

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Monday, 30th March, 2015.

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

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillor Strutton

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Chahal, Shah and Sidhu

PART 1

57. Declarations of Interest

Cllr Malik declared her interest as a tenant in a property owned by Slough Borough Council (SBC).

58. Minutes of the last meeting held on 26th February 2015

The minutes of the meeting on 26th February 2015 were approved as a correct record.

As a matter arising from the minutes, it was agreed that the KPIs regarding tenants' and leaseholders' satisfaction would be circulated to members.

Resolved: that the KPIs regarding tenants' and leaseholders' satisfaction be circulated.

59. Member Questions

No written questions were submitted prior to the meeting.

60. A4 Brands Hill

The Panel had made enquiries regarding the safety audit recommendations and their rejection by SBC; the Panel wished to record their dissatisfaction that some central issues had not been addressed in the papers provided. In a wider context, members felt that the process had been disorganised with Councillors not being sufficiently informed on progress. The roundabout near the motorway was also a concern and required as much consideration as other matters across Slough. Under the current arrangements, buses stopping caused congestion which was a problem given the route's role as a link between Heathrow and Slough. The situation was causing safety concerns, and the Panel was also disappointed that no officers had been present to discuss the matter.

The Panel raised the following matters in discussion:

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- There had been a previous undertaking that bus lay-bys would only be affected in areas with a speed limit of 30mph. However, this was a 40mph zone. The Panel also questioned whether a previous statement (that changes to bus lay-bys would not have an impact on safety) still applied given these alterations.
- As a three lane highway, the middle lane was shared by traffic; this increased the potential for a major road incident.
- There had been a statement that the changes were made to ensure that buses' punctuality was not affected. However, more information would be required if this impact was to be verified.

Resolved:

- 1) That the Panel request information on accidents which cause damage to cars (rather than statistics which only reflect injuries to people).
- 2) That officers be required to attend the next meeting of the Panel on 29th June 2015 to discuss the issue.

61. Garage management

Since the last report to the Panel in January 2015, occupancy rates had increased from 37.4% to 38.5%, which had also helped reduce the number of active applications from 185 to 144. All of these active applications had been reviewed and contacted in the last month. In addition 33 inspections had been completed since January 2015; of these, 12 had no potential for development, 1 site was rated as 'amber (rights of way would be required for development), 15 sites had potential for development and 5 were pending.

Consultation with customers had been undertaken, with Coniston Crescent having received 55 responses. Of these 14 stated that they would pay and 41 that they would not. On a supplementary question, 10 indicated that they would pay for guaranteed parking and 38 would not. At Eden Close the consultation would continue until 3rd April 2015, with initial indications pointing towards the adoption of open parking.

A pilot project was also underway with larger garages having been placed on 3 sites; these had a 68% occupancy rate. Whilst the rent for these facilities was higher, it appeared that full occupancy in areas of higher demand was possible for these garages.

The Winborough site had experienced a temporary interruption to work. This had been caused by the main contractor entering receivership and would be resolved.

The Panel made the following points in discussion:

- The number of applicants on the waiting list had been caused by several factors. Of these the requests for very specific sites was a major issue, meaning that applicants had to wait for vacancies to arise. Inspections of garages could be prioritised on the basis of this although

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this was not a perfect solution; individual cases could be investigated if reported to SBC.

- The evaluation process investigated the cost of building new garages, providing a tarmac area which was open to all residents and parking bays with barriers. The benefits of building garages which could then be paid for through rents of £16 or £12 per week (depending on size) had become apparent; whilst tarmacking was the cheapest option in terms of initial outlay it offered no return on income. However, the policy would be evaluated and applied on a case by case basis and would also balance the payments made by tenants with the expenditure of SBC in any work.
- Garages could be used for storage but not as business premises. Agreements also specified that tenants could not store dangerous materials in garages. Inspections of this policy were based on complaints; it was not feasible to inspect all garages, given the requirement that tenants would be in attendance and open the garage.
- Empty garages attracted anti-social behaviour, fly tipping and other undesirable activity. The installation of gates had not taken place; cases could be investigated.
- SBC had been successful in applying for part funding on lighting for garages. These facilities would be placed in sites which were to be retained on a long term basis by SBC. In terms of identifying sites with long term potential, the size and their ability to house larger modern cars was a major factor.
- The contract currently held by Interserve would be reproced in 2017. The issues relating to garages could be examined as part of the new arrangements; asset intelligence would help in this process. In addition sites running at a loss could also be identified during this.
- The potential for selling off garage roofs to be used as space for solar panels had been investigated. A major obstacle was the fact that the Government would only fund if the tariff was given to tenants rather than SBC (who would be required to make the investment). However, whilst this was not currently viable it was not permanently ruled out.
- Asbestos cement was safe until damaged; SBC addressed any major damage immediately, with minor cases evaluated on needs.
- An evaluation of garages across the Borough would be completed in the summer; the Panel could decide to receive a report on this once in the new Municipal Year it had seen the results.

Resolved: that the results of the evaluation of garages across Slough be circulated to members once completed.

62. Review of allocation scheme 2013 - 18

The report presented to the Panel followed on from the discussions in January 2015, with particular reference to the Spare Room Subsidy. 318 tenants were affected by the subsidy; of these 144 were in receipt of discretionary housing payments. SBC had been working with tenants to ensure that debt was avoided. However, this position would require modification in the long term.

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Those who received the payments had little incentive to move at present, but a 45% reduction in Government funding was due to be enacted in the future.

At present there was no evidence that the level of debt amongst SBC tenants had increased. The last year had seen a decrease in rent arrears from £1.3 million to £920,000, with 37 evictions from a total of 6,300. SBC had also appointed a Housing Arrears Officer to work alongside tenants, and had helped to contribute to a rent collection rate of 98.4%.

A change in rent policy had been made. At present some new build housing was more expensive than larger old properties which could present problems in terms of downsizing and increase the likelihood of tenants resisting proposed moves. As a result, a tenants' incentive scheme had been launched, with three levels of standards (gold, silver and bronze) offered to tenants to offer incentives to move.

The Panel made the following points in discussion:

- The cash incentive for tenants had stood at £1,000 for a considerable period of time. It was in line with similar incentives offered by other authorities, although a cost / benefit analysis could be made and then reported back to the Panel. SBC had a budget of £50,000 which was an absolute limit; 19 tenants received incentive payments, although some were relinquishing more than 1 bedroom.
- SBC held a housing stock of 6,000 properties, of which 4,000 had one bedroom.
- Families with children at university were in a position where the child was classified as habitually resident but then became non-dependent.
- Rent arrears were presently being reduced; in the future, Universal Credit could be a factor, with SBC to appoint a strategic lead to assist with registering.
- Discretionary housing payments did not just apply to the Spare Room Subsidy; the expenditure (£400,000) had reduced in the last year.
- Applicants for the incentive scheme would be rejected if their arrears were in excess of £1,000. This had not yet happened.
- Elderly residents were in a more complex position given a number of factors (e.g. family connections to the property in question, tenancy arrangements).

Resolved:

- a) That the cost / benefit analysis of the cash incentive for tenants be undertaken.
- b) That the results of this analysis be circulated to members.

63. Sub-letting fraud amnesty - to follow

This item was deferred to the next meeting of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel.

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64. Forward work programme

The work programme was noted.

Resolved: that an item on parking wardens and their geographical spread be placed on the future work programme.

65. Attendance record

The attendance record was noted.

66. Date of Next Meeting - 29th June 2015

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.45 pm and closed at 8.28 pm)