

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Wednesday, 28th October, 2015.

Present:- Councillors Plenty (Chair), Morris (Vice-Chair), Dar, Davis, N Holledge, Mansoor, Sohal and Wright

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Brooker and Parmar

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Malik

PART 1

23. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Morris declared his interest as a tenant in Slough Borough Council (SBC) property. Cllr Wright declared her interest as her spouse is the tenant of an SBC allotment.

24. Minutes of the last meeting held on 3rd September 2015

The Panel received an update regarding the A4 Brands Hill and Real Time Passenger Information items which had been referred to Cabinet. The Panel's views on the A4 at Brands Hill had been noted, with the Cabinet satisfied that the proper measures had been taken by SBC. However, the Cabinet had asked for progress made on outstanding planned work, and investigations into further safety measures, to return to the Panel in six months.

Resolved:

- 1) That the Panel receive a report for information on all outstanding planned works such as the loading ban, and investigations into further measures such as speed reductions, road markings and / or temporary signage, on 29th March 2016. This report will also include statistics on accidents. This will then be discussed with an officer at the first meeting in 2016 / 17.
- 2) That the minutes of the meeting held on 3rd September 2015 be approved as an accurate record.

25. Member Questions

No questions were submitted prior to the meeting.

(Cllr Mansoor joined the meeting).

26. Loft Insulation

Loft insulation was a high priority in efforts to improve energy efficiency. Previously, SBC had received a grant but funding had changed in 2015 leading to an alteration in arrangements. SBC had discussed the situation with British Gas, who did not generally offer the service; however, an

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel - 28.10.15

exception was being made in Slough, although a lack of publicity had led to extremely low take-up rates. SBC had also previously signposted residents towards Mark Insulations, but this company had entered liquidation in October 2015.

SBC had also moved its focus of attention from loft insulation to external wall insulation, with roofing and heating programs also supporting energy efficiency efforts. Over 80% of SBC properties had benefitted from insulation, with £50,000 per annum set aside for future work. Voids are inspected, with the level of insulation measured; if none was in place then it would be fitted, if 150mm or more was fitted this would be assessed and the appropriate action decided.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- For tenants to receive the service from British Gas, SBC would have to notify British Gas initially who would then notify the tenant (with SBC granting authority for the work). This accounted for the very low take-up rate.
- The next phase of insulation work would be driven by an assessment of housing stock. The current standard for insulation was 300mm, meaning that significant levels of work may be required to upgrade SBC's properties as 150mm had previously been the accepted level. An internal contractor would be used to complete any identified work given Mark Insulations' recent liquidation; however, external walls would be the focus as this attracts funding.
- The stock condition survey would commence in January 2016, with work on its findings enacted from 2017 onwards. However, tenants could contact SBC or members could raise instances identified in casework in the interim period; these cases would receive more immediate attention.

(Cllr Sohal joined the meeting).

- Properties with levels of insulation deemed inadequate at the present time often had been subject to work undertaken at times when standards were different. The standard had been 50mm, 100mm and 150mm at different times; whilst 80% of properties were at the present 300mm standard, many of the remaining 20% were a legacy of these previous guidelines. SBC was unaware of any properties with no insulation at all, although SBC was aware that its records were not as robust as was desirable (hence the commissioning of the survey for 2016).
- Properties needed to meet certain criteria to attract funding. Tenants also had the right to refuse to have work done on their property.
- Members raised concerns that the overall housing strategy lacked innovation in terms of using solar power, ground heating pumps or similar technology. SBC would look at these matters, although there were possible legal challenges or impediments to the installation of solar panels and other equipment. However, the possibility of using

network heating (including power generated by the crematorium) was being investigated.

- SBC could not attract funding for loft insulation as a social tenant. SBC did have additional funding for vulnerable tenants.
- Tenants who had been on Mark Insulations' waiting list would be referred to alternative suppliers. Those who required cavity wall insulation should receive this free from utility companies.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

27. Violence Multi-Agency Panel

The Violence Multi-Agency Panel (VMAP) had been running for 4 years and was a joint initiative with Luton; this was the first formal evaluation. The main aim of the project was to decide how violence could be handled by agencies working together, and where work should be targeted to meet local needs. Chalvey and Upton wards had been selected in Slough for the year-long pilot, with 26 meetings held on a fortnightly basis to discuss a total of 298 individuals. The pilot had identified that 42% of violence cases were linked to domestic abuse, and the evidence also supported the theory that victims and perpetrators were often interchangeable.

The main positive impact established during the pilot was that the period between offences had increased; however, reoffending rates had not been reduced significantly. However, it was possible that a longer pilot could have seen an impact on reoffending, and partner organisations involved in VMAP had agreed that the efforts should continue. In addition, it should be extended across all wards in Slough. VMAP would continue to investigate low-medium level violence where there had been 2-3 recurrences in the last 3 months; the aim was to become involved early and reduce the impact of offences. A full evaluation into VMAP would be completed in early 2016.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- Chalvey and Upton wards had been selected on the basis of 2 years of research.
- Men were also victims of domestic abuse, with the recent AGM having reflected a rise in reported cases. Alcohol was also often identified as a factor in cases investigated.
- Partner organisations did not perceive VMAP as an increase in their workload, but rather an effective means of sharing information and improving case management.
- The pilot had looked at the pattern of offending in the previous 3 months, and the resulting pattern after 3 months of intervention. It was a Police Foundation project, so Police data had been used.
- VMAP were confident that quantifiable results would be visible over a longer period. The pilot did not investigate the impact on resources of the reduction in demand for services (i.e. longer gaps between reoffending); this may have been a quantifiable result which had already arisen from the pilot.

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel - 28.10.15

- The funding had been acquired from a Government grant to the police service which had been agreed several years ago.
- The percentage of violent cases which were domestic was fairly equal to national averages. Violence in Slough was increasing, but a) this was a national trend b) reporting had changed and c) the rise was more pronounced in Oxford and Reading.
- Female on male violence was still taboo in many cases, and efforts needed to be made to encourage victims to bring cases forward. The progress being made on male on female violence was quicker, and challenge to social attitudes towards cases where men were the victims was required.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

28. Allotment Services Update

The service was being subsidised by SBC, with an independent inspection being undertaken to ascertain the exact position of the service. SBC officers were working with the Slough Allotment Federation to improve provision; the report addressed concerns raised by the Panel and work undertaken on areas of concern.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- Members were concerned by the continued existence of a waiting list whilst 156 plots remained vacant. SBC did not want to issue tenancy agreements which may have to be renewed or dropped in January 2016, and an effort on allocating these plots would be made in the new year. In the 4 weeks before the meeting, 6 offers had been made on plots at Westpoint and the capacity of the team making offers was 0.5 full time equivalent. There was a one month period in which agreements not renewed would be given a chance to pay; on 1st February 2016, those not paying would be terminated and the position should be improved more quickly. Work was also being undertaken with the Slough Allotment Federation to allocate vacant plots.
- Spencer Road had 11 plots, all of which were vacant. Due to the significant legacy issues inherited, this site had not been prioritised as larger allotments (e.g. The Myrke, Cherry Orchard) were targeted with SBC's limited resources. However, as new systems were implemented to replace the previous, outdated paper-based records such matters would be resolved. The completed business plan would outline the actions to be taken on such cases.
- At present, SBC was inspecting allotments and had brought in the Association of Public Sector Excellence to examine a range of issues. Allotments which were not allocated as 'vacant' but were being left untended were being identified and processes put in place to evict tenants who were not caring for their allotment. However, this process could be legalistic and lengthy, although SBC were hoping to be in a significantly improved position regarding allotment management by early 2016.

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel - 28.10.15

- An issue which often occurred with uncultivated plots was that owners had to be given one month's notice to correct the situation. There had been several cases where the corrections would be made, then cultivation would again cease, leading to a drawn-out cycle of request, action and inaction. The new management system being devised at the present time would help tighten processes and improve enforcement.
- The Smart Motorway Scheme could have an impact on Westpoint and The Myrke. However, at present the timing, duration and nature of the impact was not clear, although SBC estimated that 5 plots could be subject to temporary effects. Consultation was being undertaken and any compensation would be calculated by the District Evaluator; however, SBC had to remain neutral whilst the matter was unresolved.
- SBC was looking to reduce or end subsidies as part of the 5 Year Plan. SBC was not obliged to provide allotments to non-Slough residents, although did allow those who had been resident but moved to neighbouring authorities to retain plots. However, those outside the Borough were not allowed to apply for new allotments. The new system would make verification of this easier (e.g. matching electronic records with Council Tax payment data).
- Independent baseline data would be used to construct the information on allotments and organise conversations with tenants where a lack of cultivation had become a concern. The previous paper records had been less effective in managing such issues, and SBC's improved reputation with the Slough Allotment Federation and site associations should allow for increased ownership of the matter by SBC in the near future.
- Tenancies were, by law, 1 year agreements so the option of leaving a plot fallow for a year did not exist.
- The waste collection service had been offered to improve the condition of facilities; it was not an obligation for SBC. However, green waste had often been allowed to pile up making the service more costly, whilst household waste had been brought on site in an abuse of the system. Future plans would stress affordability or options such as composting at Ragstone Road, but changes in behaviour and self-policing would be required.
- Rents would be reviewed; however, legislation limited SBC's ability to raise rents by significant amounts. Water costs were a large element in the cost of allotment provision, and would be included in a rent review (as would charging regimes in neighbouring authorities). However, in addition notice had to be given when raising rents, meaning that increased income would take some time to become effective.
- Plots affected by high levels of weeds were included in the review, but a simple, cost-effective solution was not easy. Options such as offering such plots rent-free to new tenants would be assessed. Ploughing could also be offered as a paid service if the review saw benefits.

Resolved: that the report be noted.

29. Waste and Environment: Services Scorecard

This was the latest element of the Waste Strategy to be presented to the Panel, as part of the recommissioning of the Environmental Services Contract. The scorecard covered waste management, waste collection and street cleansing, with governance and transparency to be increased from the previous arrangements. The data on the scorecard would, if accepted, be published on a quarterly basis.

A key performance indicator (KPI) on returning bins to property curtilage had been included as the non-replacement of bins had been raised by the Panel previously. In addition, waste per person was included; should this continue to increase, so the budget would need revision. There would also be increased scrutiny of complaints and telephone calls, allowing the perception of the service to be reported as well as the statistics on the service itself.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- The Panel wished to receive the scorecard, but would not want it as a standing item on agendas. The approach to be taken would be that members would then raise concerns as they occurred.
- Local performance on waste management presented a mixed picture; whilst Slough was in the top quartile on waste sent to landfill, it was in the bottom quartile on recycling. As a result, the Panel requested that a column be added demonstrating Slough's performance in comparison with similar local authorities.
- The definition of 'curtilage' may need tightening in a code of conduct, given local residents' complaints that bins had been placed in the middle of driveways or similar inconvenient places. Whilst meeting the technical definition of curtilage, it would not stop complaints; other matters such as 'bin clustering' (the placement of bins in areas not adjacent to the property in question) would see joint work with local residents to clarify messages and required practices from all parties.
- Contaminated bins were not collected, and a sticker would be placed on them. Often such bins would also be unlabelled, leading to Amey having to guess whose bin this was; it was a future aspiration for the labelling of bins to become universal.
- At present, it was unclear if the dedicated line for bulky waste collection would remain in place or become part of arvato's service provision.

Resolved:

- 1) That a column be added to the scorecard showing Slough's performance against comparator authorities.
- 2) That the Panel would receive the scorecard on a quarterly basis, outside of agenda papers, once they were compiled.
- 3) That the item on the Environmental Services Contract be moved forward to 6th January 2016.

30. Housing - Performance Management and Reporting

Resolved:

- 1) That the 10 KPIs identified as the most important be published on the SBC website on a monthly basis.
- 2) That 50 KPIs be included in agenda papers for the Panel on a six monthly basis for information.

31. Civil Enforcement Officer Beat Coverage

Members requested that the item be discussed with an officer present on 6th January 2016. To assist with the compilation of the report to inform the debate, members were asked to submit any questions, information or images they had which highlighted their concerns.

Resolved: That an item on traffic wardens across the SBC area be added to the agenda for 6th January 2016.

32. Forward Work Programme

Resolved: That, in addition to the agenda changes noted in previous minutes;

- 1) A report on the contract for taxis for school transport for information be added to the agenda for 6th January 2016.
- 2) The items on disabled parking policy and yellow line parking be added to the agenda for 6th January 2016.

33. Attendance Record

Resolved: That the attendance record be noted.

34. Date of Next Meeting - 6th January 2016

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.32 pm and closed at 9.11 pm)