

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Tuesday, 4th April, 2017.

Present:- Councillors Plenty (Chair), Anderson, Davis, N Holledge, Rana, Rasib (until 7.28pm) and Swindlehurst

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Wright

PART 1

52. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were given in relation to the agenda items.

53. Minutes of the last meeting held on 2nd March 2017

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 2nd March 2017 be approved as an accurate record.

54. Action Progress Report

Resolved: That the update on the progress made on actions be noted.

55. Member Questions

The answers received to the members' questions were circulated to the Panel.

Regarding Vehicle Activated Signs (VASs), members noted that only 2 roads were covered at the present time (4 signs being employed, 2 at each of this sites covering both directions of travel). In addition, was the proximity of the lights in Langley to temporary traffic lights likely to ensure that the best use of these facilities was being made? Members sought clarification on the level of priority given to VASs as a form of traffic calming, especially given their cost and popularity in comparison with measures such as speed bumps. As a result, the Panel requested an agenda item on the issue for its next meeting.

On CCTV, members noted that there was currently no waiting list for their deployment. In addition, it was unclear as to whether the units at Wentworth Flats (which had been demolished) were capable of being redeployed or obsolete. Members also requested precise locations for the 3 minicams listed in the response. An agenda item on this was requested for the autumn.

Resolved:

1. That an agenda item on Vehicle Activated Signs be added to the agenda for 26th June 2017.
2. That an agenda item on CCTV be added to the agenda for 7th September 2017.

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56. Football Pitch Hire - Verbal Update

The last meeting had raised questions regarding the impact of the recent rise in the cost of hiring pitches, and whether the teams who had stopped hiring pitches were from Slough or outside the Borough. Before the rise in 2015, 28 teams had taken out pitches for the football season; this fell to 17 in 2015 – 16 and 14 in 2016 – 17.

Slough Borough Council (SBC) conceded that this had not been a consultative process; it had now compiled a redevelopment plan for football in Slough. As part of this, SBC officers would be hosting a meeting with the Football League and Chairs of football clubs in April 2017. This would be part of a comprehensive relationship building process. SBC was also committed to ensuring that youth players progressed into the adult game more regularly, that mini football was more available and that participation amongst girls and women increased. The development of coaches and volunteers would be imperative in securing this progress.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- SBC's prices were now in line with neighbouring authorities. Prior to 2015, the rent charges had been significantly cheaper than other authorities.
- The clubs which had left had chosen to do so for 2 main reasons; the price rise and the lack of working relationship with SBC. It was intended that numbers of clubs hiring pitches for the season would rise as relationships were re-established. Local clubs would be prioritised.
- There would be a clamp down on teams using SBC's facilities without registering or paying. This would be included in the forthcoming dialogue with local football clubs.
- The service had lacked ownership; this was due to the shared responsibilities of Parks, Leisure and Corporate Landlord for the service. This had been clarified prior to the forthcoming dialogue.
- Current facilities could be employed more in some cases. This would be included in some elements of the dialogue (e.g. should mini football be subject to low pricing to generate interest).
- SBC would be approaching schools and colleges as part of communicating its message on football.

(At this point, Cllr Rasib left)

Resolved: That the update be noted.

57. Housing Revenue Account Business Plan 2017 - 47

The previous report provided to the Panel (3rd November 2016) had been given in the context of significant areas which required clarification. Whilst some of these had now become apparent, some uncertainties remained. These were as follows:

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- The payment of the capital sum – this may require the sale of higher value voids. If so, questions such as the number of these sales required would have to be resolved.
- The situation after 2020 – at present, the rents for 2016 – 17 and the next 4 years would have to go down, but after this date predictions were based on hypothetical calculations. In addition, whether rent policy would be a blanket national policy, or an area where rents were linked to the amount of building work being undertaken by the local authority, was still undecided.

As a result, the document would continue to be amended as these matters were resolved. However, some of the uncertainties included in the November report had been resolved:

- Pay To Stay legislation had been abandoned.
- The headline findings of the stock condition survey were now known. These largely correlated with predictions.
- The affordable housing policy had been codified and would be the subject of a workshop for members in April 2017.
- The options appraisal had been presented to Cabinet on 20th March 2017. This was a 20 year overview.

The stock condition survey would now be used to predict which properties were likely to survive for 20 years and which would need replacement in that time. SBC would also be looking at the work of other local authorities and using the research to help shape policy. The Treasury Management Strategy would also be revisited; were present borrowing levels correct, could more be borrowed to fund new construction work? This would be reported on in December 2017.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- The borrowing gap is fixed; it is not linked to inflation or house values. It had remained at the same level since 2012.
- The current climate was difficult for local authorities. The Government's long term proposals were unclear, with the Housing Benefit Bill a significant element of this uncertainty. Whilst Housing Associations may be in a relatively good position to withstand the rent policy, local authorities may find that their willingness to build could be limited by this.
- SBC had predicted lower income from garages and shops on the basis of some assumptions. With garages to become parking bays on the basis of their outdated sizes, this would have a negative impact on income. Meanwhile, it was predicted that continued trends in shopping (e.g. continued growth in online commerce) would impact on neighbourhood shops in a similar fashion to town centres.
- The issue of requesting residents to downsize remained; around 30% of SBC's housing stock was underemployed. The option of creating flats which were of sufficient quality to act as an incentive to move was

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open, but not one which could be committed to at present. Should such an option be pursued, SBC would also need to conduct conversations on downsizing with tenants earlier so that the situation could be managed in advance.

- The Development Programme for housing was looking to create a mixture of housing stock; this would bear in mind issues of supply and demand. Options appraisal would look at existing sites; however, financing remained a major issue and may require innovation.
- The Housing Revenue Account would be considered when designing building work on new sites such as the recently acquired former Thames Valley University land.
- Right to Buy sites would continue to leave SBC's housing stock. In addition, the borrowing cap would remain, whilst income generation would be generated through cross subsidy or rents. These constraints would be central in calculating the level of new building; however, for affordable housing, SBC may well have to consider options beyond the Housing Revenue Account.
- In terms of local authorities offering inspiration to SBC, the Newham system was proving to be particularly influential.

Resolved:

1. That the Panel endorse innovative measures be taken to encourage downsizing.
2. That the Panel endorse a greater emphasis on solving the issue of limited temporary accommodation.
3. That the Panel support the creation of a ring fenced resource to deliver an increased supply of stock for housing and regeneration.

58. Overview of Homelessness in the Borough

The Panel received a presentation on the role of SBC in alleviating homelessness and the current local situation. Subsequent to the presentation, the Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- The Localism Act 2011 required SBC to make payments for 24 months for the homeless to offer support. As this was a relatively new duty, the outcomes for recipients of this money was not yet clear; however, it was clear that SBC needed to ensure that such tenants were allowed to move on and improve their situation.
- There were a small number of vulnerable cases. SBC would continue to try and support them, but some of these could prove very hard to help. This could include people from the European Economic Area, but such instances could be hard to detect.
- Should an applicant for support not pass the test, SBC would still offer advice and support. They may also be referred to other relevant agencies (e.g. YMCA); if appropriate, SBC may even pay the rent deposit.
- The site on Langley High Street was now available to SBC. Staff would also be looking to prevent cases falling into problems or arrears through measures such as talking to landlords.

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- It was apparent that some London boroughs were referring cases to landlords in Slough. Should this take place, SBC should be informed although it appeared the case that this was not always respected. SBC could not just move these cases to other areas; in addition, after 6 months such cases could argue that they had created a local connection with Slough and should remain here permanently.
- It was unavoidable that those in temporary accommodation would be subject to repeated moves. Emergency accommodation would be used as a short term solution as decisions on cases were awaited.
- SBC had to manage the situation, as it neither controlled the relevant housing stock nor acted as ultimate arbiter in homelessness cases.
- No local authority in the South East of England had the matter entirely under control. However, the number of cases using bed and breakfast accommodation was often quoted as a key indicator on the level of control the local authority had. The fact that SBC had recently reduced this to zero indicated SBC was in one of the better positions regionally.
- Converting the service into one which predicted and intercepted problems rather than reacted to situations was a key aim. Whilst this would increase the upfront costs, it would reduce the long term expenditure.
- Homelessness was increasing as prices in the local housing market rose.

Resolved:

1. That the Cabinet lobby for the Local Housing Allowance in Slough to be adjusted to reflect its similarity with London Boroughs.
2. That the Cabinet write to London Boroughs to reinforce the need for them to fulfil their obligations towards homeless people for whom they are responsible.
3. That children in bed and breakfast be reported to the Panel as a lead indicator.
4. That future changes in allocations policy should only be aimed at reducing homelessness.

59. Development Initiative Slough Housing - Verbal Update

The Initiative (DISH) had been set up in the 20th century to develop homes; 57 such residences existed within it at present. These homes were provided at social housing rents and were also not subject to Right to Buy legislation. Should no action be taken, the homes would revert to the Housing Revenue Account in 2018.

SBC had received legal advice on the options. There were 3 possible choices:

- Allow them to revert to the Housing Revenue Account – at which point, they would be subject to Right to Buy.
- Extend the existence of DISH – but the founding articles of the company worked against this.

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- Put the properties into a different scheme – these properties were low debt and high value. As a result, they could be put into a different vehicle and used as security to assist with funding.

The Newham system (mentioned in minute 57) had been funded using the mechanism suggested in the last of these options. SBC was hoping to have its formal options clarified in the summer of 2017.

Resolved: That an update on the matter be taken on 7th September 2017.

60. Yellow Box Junctions

Resolved: That the report be noted.

61. Attendance Record

Resolved: That the attendance record be noted.

62. Date of Next Meeting - 26th June 2017

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 9.33 pm)