2015-16. This will ensure the amount of DHPs available to support those social housing tenants affected by under-occupancy deductions will not be reduced for the next two years, giving councils discretion to make longer term awards. Funding of DHPs will be met from Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) budget from 2014-15.
- 10.4 The caseload for Housing Benefit has not changed considerably over the year, with uptake remaining fairly consistent when compared to previous year's caseload volumes:
- November 2012 = 11,595
  - November 2013 = 11,732

## 11 **The “London” effect**

- 11.1 Prior to the introduction of the welfare benefit reforms, much was made of the potential effects on low income households in inner London areas where rental costs were at their highest. As individual household incomes were capped at £500 per week upon the phased introduction of Universal Credit there was a logical assumption that households would either willingly relocate to cheaper areas or would be 'exported' by hard pressed London Boroughs (LB) who were forced to seek cheaper private sector accommodation in order to discharge their homelessness duties.
- 11.2 To date, the council has no evidence that this is happening, even on a small scale and although the 'footfall' of clients seeking housing advice from the service at Landmark Place has increased by over 40% since last year, these clients either facing eviction from private landlords, escalating rent or mortgage arrears, or other threats, are existing Slough residents.
- 11.3 Previous enquiries by Slough's MP focused particularly on LB Hounslow identified a dozen families in temporary accommodation in our borough and an Freedom of Information (FOI) request by the BBC suggested that as a whole, London Boroughs had only placed some 90 households within our area. Additionally, our neighbouring boroughs of Windsor & Maidenhead, Wycombe and Bracknell Forest are known to use the temporary accommodation within Slough while they each retain responsibility for their clients and will ultimately re-house them back into the placing authorities when homes become available. There is no evidence of any increase in the use of out-of-borough temporary accommodation, because, if for no other reason, the supply of available rooms is fairly fixed and this does not impact upon either the level of housing demand, rent and property values or the workload of the housing needs service as a consequence.

11.4 Therefore, it is reassuring for the moment, at least, to know that contrary to the pessimistic predictions, Slough is not becoming a 'dumping ground' for other borough's problems. In future the council's position is further safeguarded by adoption of the new allocation policy which requires applicants to live within Slough for a minimum of five years before they become eligible to join our housing waiting list.

12 **Conclusion**

12.1 Based on the current figures and the "newness" of the changes to the welfare benefit system it is too early to draw any reasonable conclusions with a great deal of confidence.

13 **Appendices Attached**

Appendix A - The Local Council Tax Benefit Scheme – Slough Borough Council

14 **Background Papers**

None.

## Appendix A

### The Local Council Tax Benefit Scheme – Slough Borough Council

1. This document contains the Council Tax Support Scheme which the Council is required to produce under the provisions of Schedule 4 of the Bill. The Council Tax Reduction Schemes (Prescribed Requirements) (England) Regulations 2012 prescribe a number of matters which must be included in the scheme and the scheme is to be interpreted and applied in accordance with those regulations.
2. The scheme applicable to pensioners is defined in the Council Tax Reduction Schemes (Prescribed Requirements) Regulations 2012, Part 3, Schedules 1 to 6, which will be adopted within this scheme following their enactment.
3. The procedure for the operation of the Scheme summarised below is made in accordance with Schedules 7 and 8 of the Council Tax Reduction Schemes (Prescribed Requirements) (England) Regulations 2012.
4. The scheme related to persons of working age is being proposed based upon the following Key Principles:

**Principle 1:** The core of the new local Council Tax support scheme will remain the same as the current Council Tax Benefit scheme

**Principle 2:** Every working age adult should pay something and therefore the reduction required to cover the Governments cut should be applied equally

**Principle 3:** There is no change for pensioners and protects those classed as vulnerable as instructed by Government

**Principle 4:** The scheme should incentivise work. The new scheme adopts the existing scheme as defined in the Council Tax Benefit Regulations 2006 as they stood on 21 July 2012 subject to the following amendment:

5. This scheme states that the principals and methods set out in those regulations be used to determine council tax support, except where amendments are set out in this scheme or by statute under the Local Government Finance Act and accompanying legislation.

That Regulation 57 in Part 6 of the Council Tax Benefit Regulations 2006 shall be taken to read as follows:

“57. (1) Subject to paragraphs (2) to (5), the amount of a persons maximum council tax benefit in respect of a day for which he is liable to pay council tax, shall be between 70% and 90% of the amount A/B where –

(a) A is the amount set by the appropriate authority as the council tax for the relevant financial year in respect of the dwelling in which he is a resident and for which he is liable, subject to any discount which may be appropriate to that dwelling under the 1992 Act; and

(b) B is the number of days in that financial year, less any deductions in respect of non-dependants which fall to be made under regulation 58 (non-dependant deductions)."

6. This scheme is compliant with the following local operational principles:

- To protect the most vulnerable in society.
- To maintain the current protection for War Widows and War Disablement customers.
- Is simple to administer ensuring the Council will have available resources to operate it, reflecting the fact that the administration grant for CTS will soon be withdrawn by Government.
- That the attached hardship policy is adopted in order to ensure that there is a safety net for exceptional cases.
- Any change in benefit entitlement is collectable.
- Recovers as much as possible of the potential gap in funding

## **7. Principles of the Council Tax Benefit Replacement Local Support Scheme**

As well as protecting pensioners' entitlement to their current level of council tax benefit the Government propose two additional principles to underpin local schemes which Slough will adopt: .

- Local authorities should also ensure support for vulnerable groups;
- Local schemes should support work incentives, and in particular avoid disincentives to move into work.

## **8. Pensioners**

Pensioner council tax support will not be reduced as a result of the local scheme. Therefore all pensioners and those who apply in the future will have their council tax support based on the current regulations.

## **9. Vulnerable Groups**

Slough like all local authorities has a duty to protect vulnerable groups. While there is no agreed definition – in government or elsewhere – of what characteristics make an individual vulnerable the local authority has statutory duties in relation to:

- Children, and duties under the 2010 Child Poverty Act to reduce and mitigate the effects of child poverty;
- Disabled people, and duties under the 1986 Disabled Persons Act;
- Homelessness prevention, and duties under the 1996 Housing Act to prevent homelessness with a special regard to vulnerable groups.

10. It is the Government's intention to prescribe the criteria, allowances and awards for Council Tax Support to pensioners. This means there will be no flexibility on funding the shortfall for councils in respect of this element of the scheme. Both this and the Governments wish to incentivise Customers into work and protection of the vulnerable is emphasised in the Government's response to the outcome of consultation published in December 2011.

11. The following scheme provides the way forward and is split into the following broad categories:

- A - Changes to Discounts and Exemptions for Council Tax
- B - Percentage Reduction in benefit.
- C - Reduction based around property band.
- D - Reduction based on income e.g. Child Benefit
- E- Removing Second Adult Rebate

**12. A- Changes to Discounts and Exemptions for Council Tax**

Central Government legislation allows for changes to Council Tax Discounts and Exemptions which will come into effect from 1st April 2013. Slough Borough Council has chosen implement these changes.

There are currently 23 classes of Council tax exemption and the changes will only affect three of these:

- Class A - A property which is undergoing or requiring major structural repairs or alterations.
- Class C - A new property or a property that has become empty. It must be unoccupied and substantially unfurnished. May last for a maximum of six months from the date last occupied and substantially unfurnished or the date of completion on new properties.
- Class L- A property that the mortgagee has taken possession of under the terms of the mortgage contract.

In addition the council will also implement a charge of a 50% Empty Home Premium on properties that have been empty longer than 2 years.

These changes affect discounts currently granted to properties not used as a main home.

This will impact mainly upon landlords and will include the council's own empty properties as well as housing association properties and possibly property developers.

**13. B – A flat rate reduction from all existing working age CTB Customers**

The Government have made it clear that we cannot remove benefits from pensioners, and that we should look to protect the vulnerable. In the following the customers who are pensioners or receiving severe disability allowance, disability allowance, disability allowance for a child and receives a disability premium have been protected.

14. We will implement a flat rate percentage cut of 20% in benefit which will be applied to all current working age Customers
15. Reducing entitlements for all Customers slightly strengthens work incentives but imposes significant losses on even the poorest households. Such a policy would mean that all households, even those on the lowest incomes, would have to pay some Council Tax. The poll tax experience showed how difficult it can be to collect small amounts of tax from low-income households who are not used to paying it.
16. This reduction option would mean that those of working age would never be entitled to have all of their Council Tax rebated, meaning that the Council would have to collect some Council Tax from families with very low incomes.

#### **17. C - Restricting Council Tax Support to the charge for a Band C Property.**

We will restrict Council Tax Support to the liability of a Band C property. This means we will calculate Council Tax Support assuming that all customers who are in a higher band are in Band C. We acknowledge that while simple to administer this option pays no regard to the needs of the people who may happen to live in larger properties, such as large families.

Customer distribution by property band is as shown below:

<b>Total Number of Council Tax Benefit Customers by council tax band (</b>	<b>Number</b>
Disabled A	2
A	452
B	3,137
C	5,207
D	2,305
E	410
F	93
G	7
H	0
Total	11,619

This shows:

- 76% of Customers live in band A, B or C properties in Slough.
- 96% of Customers live in band A, B, C or D properties in Slough.

18. The advantage of this option is that it sets a maximum support cap for all Customers of working age so could be perceived to be transparent and fair.
19. Reducing support for occupants of properties in higher Council Tax bands also involves starting to collect Council Tax from some households with little or no private income. But only households in higher-band properties are

affected. Reforms of this kind slightly strengthen work incentives, and also affect people's incentives to occupy properties in higher Council Tax bands.

20. The Government have made it clear that we cannot remove benefits from pensioners, and that we should look to protect the vulnerable, in the above customers who are pensioners or receiving severe disability allowance, disability allowance and disability allowance for a child have been protected.

#### **21. D –Reduction Based on Income**

We will use income in the calculation of Benefit that is currently disregarded.

22. The current Council Tax Benefit regulations mean that the following income is not used in the calculation of entitlement
- Child Benefit
23. This income will now be brought into the calculation of CTS, which would have the effect of increasing the income used in the calculation and reducing the amount of Benefit received
24. Child Benefit will no longer be disregarded in the calculation of Council Tax Support for all current working age Customers.
25. Customers who are pensioners or receiving severe disability allowance, disability allowance and disability allowance for a child have again been protected.
26. This option would proportionally disadvantage customers with children
27. This option may also increase the burden on other areas of the authority.

#### **28. E- Remove Second Adult Rebate**

Second Adult Rebate is claimed by the householder but on the basis of the "second adult" normally a non dependant in the household, the level of the Customers own income and capital (and that of any partner is irrelevant) the income and capital of the second adult is taken into consideration.

29. We will remove the calculation of second adult rebate

#### **30. Supporting People into Work**

There are also a number of small changes that could be considered at minimal cost and will support customers into work which is the other principal of the scheme. These include

- **'Run-ons'**: Allowing the award to continue unchanged for a period after someone returns to work. We will allow the benefit to continue at the existing rate for four weeks after the Customer enters work to allow for them to receive their first monthly salary.

There would be minimal costs associated with this.

- **Advance claims:** Allowing customers to submit claims for council tax support in advance of being liable for paying council tax, which may encourage some customers to take up short term employment opportunities. This would ensure that they would not need to take time away from work to claim their benefits, there would be no cost to this.
- **Retaining ‘information stubs’ about customers for a fixed period after eligibility is lost:** Providing for simplified claim procedures when a customer reclaims within a specified period of their previous claim provided there has been no change in their circumstances only their income

### **31. Applications for Council Tax Support**

#### **This part applies to both pensioners and working-age applicants**

The following procedure is in accordance with the Council Tax Reduction Schemes (Prescribed Requirements) (England) Regulations 2012, referred to as the Regulations below and shall be implemented in accordance with those Regulations.

Entitlement to CTS is dependent on an application being made in the following way.

An application may be made:

- (a) In writing
- (b) By means of an electronic communication or
- (c) By telephone following publication by the Council of a number for this purpose.

The form provided by the Council for this purpose must be properly completed, and the Council may require the applicant to complete the form in the proper manner, and will require that information and evidence is provided by the applicant.

An application will be defective if the applicant does not provide all of the information the Council requires.

Applications made by telephone will only be valid if the applicant provides a written statement of their circumstances in the format required by the Council.

The Council will provide applicants making their applications with an opportunity to correct any defects in their application.

Applications may be made by those persons set out in paragraph 6 of Schedule 8 of the Regulations.

### **32. Evidence and Information**

Any person who makes an application or any person to whom a reduction under the Councils scheme has been awarded shall furnish such certificates, documents, information and evidence in connection with the application or award, or question arising out of it as may reasonably be required by the Council in order to determine the person’s entitlement.



Where the Council requests information it shall inform the applicant or person of their duty to notify the Council of any change of circumstances and shall indicate the kind of changes of circumstances which are to be notified.

Matters related to the electronic communication of information, proof of delivery and content of information will be determined in accordance with Part 4 of Schedule 7 of the Regulations. 5

Where the person is a pensioner paragraph 7(4) (5) (6) and (7) of Schedule 8 of the Regulations apply which specify matters relevant to evidence and information related to pensioners.

### **33. Amendment and withdrawal of applications**

Any person who has made an application may amend it at any time before a decision had been made by serving a notice in writing to the Council in accordance with paragraph 8 of Schedule 8 of the Regulations.

### **34. Decisions by the Council**

The Council will make a decision in respect of any application for a reduction under this scheme in accordance with the criteria set out within the Council Tax Benefit Regulations 2006 (subject to the amendment made to regulation 57 referred to above), and in accordance with Schedules 7 and 8 of the Regulations.

The date upon which the Council is deemed to have received the properly completed application shall be determined in accordance with paragraphs 6 of Schedule 1, paragraph 7 and Part 1 of Schedule 7 of the Regulations being satisfied, or as soon as reasonably practicable thereafter.

The Council will notify the applicant or any person affected by its' decision under the scheme in writing forthwith, or as soon as reasonably practicable.

Any person affected to whom the Council sends or delivers a notification of a decision may, within one month of the notification of the decision, request in writing from the Council a statement setting out the reasons for its decision on any matter set out in the notice.

Where an award or payment of reduction is made the time and manner of granting the reduction under the scheme will be in accordance with Part 5 of Schedule 8 of the Regulations.

### **35. Change of circumstances**

For persons who are not pensioners the date on which changes of circumstances are to take effect will be determined in accordance with paragraph 4 of Part 2 of Schedule 8 of the Regulations.

### **36. Procedure for making an appeal**

Any applicant who is not in agreement with the decision of the Council has taken under this scheme may service a notice in writing on the Council

setting out their reasons and grounds upon which they believe the Council has made the wrong decision.

Following receipt of an appeal in writing the Council will:

1) Consider the appeal

2) Notify the applicant in writing of the following:

- a. Any decision not to uphold the appeal and the reasons for that; or
- b. That steps are being taken to proceed with the appeal and set out what steps.

Where an applicant remains dissatisfied following receipt of any written notice sent by the Council in response to their appeal, they may within two months of the service of that notice, appeal to the valuation tribunal.

### **37. Transition Arrangements**

The regulations will state that a person who is in receipt of Council Tax Benefit immediately before 1st April 2013 then they will be treated as having made an application for a reduction under the local scheme.

A review process may be implemented by the Council for new and existing awards, this time period will be determined by the Council and failure by the Customer to fulfil and request during the review of their award may result in the termination of that award.

**SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**REPORT TO:** Neighbourhoods & Community Services Scrutiny Panel **DATE:** 8 January 2014

**CONTACT OFFICER:** Neil Aves – Assistant Director, Housing and Environment  
**(For all enquiries)** (01753) 875263

**WARD(S):** All

**PORTFOLIO:** Councillor James Swindlehurst – Neighbourhoods and Regeneration

**PART I**  
**FOR CONSIDERATION & COMMENT**

**THE VOIDS PROCESS AND THE RE-ALLOCATION OF EMPTY COUNCIL HOMES**

1 **Purpose of Report**

The purpose of this report is to provide members with an overview of current service performance achieved by the Council in relation to the repair, clearance and reallocation of council houses.

2 **Recommendation(s)/Proposed Action**

That the Panel discuss the information provided and in particular the current status of the service together with the expectation of improvements within future years.

3 **The Sustainable Community Strategy, the JSNA and the Corporate Plan**

3a. **Sustainable Community Strategy Priorities**

The quality of and access to housing is a key priority for the council. Slough's 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."

Good quality, readily available housing is central to the health and wellbeing of the population; it gives the ability to access work and for older residents suitably located and adapted dwellings provide a safe environment for retained independence.

3b. **Sustainable Community Strategy: Cross-Cutting themes**

Residents who are adequately housed, and feel safe 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.

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

Housing is a contributory factor to the wellbeing of Slough residents, and the provision of any form of housing to those in need supports the priorities in the JSNA and it contributes to reducing inequalities in health by avoiding the occupation of 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 ensuring that the available services and facilities are responsive to the demands of local residents.

4 **Other Implications**

(a) Financial

There are no additional financial implications relating to this report.

(b) Risk Management

This report records the historic transition from Sheltered Housing through to Supported Housing and beyond and as such is purely retrospective and without associated risk.

(c) Human Rights Act and Other Legal Implications

There are no human rights implications for this report.

(d) Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA)

As a reference report this does not make any recommendations as to future operation of the service or of policy change. Should changes be proposed in future an EIA will be completed at that stage.

5 **Supporting Information**

- 5.1 When a Council tenancy is ended and a property becomes vacant, the Allocations and Voids team within Housing Services visit the property to ensure the attribute details of the property are correct, for example has the property been adapted, are there any additional out buildings, has a large bedroom been subdivided into two.
- 5.2 The property is then passed to Interserve the Council's measured term, responsive repairs contractor who also has responsibility for void refurbishment. The specification and extent of this work can of course vary from property to property and if the home has not had the benefit of Decent Homes work the opportunity is taken to complete this while it is empty.
- 5.3 Once Interserve have completed the necessary works, the property is passed back to the Allocations and Voids team so that they can allocate the property to a household from the Council's housing register. However, although a simple process in theory there are numerous complications.

- 5.4 The voids process is measured by Housemark ( formerly BVPI 212) and defined as 'the time in calendar days from the date when the tenancy is terminated up to and including the date the new tenancy agreement starts'. This definition is a standard industry definition.
- 5.5 The performance for Slough for April 2012 to April 2013 was 33.60 days and for the previous year April 2011 to April 2012 was 29.64 days. Both figures are considered lowest quartile performance when compared to other similar sized organisations while top quartile performance is around 12.90 days.
- 5.6 In breaking down the data, there are clear performance issues with the repairs performance of the Council contractor Interserve. On average a void took 28.87 days to complete in the last financial year representing bottom quartile performance. Whereas the average time taken to actually re-allocate a home by the Allocations and Voids team is 4.73 days, which is upper quartile performance.
- 5.7 In mitigation, many of the voids presented to Interserve do require a full decent homes upgrade of affordable warmth, new kitchens or bathrooms rather than 'a lick of paint' and while some authorities may exclude performance on such voids from their reported figures, classifying them as long-term voids, Slough prefers to report performance in its purest form so that we can fully appreciate the cost and resource implications of managing the stock.
- 5.8 There are a number of reasons for this poor performance.
- The initial contract signed with Interserve dates back to February 2002 and therefore understandably has to be put in the context of its operational era. However the initial void performance as stated in the contract for Interserve was 15 days, reducing down to 10 after 3 years. A contract variation was signed on 25 April 2006 which essentially gave full control of voids performance back to Interserve and no longer were they obliged to keep to the original performance in the Contract.
  - Clearly contract monitoring has not been fully robust as to hold the contractor to meeting the requirements of performance.
  - The voids and repairs function are the responsibility of Property Services and since 2011 no longer a Housing Service function which is contrary to best practice among stock owning authorities with top quartile performance. While this separation alone should not result in bottom quartile performance, communication across different office buildings and teams with different priorities does add an additional factor into an already difficult relationship with Interserve.
  - The regular fortnightly voids liaison meetings with Interserve are managed by the Allocations and Voids Team, who do not manage the contract and these meetings have not been attended by representatives of Property Services. This creates another disjoin in performance.
  - Interserve regularly state that sub-contactors are not available or are performing poorly, that they have high levels of sickness, that there are a shortage of specific or key trades and so on.

- In tandem with the poor performance, the quality of many 'completed' voids is poor with contractual obligations only set at a barely lettable standard. Even allowing for this a significant number of properties are rejected by the Voids and Allocations team as not being acceptable and are returned for further work. Despite this check, customers often complain or even refuse properties despite being in housing need.

## 6 **Looking to the future**

- 6.1 This report has focussed on the negative aspects of the voids management process however it would be unfair not to reflect on the massive improvements which have been made over the life of the Interserve contract. Just prior to the launch of People 1<sup>st</sup> in 2005, voids performance was around 85 days and for one particular month peaked at over 100 days, representing significant loss of rental income and delays in re-housing needy households from inappropriate temporary accommodation. The current performance, while not acceptable is still significantly better than in the past.
- 6.2 The council is approaching the end of the contract with Interserve and will soon have the opportunity to reconsider how the voids process is operated and managed, clearly a more responsive, efficient service is a must, but similarly the actual standard of voids and quality of workmanship needs to be enhanced as well.
- 6.3 In preparation, the Customer Senate are already reviewing current voids and they have previously completed a review of the responsive repairs service as reported to the panel earlier this year. With the adoption of the new allocations policy, the future focus of allocating the available homes will be to existing tenants, as a reward for good behaviour, to those who have shown the ability to look after their existing homes and to maintain their tenancies without impacting upon their neighbours or the service. Clearly this initiative will fall flat if the reward for maintaining an existing home is the offer of one in a decrepit state.

## 7 **Conclusions**

- 7.1 Slough will continue to perform at bottom quartile performance on voids, with poor quality voids with the present contract and structural arrangements. In a relatively short time frame the contractual shortcomings can be resolved through re-procurement and with proposals already being implemented by the Strategic Director of Regeneration, Housing & Resources in restructuring Property Services, Housing Service will be increasingly responsible for the customer relationship for both the voids and the 20,000+ response repairs carried out each year. This will lead to an operation which will see voids of an agreed standard being returned to the occupied housing stock in an agreed timescale thereby increasing the rent roll to maintain and enhance services further.

## 8 **Background Papers**

None.

**SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**REPORT TO:** Neighbourhood & Communities Services Scrutiny Panel  
**DATE:** 8<sup>th</sup> January 2014  
**CONTACT OFFICER:** Trevor Costello – Service Charge Co-ordinator  
**CONTACT NUMBER:** (01753) 875357  
**WARD(S)** All  
**PORTFOLIOS** Cllr James Swindlehurst

**ESTATE SERVICES REVIEW**

**1 Purpose of the report**

- 1.1 To advise the Panel on the latest position regarding tenant and leaseholder service charges and of the commencement of an Estate Services Review (ESR)

**2 Recommendations proposed/action**

- 2.1 The Panel is requested to note the commencement of the review.

**3 Corporate Priorities**

- 3.1 This report contributes towards the delivery of the 2013/14 Service Plan for Housing Services, which includes the following objectives:

Objective 2: 'Seek opportunities and implement initiatives to optimise revenue through new income streams, partnership working and achieve natural efficiencies through streamlining the delivery of services.'

Objective 4: 'Implement creative management to improve quality of service to create and maintain attractive neighbourhoods that customers are proud to live in.'

And connects to the following Corporate priorities:

**Corporate Plan**

- Improve the customer experience
- Deliver high quality services that meet local needs
- Develop new ways of working
- Achieve value for money

**Sustainable Communities Strategy**

- Economy and Skills
- Housing
- Regeneration and the Environment

## **Other implications**

### **(a) Financial**

All three reviews concentrate on the ability of the council to recover costs for additional services it currently, or intends to provide in the future to residents of its HRA and leasehold properties.

The caretaking service is paid for by residents through service charges. The current process for recharging the activities of caretakers will be reviewed, to introduce a greater degree of accuracy and accountability but which may ultimately increase or decrease individual residents' contributions. The review will also consider possible expansion of the role the service plays in maintaining housing properties and estates, this could include optional enhanced service levels with an appropriate scale of charges offering residents' choice in the level of services they receive. This should be cost neutral to the Council as any adjustments to services offered will be recovered through service charges.

The recharges policy will explore the potential for reducing the impact on HRA reactive maintenance budgets by the increased recharging for tenant wilful damage and/or neglect. It will also explore the potential for creating income on non-landlord or commercial activities through charging for leasehold management activities and other non-standard housing activities.

Projections for the impact on income will be developed as the Review Project Group commences work on project activities.

### **(b) Risk Management**

Risk and Equality Impact Assessments will be carried out when forming proposals for alterations to service.

In relation to the review itself, the following initial risks have been considered:

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Mitigating action</b>	<b>Opportunities</b>
Legal	Reviewing the service charge calculation process will remove the risk of challenge to the legitimacy of the service charge and recovery process.	Harmonising leaseholder and HRA service charge processes will assist with complying with the new Universal Credit service charge eligibility criteria maximising benefit assistance for residents.
Property	Relaunching the recharge policy will reinforce the council's intent to ensure properties and estates remain in a safe and good condition.	Identifying and enforcing tenancy and lease conditions will ensure risks to building and neighbours are dealt with promptly and links to tenancy enforcement will address serious or repeat breaches.
Human Rights	None	None
Health & Safety	Estate, block and individual property inspections will be carried out on more structured and routine basis.	Opportunities for reducing the take-on of non-standard alterations and improvements will be achieved through an inspection process linked to



		improvements and mutual exchange requests.
Employment issues	Amendments to the supervision of the caretaker team with no expectations in the reductions in the establishment. Review of job descriptions, training and competency framework for caretakers.	The potential for cost-neutral expansion of the caretaking team and services it provides to residents.
Equalities issues	None	None
Community Support	None	None
Communications	The development of a communication plan for the review will ensure residents are consulted appropriately on any changes planned.	None
Community Safety	None	Expansion of caretaker roles and responsibilities could increase the speed of response and resolution of estate-based issues and concerns, including fly-tipping, graffiti removal and other safety hazards.
Financial	Improving service charge calculation will reduce the impact on HRA budgets.	Increasing service charge revenue and costs recovery will free up income to spend on other services to residents.
Timetable for delivery	The project action plan will ensure that completion and delivery of the review will be achieved.	
Project capacity	A specialist project manager with experience in carrying out similar reviews has been appointed to work alongside existing officers.	None.
Other	None	None

(c) Human Rights and other Legal Implications

There are no Human Rights Act or other legal implications in connection with this report.

(e) Equalities Impact Assessment

The completion of an EIA will be required depending on the nature of changes to resident-impacting services.

(f) Workforce

There are no workforce implications as there is scope for expanding the caretaking service with no additional cost to establishment budgets. No reductions in staff are envisaged.

## **4 Previous Scrutiny and review**

4.1 During 2013, Members have received two reports into service areas that are now included in the ESR, specifically:-

1. On 8 July 2013, Housing Services responded to a Request for Review by Councillor Plimmer into leasehold service charge accounting. In response to the Councillor's request, Committee asked:
  - that a progress report on improvements to the leasehold service be presented within 6 to 12 months;
  - that investigation of moving from a percentage charge management fee to a flat fee is carried out to meet best practice

Aspects of the Estate Services Review will have implications in both of the above areas as the review will involve the fine-tuning of current leaseholder service charge calculation process in preparation of its application to the calculation of charges for HRA properties.

The moving of the management fee to a flat rate is also to be considered during the review.

2. On 27 August 2013, Housing Services presented a separate report covering the caretaking service and detailing improvements implemented and proposed following the submission of a report by the Slough Customer Senate in 2011 of their review of the caretaking service.

### **Responding to resident feedback**

4.2 The Review will address concerns raised by residents in recent reviews and surveys.

4.3 The 2011 review of the caretaking service by the Slough Customer Senate recommended improvements in many of the service's key activities.

Whilst a number of improvements in cleaning and caretaking approaches have already been implemented in response to the report, the ESR will take a wider look at the structure, management and operational effectiveness of the caretaking service to fully utilise and evidence the value of an in-house caretaking team and the mechanisms for resident involvement in monitoring and scrutinising service delivery.

4.4 The publication of the outcomes of the 2013 STAR tenants and leaseholders' survey painted a challenging picture of resident satisfaction with estate services, in particular those that lead to the calculation of service charges.

59% of HRA tenants were fairly or very satisfied that services represented value for money compared with 15% who were fairly or very dissatisfied.

These percentages are difficult to interpret accurately as typically two thirds of HRA tenants receive some amount of Housing Benefit under which the service charge would be included.

The picture for leaseholders is significantly weaker: only 30% of leaseholders

were fairly or very satisfied that service charges represented value for money whereas 51% were fairly or very dissatisfied.

- 4.5 The need to carry out the ESR review was established following previous resident-led service and feedback from individual residents and Members.

Furthermore the appointment of staff with specialist expertise in leasehold and service charge management has identified further improvements required.

Housing Services are committed to widening the beneficial impacts to services alongside the restructure of neighbourhood housing and caretaking teams.

## **5 Objectives of the Estate Services Review**

- 5.1 The ESR is the umbrella project covering three separate service reviews into the following work areas:

- Caretaking services
- Service charges
- Recharges

These three service areas have cross-cutting impacts and consequently the creation of an over-arching Estate Services Review will enable the project group to identify common themes and co-ordinate project work activity accordingly.

The core project group will oversee and monitor the implementation of review outcomes to evidence and report on the success of the project.

### **Drivers for review**

- 5.2 The need to carry out the ESR review was established following previous resident-led service reviews and feedback from individual residents and Members.

Furthermore the appointment of staff with specialist expertise in leasehold and service charge management has identified further improvements required.

Housing Services are committed to widening the beneficial impacts to services alongside the restructure of neighbourhood housing and caretaking teams.

### **Themed objectives**

- 5.3 Improvements to services can broadly categorised under the following headings:

#### **Resident aspirations and delivering service excellence**

- 1. To improve resident satisfaction with estate services, their homes and neighbourhoods and to involve residents in the creation and monitoring of service standards to ensure the delivery of service excellence.**

Recent surveys and reports have shown that there is a definite link between residents' perception of service charges as representing poor value for money and the quality of the caretaking/cleaning service.

Residents have told us that keeping their homes, estates and neighbourhoods clean and in good condition is one of their top priorities and this is reflected in the commitments in the 2013/14 plan to improve services in these areas.

The review will enable the service to deliver improvements sought by residents and the Council to deliver service excellence.

### **Fit for the future**

#### **2. To deliver an innovative, fit for purpose housing service that meets and exceeds best practice and regulatory requirements and residents' expectations.**

The implementation of changes to current service processes will ensure that the Housing Service meets all regulatory and best practice expectations for the operation of tenant services, including the transparent accounting and charging for services through resident service charges.

By using the Capita Housing database as the central point for all customer information, regardless of tenure, it will improve the customer contact experience by maintaining one database of customer and property information.

The validation of data on the Capita Housing database will improve the use and sharing of stock and customer information between teams and departments and ensure that data on the Council's stock is managed and controlled effectively.

### **Income maximisation**

#### **3. To optimise service charge income for services to residents that ensures residents pay for the services they receive.**

By improving the calculation of service charges and ensuring that residents are charged accurately for the services they receive, Housing Services will maximise service charge recovery and reduce the subsidising of the costs of services from the Housing Revenue Account.

By reviewing and implementing a comprehensive and effective service charge calculation process across all tenure types, Housing Services will ensure that there is transparency, accountability and consistency in the charging process so that residents of the same block will pay similar charges regardless of tenure.

By re-launching a strengthened recharges process, the Council will reinforce the responsibility of residents to look after their homes and neighbourhoods, Housing Services will look to offer additional services to residents to help them achieve these goals. Examples include offering gas and other safety inspections for leaseholders, standard rates for recharging for repairs that are the tenant's responsibility.

In addition to reducing HRA expenditure on repairs and services related to tenant damage and neglect, fly-tipping and general poor tenant behaviour, by linking recharges to tenancy/leasehold accounts on the Capita housing database, a broader picture of the conduct of a tenancy becomes visible, allowing the council's intervention teams to respond to emerging tenancy issues.

This has further synergy with the newly adopted allocation policy which will prioritise transfers to those tenants maintain properties and conduct themselves having regard to their neighbours and the wider community.

- 5.4 To enable the delivery of the themed objectives set out above, specific review areas include:

#### Caretaking service

The ESR will adopt responsibility for continuing the review into the caretaking service that commenced following the SCS report in 2011. The ESR will assess improvements already undertaken under this review and ensure that they complement the wider review process.

- To establish a better understanding of the costs of providing the caretaking service by accurately identifying the costs of employing staff, providing equipment, materials and other associated expenditure.
- To implement a mechanism of activity-based costing covering within each area team so that costs can be apportioned and recharged accurately based on the time and services provided to each block, estate or location.
- Evidencing whether the current structure delivers value for money and to look, whether as part of this review or at a secondary stage, at scope for developing a menu of tiered services, designed in co-operation with residents that offer different levels of services.

#### Service Charges

- To review the process of calculating service charges for HRA residents and to harmonise the process for both leaseholders and tenants so that charges are equal regardless of tenure.
- To identify all activities that are service chargeable to maximise the level of recovery of costs incurred.
- To create a charging framework that meets regulatory, legislative and best practice requirements and which ensures residents are charged fairly for the services they receive.
- To create a framework for resident scrutiny and involvement and monitoring of services recharged through service charges.

#### Recharges

- To re-launch an enhanced residents' recharge policy that reinforces their responsibility to look after their homes and neighbourhoods and which will see residents recharged for work arising from damage, neglect or other unacceptable behaviours.

This will also include rectification works following unauthorised and unsafe alterations and additional void works where a tenant has left a property in an unsatisfactory condition.

- To offer a range of additional or new services to residents to ensure they are able to live in comfort and safety in their own homes, e.g. gas safety and periodic electrical system inspections and a range of property maintenance services.
- To expand the potential for income through administration and document-approval services for leaseholders and other residential and commercial management activities and functions.

## **7 Timetable for updates**

- 7.1 The review group will formulate a workplan which will set milestones throughout the 2013/14 financial year.

It is intended to provide an update report to Committee in March 2014 detailing progress of the review along with timescales for alterations to services throughout the 2014/15 year.

## **6 Appendices Attached**

- Estate Services Review action plan – Appendix A





ESTATES SERVICES REVIEW  
PROJECT ACTION PLAN

Project Key:  
Caretaking: CR  
Service Charges: SC  
Recharges: RC  
Cross-cutting: CC

On time   Late   Completed  

PROJECT AREA / OBJECTIVE		OUTCOMES		LEAD	STATUS
CROSS-CUTTING OBJECTIVES					
Page 36	CAPITA				
	CC1	Ensuring stock data across systems is validated and verified.	Create verified list of HRA and Leasehold stock referencing new area patches.	K Khan K Lallian	
			Ensure block and unit references match between existing SBC systems.	K Khan K Lallian	
			Identify service partners who require updated stock lists.	K Lallian	
	CC2	Configuring service charge coding structures to maximise income, charging transparency and reportability.	Review and implement comprehensive service charge sub-coding structure within rents & charges.	T Costello	
	CC3	Migration of leaseholder data into Capita	Complete migration of leaseholder data into Capita	M Brown D Viljoen	
	GAP ANALYSIS – CURRENT P&Ps				
	CC4	Policy and procedure guides	'Fit for purpose' check and/or creation for the following P&P: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Recharges</li><li>• Mutual Exchanges</li><li>• Estate Inspections</li><li>• Repair responsibilities</li><li>• Improvements and alterations</li><li>• Leasehold service charges</li><li>• HRA service charges</li></ul>	T Costello AHMs	
	FINANCIAL INFORMATION				
	CC5	Configuring of Capita and work-based processes to ensure accurate coding of service charge expenditure and activity.	Validate finance coding for all estate-based expenditure types	T Costello D Viljoen	
			Identify and resolve examples of missing payments/bills from third party	T Costello	



		agents/suppliers	S Saqlain	
CC6	Identify potential accounting mechanisms within Capital for non-rent charges (e.g.: court costs and recharges)		D Viljoen	
CC7	Carry out activity-based costing (ABC) of in-house revenue funded services/teams.	Identifying charges for appropriate service charge, labour and other recharge activities.	P Bird T Costello	
	<b>SERVICE STANDARDS AND MONITORING</b>			
CC8	Develop a service framework that meets customer expectations	Develop a recharging structure that reflects the level of services received, including the possibility of a menu of caretaking options enabling customer choice.	K Lewis	
		Develop a suite of appropriate cleaning specifications and supplier solutions to ensure blocks are maintained and managed to an excellent standard.	P Bird K Lewis	
		Develop internal and customer-based service monitoring processes that help achieve customer satisfaction with the service.	K Lewis	
		Develop a suite of KPIs and targets that demonstrate improvement in services.	T Costello K Lewis	
	<b>BEST VALUE</b>			
CC9	Benchmark costs and performance of services within the sector and other organisations.	Compare costs for service costs against against other RPs to identify further efficiencies and improvements to services.	T Costello K Lewis	
	<b>COMMUNICATION</b>			
	<b>See separate communication plan</b>			

<b>CARETAKING REVIEW</b>				
	<b>STAFFING REVIEW</b>			
CR1	Complete the review of the Caretaker service	Finalise approval of new job descriptions and competency framework for the Caretaker role.	P Bird	
		Implement HR-related outcomes of the review (team structure, supervision and line management responsibilities).	TBC	
CR2	Implement changes to operational activities that increase the efficiency and safety of the service.	Identify, produce (where missing) and roll-out relevant H&S processes relating to the Caretaker service, including: Manual handling Lone working COSHH RIDDOR	P Bird	

**SERVICE CHARGES**

SC1	Create a charging process that can be applied equitably across tenure types to maximise recovery of service charge costs	Create a matrix of service charges elements linked to tenure type.	T Costello	
		Review efficiency surrounding provision of service charge expenditure information from other departments/partners.	T Costello K Lallian	
		Assess impact of changes to service charges against the welfare reform and limiting of eligible service charges for Universal Credit and other benefits	T Costello	
SC2	Implement the harmonisation of service charge calculation process for leaseholder and HRA general needs properties	Identify and resolve challenges presented by separate calculation processes	T Costello	
SC3	Strengthen relationships with 3 <sup>rd</sup> party/contractors/suppliers to improve handling of expenditure data.	Audit existing supplier arrangements to create a library of services and contract/account arrangements/details.	T Costello D Viljoen	
		Review billing/charging arrangements to maximise quality and utilisation of costs data within calculation processes.	T Costello B Sangha	
SC4	Improve transparency to customers, regulatory and other statutory agencies in service charge calculation and evidence	Develop a suite of customer statements and correspondence to provide account information in plain English (and other languages) and accessible formats.	T Costello K Lewis	
SC5	Introduce mechanisms for staff and customer involvement in procurement processes for contractor/supplier selection.		TBC	

RECHARGES				
RC1	Ensure the ability to recharge exists across tenure types. Consult and implement changes where necessary.	Audit existing tenancy, lease and other agreements to maximise recharge potential across the housing stock.	T Costello	
RC2	Develop a framework for recharging costs to customers and other non-standard services across all tenure-types	Assess the impact/outcomes of the previous project group on Recharges	T Costello AHMs	
RC3	Ensure the recharges processes has appropriate links to other strategies/functions linked to the management of the stock.	Ensure damage and neglect by tenants is linked to appropriate tenancy enforcement measures	T Costello AHMs	
		Identify the implications of recharging on customers' eligibility to access other Council services and functions (e.g. accessing the housing register; improvements; mutual exchanges)	T Costello A Stavrou	
		Identify and propose introduction of add-on landlord services, e.g.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gas servicing</li> <li>Enhanced buildings' insurance (accidental cover)</li> <li>Leaseholders' repairs</li> <li>Tenants' Cashback scheme</li> </ul>	TBC	

**SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**REPORT TO:** Neighbourhoods & Community Services Scrutiny Panel **DATE:** 8 January 2014

**CONTACT OFFICER:** Sarah Forsyth – Scrutiny Officer  
**(For all Enquiries)** (01753) 875657

**WARDS:** All

**PART I**

**TO NOTE**

**NEIGHBOURHOODS & COMMUNITY SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL  
2013/14 WORK PROGRAMME**

**1. Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 For the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel to review its current work programme.

**2. Recommendations/Proposed Action**

- 2.1 That the Panel note the current work programme for the 2013/14 municipal year.

**3. Joint Slough Wellbeing Strategy Priorities**

- **Housing**
- **Regeneration and Environment**
- **Safer Communities**

- 3.1 The Council's decision-making and the effective scrutiny of it underpins the delivery of all the Sustainable Community Strategy priorities. The Neighbourhoods & Community Services Scrutiny Panel, along with the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and other Scrutiny Panels combine to meet the local authority's statutory requirement to provide public transparency and accountability, ensuring the best outcomes for the residents of Slough.
- 3.2 In particular, the NCS Panel specifically takes responsibility for ensuring transparency and accountability for Council services relating to housing, regeneration and environment, and safer communities.

#### 4. **Supporting Information**

##### Work Programme

- 4.1 The current work programme is based on the discussions of the Panel at its previous meetings, looking at requests for consideration of issues from officers and issues that have been brought to the attention of Members outside of the Panel's meetings.
- 4.2 The work programme is a flexible document which will be continually open to review throughout the municipal year.

#### 5. **Conclusion**

- 5.1 This report is intended to provide the Panel with the opportunity to review its upcoming work programme and make any amendments it feels are required.

#### 6. **Appendices Attached**

A - Work Programme for 2013/14 Municipal Year

#### 7. **Background Papers**

None.

**NEIGHBOURHOOD AND COMMUNITY SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL**  
**WORK PROGRAMME 2013/14**

Meeting Date	
<b>27 February 2014</b>	
<b>Scrutiny Items</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overview of work of the Community Safety Partnership incl. prostitution update</li> <li>• Domestic Violence</li> </ul>	Crime and Disorder Committee
<b>2 April 2014</b>	
<b>Scrutiny Items</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review of Neighbourhood Action Groups</li> </ul>	

Currently Un-programmed:

- Traffic Congestion: report back from working group

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**MEMBERS' ATTENDANCE RECORD**  
**NEIGHBOURHOODS & COMMUNITY SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL 2013-14**

COUNCILLOR	MEETING DATES						
	19/06/2013	05/09/2013	30/10/2013	06/11/2013	08/01/2014	27/02/2014	02/04/2014
Dar	P	P	P	P			
Dhillon	Ab	P*	P*	Ab			
Malik	P	P	P	P			
M Mann	P	P*	P	P			
Minhas	P	Ap	P	P			
Plenty	P	P	P	P			
Shah	P	P	P*	P			
Sohal	P	P*	P	P			
Wright	P	Ap	P	P			

P = Present for whole meeting      P\* = Present for part of meeting  
 Ap = Apologies given                Ab = Absent, no apologies given

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