

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Thursday, 7th September, 2017.

Present:- Councillors Plenty (Chair), Kelly (Vice-Chair), Anderson, Davis, N Holledge, Rasib, Swindlehurst and Wright (until 9.40pm)

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Nazir and Strutton

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Mann

PART 1

14. Declarations of Interest

Cllr N Holledge declared her ownership of a garage rented from Slough Borough Council (SBC).

15. Minutes of the last meeting held on 26th June 2017

The Panel requested that minute 6 be amended to include reference to calls for fire safety measures to be provided in multiple languages to residents.

Resolved: That, with the above caveat, the minutes of the meeting held on 26th June 2017 be approved as a correct record.

16. Action Progress Report

Members were informed that the following recommendations had been amended by Cabinet as follows:

Minute 58: That the Cabinet lobby for the Local Housing Allowance in Slough to be adjusted to reflect its similarity with London Boroughs.

Cabinet amended this to:

The Council include the issue raised about Local Housing Allowance in a wider representation to Ministers about greater financial recognition for the scale of the homelessness problems facing Slough.

Minute 58: 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.

Cabinet amended this to:

That the suggestion of the Panel be taken into account as part of the consideration of the best approach in relation to London Boroughs and other

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel - 07.09.17

Local Authorities which were placing households in Slough in view of the growing demands this was placing on key services in the Borough.

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

17. Member Questions

Members raised questions regarding the response on roadside information signs. In particular, the issues of their non-detection by Highway Inspectors and their remaining in place long after the information on the sign was relevant were raised.

Resolved: That the Panel receive detailed information regarding roadside signs.

18. Review of Housing Allocations Scheme 2013-18

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- The number of homeless households in Slough was rising; the number of households in temporary accommodation had stood at 315 in early 2017 and was now approximately 350. An issue had emerged regarding those currently in band C (as explained in page 81 of the agenda papers), whose priority level had led to some being in temporary accommodation for 2 years or similar. As a result, such households were being moved to band B.
- SBC was bound by legislation in terms of its policies. Whilst it may be receiving some cases from London's Boroughs, it had to comply with law.
- The housing register was hard to manage given the rising demand for social housing. By the end of 2017, it was estimated that approximately 3,000 households would be on the register. Theme 4 of the Housing Strategy (overseen by Overview and Scrutiny Committee) was focused on homelessness; however, no easy solutions were promised given the problems faced by all Councils in the region.
- Whilst the 'Community Contribution' scheme was being ended, the ethos of helping hard working, poorly paid households would remain in the allocations scheme. As a result, those currently in this scheme would be allocated to band B, as would those who were homeless and had lived in the Borough for over 5 years.
- Households in band C could be moved into the private rented sector; however, the reality of the situation did not always make the decision so clear cut.
- The policy for key workers had not yet been finalised. At present, the Housing Team were talking to social services and education to explore possible options. However, these people were not likely to be resettled in social housing but rather through the James Elliman Company or similar bodies. 5 year contracts for newly qualified teachers taking

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel - 07.09.17

housing could also help ensure that SBC housing stock was not being used to house key workers who worked outside the Borough.

- The reduction in offers from 2 to 1 had been made to limit the number of refusals; there was evidence that some offers had been declined solely because the applicant was in a position to do so. Applicants would still be able to specify their criteria for new housing prior to the offer being made, and vulnerable people could specify geographical parameters to ensure they remained close to key individuals. Applicants also had the right to appeal any offers they refused.
- However, members were keen to stress that a wide range of issues be borne in mind if only 1 offer was to be made (e.g. schooling arrangements).
- The 1 offer would be the only offer given until 24 months had expired; at this point, a new offer could be made.
- SBC was working with landlords to keep rents at social, rather than market, rates.
- 55 3 bed houses had been allocated in 2016 – 17, and a similar figure was anticipated for 2017 – 18. However, the level of under supply in Slough was now similar to many London Boroughs, with some applicants being on the waiting list for 3 – 5 years.
- At any given time, approximately 5% of properties would be vacant whilst waiting for repair. This corresponded to 50 such vacancies at present.
- At present, the supply was providing a preponderance of 1 bed houses for the elderly, compared to the local demand for 2 – 3 bed accommodation for families.
- The Panel welcomed the implementation of technical, relevant and appropriate responses to the local situation. However, there were questions as to the proposals for key workers. This group wanted a financial solution as opposed to being offered property on the register; did this mean that a mortgage-based offer was more appropriate?
- In addition, the Panel asked if fewer properties were being allocated than had been the case previously. The figure had been 200 per year, but estimates on future performance indicated less than this.
- Members of the Panel would receive numbers of properties which were subject to 'Right to Buy' and had therefore been lost to SBC.
- James Elliman Housing had recently purchased 6 new homes. It was currently proposed that these would house key workers after the completion of a discussion paper.
- SBC would be hosting a Landlords Forum on 20th September. This would be a crucial event for the process of building relationships with local property owners.
- SBC had the target of creating 50 private lets; incentives would be created to assist in this.
- The decanting of Tower and Ashbourne Houses had also led to lower numbers of available housing stock.
- The Housing Allocations Scheme was designed to a) provide confidence in the system and b) ensure SBC was not seen as an easy authority for other Councils to refer their problem cases to. However, it

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel - 07.09.17

should be noted that accusations of moving problem cases around and allegations of authorities being a 'soft touch' were notoriously rife. All Councils were under significant pressure in terms of matching supply to demand, and all were obliged to operate within the parameters of the law. Given that applicants would see other cases receive housing whilst theirs did not, such sentiments were almost inevitable. In addition, Slough had a high level of pressure on its available land, making the creation of innovative solutions vital.

- SBC had taken advice on its policy, which operated by high standards; for example, the Government advised that residents should have 2 years' occupancy in an area before entering the register, whilst SBC enforced 5 years. However, SBC had also lowered other criteria (e.g. to be classified 'full time workers', single people had to be in 16 hours of employment per week and couples 24 hours between them). In addition, 6 months of continuous employment was now considered being in permanent work.
- SBC had a downsizing scheme but this needed review. Incentives may need to be created, whilst SBC also had the power to extract residents if required.
- For owner occupiers over the age of 60, rehousing could be an option whilst possible solutions involving leasing could also be investigated.
- The policy could be reviewed, and amended to give nuance to its provisions (e.g. those offering to downsize be given more than one offer of new housing).
- An options appraisal was being undertaken across SBC's housing stock to ascertain if changes such as de-designation or property conversion could be used.
- SBC could use discretion and make decisions based on specific circumstances in cases where such situations existed (e.g. too ill to work).

Resolved:

1. That the Panel approve the proposed changes to the policy, with the following exception:
 - Those offering to downsize their property be made more than 1 offer of new accommodation.
2. That the Panel receive an update in 2019 once the new policy has been in operation for a year.

19. Repairs, Maintenance & Investment Contract - Progress Update

This report was the first on the contract (RMI) since the process of competitive dialogue and selection of service provider had been completed. Once the competitive dialogue had finished, an independent evaluation of the bids taken forward was undertaken; the fact that no challenges to the decision from unsuccessful bidders had been received was taken as assurance that the process had been robust and fair. Legal advisors had also helped SBC shape the contract with Osborne Property Services Limited (OPSL) to ensure that the issues of the previous agreement were avoided. 1st December 2017 would be the 'go live' date for the contract.

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel - 07.09.17

Social return on investment, value for money and community projects were to be vital considerations in the arrangement. The customer experience was also being mapped to ensure that processes were as efficient as possible, whilst negotiations over the IT system were also underway. The focus of the first 2 years of the contract would be on garages and the environmental aspects of the work, with some of the more problematic sites owned by SBC being altered. SBC had ultimate control of the investment program.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- Given the fact that IT featured twice in the list of risks, members raised concerns that it required a higher amount of mitigation than currently proposed. However, OPSL were confident that by breaking down the work into a series of milestones, progress would be closely monitored.
- Voids had been an area of poor performance in the previous contract. OPSL were aware that there was already some backlog of work forming that they would inherit, but were confident that their present average of 8 ½ to resolve a void would be maintained. In addition, they were completing some of the cases which were due to feature in the backlog. OPSL was analysing the 'key-to-key' process to make the void clearance process as efficient as possible. OPSL would also have completed enough voids to contribute to the report on the matter at the meeting on 2nd November 2017.
- In terms of the demobilisation of the current contract holder, OPSL was committed to having as clear a view as possible of its inherited workload on 1st December 2017. It was also working on robust communications with tenants to help build this picture.
- The work previously completed on Poplar House had been cosmetic. OPSL was now completing structural alterations on the property, including fire safety measures (e.g. sprinkler system).
- The cladding material used at Broom and Poplar Houses was not the same as that present at Grenfell. However, it was deemed to be a medium risk and would be considered for replacement (albeit not as an immediate priority).
- Members raised concerns that the present contract was simply 'running down' and did not want a repeat at the end of this arrangement. To avoid this, the process of procuring the successor contract would begin 2 years before the end of this one. Equally, SBC had 2 major sanctions it could use in the case of poor performance. It could either terminate the contract, or insist that other providers step in and undertake parts of the work at the expense of OPSL. The new performance management system would also specify that OPSL must work up to and including the last day of their contract to receive full payment.
- Members welcomed the references to flexibility and performance management in the new contract.

Resolved: That the Panel receive an update on the first year of the contract in the next Municipal Year.

20. Neighbourhood Services Garage Licences and Review of Garage Sites

SBC had been made aware of three primary concerns in its previous discussions with members and residents:

- Garages were in a bad state
- Undertakings had been given which had not transpired
- Residents and members felt SBC was not engaging with them

This created a clear agenda for Savills and OPSL in their review of existing sites. 80% of the preparatory work had now been completed, with all sites having been assigned 1 of 6 options for their future as a preliminary measure. However, some of these were borderline and could be amended whilst all could be altered as site specific reviews were undertaken to clarify the detailed picture for each site. These reviews would include discussions with Councillors and local residents, and would lead to the provision of timelines and associated budgets. The work would be delivered over the next 2 years.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- Only sites where a good offer could be made to residents would be repaired; ones to be demolished would receive no such attention.
- The costs for each garage could vary considerably depending on a range of factors (e.g. the presence of asbestos). In cases involving asbestos, a specialist would be involved in its removal.
- Some of the current garages would be demolished and replaced with parking spaces. SBC was aware of the pressure on the system and the need for a balance to be struck.
- Members raised concerns that the number of sites being rented still remained below 50% despite the removal of some less desirable garages. In addition, would the removal of significant amounts of sites leave a deficiency in the amount of available parking? However, the new structure of 3 Neighbourhood Managers was intended by SBC for decisions to be made which took the wider local picture into account rather than just the specific circumstances of isolated sites.
- The new RMI contract would also assist in this work, whilst Savills had committed finances and support to the initiative.
- The options were not listed in order of preference (i.e. Option 1 is best, if not suitable try option 2, if not suitable option 3 etc.).
- Discussions with local stakeholders would take into account the condition of the site, its impact on demand and whether renovation was a suitable option. The impact of any decisions on the local community would also be a part of the final decision making process.
- At the time of the meeting, SBC had conducted all possible work that did not involve inspections of individual properties. Difficult or ambiguous cases would feature considerable dialogue with members and residents.

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel - 07.09.17

- Lighting had not been mentioned in the report, but would be a part of the decision making process. Officers were aware of the impact of lighting on the desirability of sites. This also applied to parking bays.
- Members were asked to raise specific cases with officers as casework if that would help facilitate the process.

Resolved:

1. That the Panel endorse the proposed programme of redevelopment and refurbishment of all council owned garage sites.
2. That the Panel endorse the work to introduce controlled parking schemes on housing land.

21. CCTV In The Local Community

At present, SBC was working on a briefing document for Councillors. This would convey the information on the system in a form that was readily understandable by local residents.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- The installation of a CCTV unit on top of a mast in an industrial estate had been proposed, but the prohibitive cost (c. £200,000) had meant the idea had been abandoned.
- The refurbishment of the CCTV Room had increased capacity; in 2012, SBC monitored output from 84 cameras, and at present this figure stood at 224. Whilst logistics did allow this number to increase further, the budget was not due to rise and this could limit expansion. In addition, some of the stock was ageing and may need replacing.
- Thames Valley Police did offer support to SBC's system. However, financial assistance was very limited. In 2016 – 17, TVP had provided approximately £44,000 and this would be reduced to £37,000 in coming years.
- Councillors' ward money could be invested in this area, provided that SBC's accounts could allocated such spending as capital expenditure.
- SBC was looking to move the site at Horton Road, although other incidents in the area had recently been detected by the equipment. Bids were welcomed for its redeployment.
- SBC was prepared to review its process for responding to bids for CCTV equipment. Members raised the view that residents were often not aware of the outcome of their bids.

Resolved:

1. That the Panel support a growth bid for the CCTV service to be made to Finance.
2. That the Council review the process for handling resident requests for CCTV units, with particular reference to feedback provided after the decision.

22. Slough Local Air Quality and Low Emission Strategy

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel - 07.09.17

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- The number of deaths in Slough attributable to particulate air pollution had been estimated as 51 in 2010; and in 2015, it had been 47. However, other health issues related to respiratory problems also required consideration.
- Speed humps were not considered to have a significant impact on air quality in Slough because air quality is affected by heavily traffic roads (in particular 'A' roads).
- Air Quality Management Areas had been in operation for a significant period of time in Slough. However, their impact was limited by the dense traffic patterns of the area; eradicating this would require drastic changes to transport. Despite this limitation, SBC had over 40 measures it could take, which it could apply as best suited to try and reduce pollution levels. The most radical of these would be the declaration of a Low Emission Zone (known as a Clean Air Zone).
- Despite their appearance, Heavy Goods Vehicles (HGVs) actually had good compliance with their Euro emission standards; there had been significant innovation for such vehicles. The problem predominantly lay with cars and vans as real world emissions far exceeds the Euro emission standards.
- Whilst some tougher solutions had been undertaken in London, the fact that Slough did not have the equivalents of the LGA, the Mayor of London or Transport for London limited its powers and financial resources.
- The national Government had not identified Slough as an area of major concern. As a result, it has not commissioned either an updated air quality action plan or feasibility study, or given Slough the financial resources to support these actions. SBC had contested this, given the proximity of Heathrow as well as the pressure on the road system.
- SBC could conduct a feasibility study into a Low Emission Zone (CAZ) costing approx. £100,000 if capital bids accepted the proposal. However, the implementation of such a zone would require approval from full Council, a consultation process with the public and sign off by the Secretary of State and its implementation would cost millions of pounds.

(At this point, Cllr Wright left the meeting)

- A statute existed in British law regarding air quality (the Environment Act 1995). Whilst this was a result of an EU Directive, this statute was unlikely to be terminated once the UK had left the EU and may indeed even be strengthened due to the known link between public health and air quality and the high profile nature of air pollution.
- Diesel vehicles were being phased out across all forms of transport, as experts recognised that gases other than Carbon Dioxide were an issue and diesel produced such pollution. However, one potential disincentive (extra charge for parking diesel cars) had been ruled as illegal in a case involving Westminster City Council. In addition, the phasing out process was likely to take many decades.

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel - 07.09.17

- SBC was one of only 11 Councils to promote electric taxis. As well as air pollution, electric taxis saved £4,000 per year in terms of running costs compared with diesel.
- A low emission strategy was being developed and would be shared with Councillors later in 2017.
- In all planning permission applications involving parking, the Environmental Quality Team Manager requested that 1 in 10 of the bays had an electrical plug in point. Consideration also needs to be given to restricting parking in the Town Centre.
- The new Environmental Services service would not include gassified vehicles, as there was concern over their reliability; the next phase of gas vehicles will be considered in 5-7 years time.. However, the RMI service would be modified to minimise environmental impact; 10% of vans will run on electric in 2018 and by 2021 25% of vehicles will be Ultra Low Emission Vehicles (ULEV) by 2021.
- Information regarding the amount of pollution caused by back up diesel-powered generators serving data warehouses had been raised with Government. However, any construction vehicles used in building work in Slough needed to work with SBC to limit their environmental impact. SBC would impose similar standards to those used in London for dust and emission controls.
- Liquid gas was not being investigated at present, as its level of reduction of pollution was less than that of electrification.
- The main impact of Heathrow on air quality in Slough was the surface road use to access the facility, rather than aircraft.
- The new road system at Tuns Lane had seen a significant improvement in air quality as traffic moved more freely. However, the volume of traffic passing through the area remained high and so does pollution levels.
- Most planning applications at SBC were seen by the Environmental Quality Team; they could make comments and recommendations as appropriate on air quality including mitigation and offsetting.
- Whilst the number of road traffic incident deaths in Slough was much lower than those attributed to air pollution, costs for the latter were much higher than the former. As an example, whilst the total road budget on road safety was £150,000, SBC has a budget of £600,000 just on its own fleet of electric cars for staff to role out.
- The policy on using electric cars for staff rather than their personal vehicles was voluntary at present, but will become mandatory in future.
- The Environmental Quality Team held weekly discussions with the Transport Team on areas of joint interest around air quality and sustainable transport. The two teams work closely together.

Resolved: That the Panel recommend that all SBC decisions in future consider air quality impact and incorporate measures within the low emission strategy.

23. Forward Work Programme 2017 - 18

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel - 07.09.17

Resolved: That, subject to the changes made in previous minutes, the work programme be noted.

24. Attendance Record

Resolved: That the attendance record be noted.

25. Date of Next Meeting - 2nd November 2017

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 7.03 pm and closed at 10.13 pm)