

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Wednesday, 7th January, 2015.

Present:- Councillors Plenty (Chair), Coad, N Holledge, Malik, Mansoor, Shah, Sohal and Wright

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Smith and Strutton

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Sidhu

PART 1

37. Declarations of Interest

Cllrs Malik and Shah declared their status as tenants of Slough Borough Council (SBC) property.

38. Minutes of the last meeting held on 2nd December 2014

The minutes of the last meeting were accepted. However, as the meeting had operated as inquorate, the following resolutions were made in relation to the business discussed:

Real time passenger information

- 1) That the Panel recommend Cabinet reviews the current level of accuracy of RTPI in order to set a target for RTPI accuracy and a suitable timeframe.
- 2) That, subsequent to this, the responsible Cabinet member is recommended to report back to the NCS Scrutiny Panel in six months.
- 3) That the Panel recommends that no further capital expenditure on RTPI be made until the Cabinet is satisfied that worthwhile levels of RTPI will be achieved.

Street cleansing

- 1) That the Panel notes the report.
- 2) That the Panel recommends that, if financially viable, housing land be included in the next contract.
- 3) That the Panel recommends that, to ensure improved monitoring of contractors' work, SBC monitor street cleanliness on
 - a) The day of the contractor inspection; and
 - b) The day of cleaning.

This is in preference to the present system of random locations which has lacked sufficient focus.

Furthermore, the minutes of the meeting on 29th October 2014 had not been formally approved on 2nd December given the quoracy issue. In confirming the

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accuracy of the minutes of the meeting on 29th October 2014, the Panel agreed that minute 24 (Slough bus station) be amended to read:

Resolved: That a survey of users be undertaken in direct consultation with Cllr Strutton.

39. Member Questions

No questions were received prior to the meeting.

40. Resident survey

SBC conducted the survey on an annual basis, compiling the views of tenants and leaseholders. The findings would be used to consult with residents and Councillors on the current service and potential future improvements.

In previous years (including the last survey in 2013) the questions used reflected those used across the nation by most housing associations. However, in 2014 SBC decided to focus more on the views and aspirations of tenants (around 2/3rds of the 2014 survey contained new material). This led to three key themes being identified: satisfaction with services, residents' priorities and aspirations and involvement and engagement.

In terms of satisfaction with services, the overall level (77% being 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied') remained unchanged from 2013. In terms of specific subsections of this, progress had been good with the exception of repairs and maintenance. Regarding priorities and aspirations, residents' main concerns were housing that was affordable, in a good state of repair and situated in a pleasant neighbourhood. In terms of differences between tenants and leaseholders, the former had drug dealing and traffic / parking issues as particular concerns and the latter identified young people loitering as a problem. On the final key theme, there did seem to be some appetite for resident involvement albeit not along the traditional lines of residents' group meetings.

SBC had compiled a significant bank of data which would continue to be analysed to provide detailed findings.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- Repairs and maintenance were areas of little or no improvement, with members also concerned that residents' complaints were often only acted on when Councillors became involved. SBC were undertaking a series of follow up projects targeting this, with qualitative research continuing to refine the information taken from the survey and focus groups being used for further work. A paper summarising the findings from this could be circulated to members.

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- The views of residents and leaseholders would be used in the imminent retendering process.
- Leaseholders had concerns that they received an inferior service to tenants. In particular, the issue of parking spaces being close to property was raised by elderly leaseholders in the context of long nights or icy conditions.
- As well as the repair work itself, the role of customer care at all stages in forming the right impression was recognised. It was also imperative that any undertakings given (e.g. timings of work) were adhered to once repairs started. Work with MyCouncil would be undertaken to resolve any issues.
- There were approximately 6,400 council tenants, with around 650 involved in the survey. This sample size allowed for a high level of confidence in the results within a 2% margin of error. The sample had been selected by market researchers, using a random selection process within certain defined parameters (e.g. levels of unemployment, families and single tenants, equality and diversity criteria) to ensure the sample was largely reflective.
- The findings would be used as part of a learning and improvement cycle. As one part of this, there were lead officers for housing in the three areas (North, South and East) into which SBC was divided. These officers would be alerted to specific issues in their area and asked how they would address them, with progress then to be monitored.
- Tenants' panels had been scrapped as they did not reflect modern methods of participation. Whilst local residents were keen to be involved in consultation, traditional methods of meetings were no longer as effective in securing participation. One change to gathering information had been the employment of Tenant Participation Officers, who would be active in an area where a concern had been identified and then move to a different part of the Borough once the matter was rectified.
- There were also concerns that, whilst minor repair work was undertaken promptly, more major work was more problematic. In addition, it had been reported that errors with the initial repairs had led to the need to revisit the property.
- Concerns that tenants were unsure over what is included in services charges had led to SBC looking into options. The possibility of offering choices to tenants and providing greater transparency on charges was being investigated.
- The recent launch of the neighbourhood service had led to issues with tenant awareness of its role. However, SBC was not required to consult with tenants prior to the merger which created the service as it had not led to a material change in service; face to face interviews with tenants were currently being conducted to clarify the situation.
- The results of the survey were mainly subjective, based on levels of customer satisfaction. SBC did compile objective KPIs which could be shared with members; however, the questions asked in the survey were useful in reflecting the experience of service users.

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- Leaseholders reflected lower levels of satisfaction with the service. This often seemed to be based on a feeling that they were not included in provision to the same extent as tenants.

Resolved:

- 1) That the report be noted.
- 2) That an update be given to the Panel on 30th March 2015.

41. Voids performance

An improvement in turnaround times for void properties was required as the current contract approached termination. The contract was divided at SBC, with one officer responsible for housing stock and another for corporate property. This arrangement had been created to improve transparency, and workshops would be held with Councillors as part of this.

KPIs had indicated that the service was improving, with the average number of days spent working on voids reducing from 12 to 9 between February 2013 and March 2014. Costs to SBC had been reduced, as the number of properties where work required expenditure above the limit of liability (which meant that SBC were liable to pay) had also reduced. There had also been a significant reduction in the number of days for the completion of routine and decent voids, from an average of 30 days in January 2014 to 15 in September 2014.

Project 20 had identified approximately £120,000 of wilful damage which could be charged back to the tenant.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- The improvements had lifted the service from the lower quartile nationally to the upper quartile. Additional improvements could be made by investment in the computer system which would increase the number of days per week on which properties could be let.
- In cases of wilful damage, there were problems around recollection of debts. Where tenants remained in the Borough, collection rates stood at over 50%. The definition of wilful damage extended to all matters which were the tenants' responsibility; even in cases of accidents, this fell into the category. A project on rechargeable repairs was currently being undertaken, with funds being reclaimed as applicable.
- SBC did not have the power to charge a damage deposit prior to a tenant taking on property.
- The definition of 'decent homes' included properties where any work required did not involve a structural aspect; long term voids needed these more substantial repairs.

Resolved: that the Panel approved the progress made in relation to major and minor housing repairs.

42. Review of allocation scheme 2013 - 18

The Localism Act had allowed SBC to introduce its own policy on allocations, which had started in January 2014. The housing service had agreed to present a review on any unintended consequences raised by this new policy, and how they would be resolved. In summary, the waiting list had declined from approximately 7,900 to 1,600. However, some of these may have been on the original list erroneously, as 2,800 had not replied to SBC correspondence with 500 letters returned as the addressee was not registered at the property. Equally, others had moved outside of Slough, leaving only 1,600 applicants under the new system. For the first 10 months of the new system, new applications were kept separate.

The new policy had reduced the bureaucracy involved and allowed greater focus to be placed on applicants. However, the following amendments were proposed to the policy:

- 1) The requirement for applicants to be in full time employment to be amended as follows: single applicants to have an average of 16 hours work per week, and joint applicants 24 hours.
- 2) The policy on those in training or undertaking volunteer work affected a low number of applicants. However, it would now be tightened to include those whose training or volunteering reflected the hours mentioned in the above point, and where training led to a recognised qualification. Similarly, volunteers would need to be undertaking their work on a formal basis accredited by the Slough Council for Voluntary Services.
- 3) Property owners were now to be excluded from making applications.
- 4) Care leavers would be assisted in finding property in the private rented sector and the definition of those eligible for SBC property would be tightened.
- 5) New housing would be offered to applicants who were eligible under the criteria listed in the report (page 67, section 6.10).

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- An equality impact assessment (EIA) had been undertaken in the formulation of the new policy. The policy had also been reviewed by a QC specialising in the area, and had also subsequently been appraised in light of recent cases involving London authorities.
- SBC held equality and diversity information on the applicants on the waiting list. This could be shared with members.
- Subletting was prohibited, and SBC checked that residents were the original applicants. Passports were verified, with Border Agency technology used in the process. In addition, tenant verification checks were undertaken and this would be continued under any new contract.
- In cases where a tenant was evicted by their landlord under Section 21, the case would need to progress through the relevant legal process. Within 28 days of the eviction itself, the tenant would then be put through a triage process by MyCouncil. If the eviction was not due

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to any action on the part of the tenant, temporary accommodation would be found and then the person(s) concerned would be placed on the waiting list as suitable according to the applicable criteria.

- Local media and SBC channels would be used to publicise new properties.
- Money raised by SBC under the Right to Buy scheme would be reinvested in housing stock. To ensure that this did not suffer from a high level of attrition, there would be no discount on new properties in the first 10 years of their existence.
- Care leavers also had some responsibility to engage with the system. Since 2013 housing and children's services had a joint protocol on resolving care leavers' accommodation, which they undertook simultaneously.
- Satisfactory conditions were prescribed by law, and included matters such as levels of crowding, health and heating. Details of this could be provided to members.
- The proposed changes to the policy, if accepted, would take effect at the end of January 2015.
- Geographic proximity had been included in the criteria for assessing applicants. However, it was accepted that this may not have the importance of some of the other criteria; making this a more sophisticated criteria would be investigated by the housing team.

Resolved:

- 1) That the Panel recommend the proposed amendments to the policy in paragraphs 6.3 to 6.8, subject to the comments above.
- 2) That the issue of vulnerable residents be brought to the Panel on 30th March 2015.

43. Garage management

The item on garages was deferred until 30th March 2015.

44. Service charge billing - Florries law

The information in the report was noted. At this stage, further discussion on an agenda item was not requested by the Panel.

45. Forward Work Programme

After discussion, the Panel made the following decisions regarding their future work:

Resolved:

- 1) That the item on garages be taken on 30th March 2015.
- 2) That updates on the following areas of housing be taken on 30th March 2015:
 - Rehousing of residents affected by new housing benefits rules;

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- Incentives to encourage residents to move; and
- Vulnerable residents.

46. Attendance record

The attendance record was noted.

47. Date of Next Meeting - 26th February 2015

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 9.16 pm)