

## **Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Tuesday, 14th January, 2020.**

**Present:-** Councillors Plenty (Chair), Wright (Vice-Chair), Ajaib, Gahir, M Holledge, Hulme, Matloob (from 6.38pm), Minhas and S Parmar

**Also present under Rule 30:-** None

**Apologies for Absence:-** Co-opted Member Trevor Pollard (Resident Panel Board)

### **PART 1**

#### **42. Declarations of Interest**

Councillor Gahir declared that he was a taxi driver and owned a taxi company. He remained in the Council Chamber throughout the meeting.

#### **43. Minutes of the last meeting held on 28th November 2019**

**Resolved** - That the minutes of the meeting held on 28th November 2019 be approved as a correct record.

#### **44. Member Questions**

None were received.

#### **45. Housing Rents and Service Charges Update**

The Interim Head of Financial Management presented a report that detailed the context and implications in relation to the setting of housing rents and service charges over the next four years.

Members were informed that the government would be implementing its plan to increase social rents by Consumer Price Inflation (CPI) + 1% from April 2020. Government policy dictated that local authorities had to follow the rent standard, as set out by the regulator of social housing, so as to align the regulation of council rents with those of private registered providers.

In February 2019, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government had published the 'Direction on the Rent Standard 2019', which set out requirements in relation to the setting of social housing rents. A further document 'Policy statement on rents for social housing' set out the practical steps required to implement the new regime from 1 April 2020. Members were referred to paragraph 6.6 of the report which set out the current rent caps for 2019/20 and the proposed caps for 2020/21.

*(Councillor Matloob joined the meeting)*

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The Interim Head of Financial Management outlined the impact of the new policy on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Council tenants as follows:

- The estimated average weekly rent for 2019/20 was £102.57 rising to £105.34 in 2020/21 – this equated to a 2.7% increase.
- The HRA 30 year Financial Business Plan had been updated to reflect the CPI+1% increase over the next five year. The impact on the 2020/21 forecast was an estimated increase in rental income of £0.82 million.
- It was explained that the full Universal Credit scheme continued to be rolled out and would affect all new claims. The financial impact on the HRA for 2020/21 was difficult to estimate, however the budgeted rental income collection rate had been revised downwards and the level of bad debts provision had been maintained in anticipation of the switch to monthly payments, longer processing times, and the merging of Housing Benefit with several other benefits into one payment. The HRA Financial Business Plan would be regularly reviewed as the impact of Universal Credit became clearer.
- Members were informed that the government had abolished the HRA cap that had previously controlled local authority borrowing for house building; the arrangements for future HRA borrowing were still emerging. A number of proposed new build schemes were in the development stage and these would be reviewed to ascertain the optimal balance of new units achievable, in light of any additional loan funding that became available.

The Chair then invited Members to comment and ask questions.

During the course of the discussion, the following points were raised:

- A Member queried why rent for properties leased from James Elliman Homes Limited was to increase by an average of 1.7% in April 2020, whereas Council house rents were set to increase by 2.7%. It was explained that government legislation determined the rent increase of council owned properties and did not apply to other housing providers.
- It was queried how long it would take the HRA to recover the £9 million it had not received under the previous government policy that had required rents paid in the social housing sector to be reduced by 1% a year, over a four year period. In addition, information regarding the current level of debt in the HRA was sought. In response, it was explained that to restore the £9 million of income not received would take approximately 20 years. The current level of rent arrears debt was £1.5 million. The Service Lead, Strategic Housing Services explained that he was unable to provide a figure for the overall HRA level of debt, but agreed to circulate this information to the Panel following the meeting.
- A Member queried if the 1.7% voids rate was sufficient, in light of the uncertain financial impact the roll out of Universal Credit would have on the HRA. It was explained that the 1.7% was set to align with the 30

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year HRA Financial Business Plan; 1.7% was a prudent benchmark figure that took into consideration the possible financial impact of Universal Credit.

- A Member asked if it was possible to quantify the financial impact that Universal Credit was currently having on the HRA and to forecast the level of HRA debt following the full roll out of the scheme. The Service Lead, Strategic Housing Services agreed to provide further information to the Panel.
- Concerns were raised regarding the standard of cleaning in communal housing areas. It was asked what the services charge provided and if a record was kept of the dates and times that cleaning was undertaken. In response, it was explained that the service charge contributed to the maintenance of communal areas, including lift repairs, grass cutting, and ground maintenance. The Service Lead, Strategic Housing Services agreed to discuss concerns regarding particular housing estates outside of the meeting.
- Concern was raised regarding the impact a rent increase would have on tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit. It was reported that under 50% of tenants were in receipt of full Housing Benefit, and approximately 70% received a partial Housing Benefit; therefore the roll out of Universal Credit would impact a significant number of Council tenants.
- A Member asked whether the conversion to Universal Credit had caused tenants financial difficulties, or if the main issues experienced were due to the six week delay period. It was explained that there was a combination of factors, including people facing difficulties budgeting and managing their finances.

### Resolved –

- (a) That the Service Lead, Strategic Housing Services be requested to circulate responses to the queries raised, as detailed above.
- (b) That the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel noted the following aspects of the report, which would be considered by Cabinet on 20th January 2020, and then by Council on 28th January 2020:
  - I. Council house dwelling rents for 2020/21 to increase by 2.7% (CPI + 1%) over the 2019/20 rent with effect from Monday 6th April 2020. This was in line with current government guidelines and legislation.
  - II. Garage rents, heating, utility and ancillary charges to increase by 1.7% with effect from Monday 6th April 2020. This was based upon the September CPI figure.
  - III. Service charges to increase by 1.7% with effect from Monday 6th April 2020. This is based upon the September CPI figure.

- IV. 'Other committee' property rents to increase by an average of 1.7% from Monday 6th April 2020 in line with the September CPI figure.
- V. Properties leased from James Elliman Homes to increase by an average of 1.7% from Monday 6th April 2020 in line with the September CPI figure.
- VI. DISH property rents are recommended to increase by 2.7 % (CPI + 1%) over the 2019/20 rent with effect from Monday 6th April 2020. This is as per the Council's recommendation to the DISH Board.

**46. Western Rail Link to Heathrow - Transport Modelling of Proposed Closure of Hollow Hill Lane**

The Service Lead, Major Infrastructure Projects introduced a report that detailed the rationale behind Network Rails routing choice for the Great Western Main Line and Western Rail Link to Heathrow at Langley; and the transport modelling of the proposed closure of Hollow Hill Lane.

The Network Rails representatives in attendance - Ruth Leuillette (Senior Sponsor) and Jane Cassidy (Contents Manager) were invited to address the Panel.

Ruth Leuillette provided Members with a presentation regarding Western Rail Link to Heathrow - modelling outputs, including the proposed mitigation measures, ahead of a Development Consent Order (DCO) submission to the Planning Inspectorate. In association with the DCO, an environmental statement would be prepared, setting out the mitigation measures in relation to traffic, noise, air quality and environmental impact.

The objective of the Western Rail Link to Heathrow scheme was to provide direct access to and from Heathrow Airport Terminal 5 from the west, avoiding the need to interchange at London Paddington. Members were informed that the design and delivery methodology had been developed to minimise the risk of disruption on the Greater Western Main Line rail line.

The following key points were highlighted during the presentation:

- A Section 106 Agreement was in place to reduce the number of heavy goods vehicle movements being undertaken. This was positive for the surrounding communities.
- With regard to the closure of Hollow Hill Lane, it was reported that model outputs had been used to assess traffic flow, noise and air quality impacts. The modelled data had been calibrated against the observed data and the model had been validated.
- The DCO required proposed mitigation measures to be proportionate to the impact of the scheme and this would be based on data outputs gathered from the modelling exercises. Mitigation options would

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continue to be discussed with Slough Borough Council officers ahead of the DCO submission.

- The most affected junctions identified from the strategic model had been assessed at a local level to find suitable mitigations. Options for consideration included, highway improvements for the most affected areas and the implementation of robust construction management statements.
- Station Road/Waterside Drive Junction had been identified as a junction that would be over capacity; to improve traffic flow in this area, a review of the signal timings would be undertaken and it was anticipated that altering the timings would suitably mitigate any detrimental impact.
- Langley High Street/Parlaunt Road, Langley High Street/Trelawney Avenue, and A4 London Road/ Langley High Street had been modelled as under capacity in all scenarios. Therefore, no significant mitigation measures were proposed.

In concluding the presentation, the Network Rail representative explained that the DCO was scheduled to be submitted to the Planning Inspectorate by spring 2020, subject to a funding statement being received from the Department for Transport. Following examination, the Planning Inspectorate would submit a report with a recommendation to the Secretary of State (SoS). The SoS would then have three months to consider granting consent to the scheme.

The Chair then invited comments and questions from the Panel.

Members had a wide-ranging discussion, during which the following points were raised:

- Concern was raised regarding the assessment of Langley High Street/ Parlaunt Road as being under capacity. The modelled outputs had concluded that there would be no significant impact in this location. Members refuted this assessment and stated that the volume of traffic in this location during peak times was currently over capacity and often gridlocked during peak times. The Chair invited the Network Rail representative to attend a site visit to observe the traffic flow during peak times. In addition, it was highlighted that there were three peak traffic times in Slough: mornings, school pick up time (around 3.30pm for half an hour) and evenings. A Member asked if the three peak times had been taken into consideration during the traffic modelling. The Network Rail representative was unable to confirm the times that had been modelled; however it was explained that the total traffic flow for the whole day had been taken into account. The Network Rail representative agreed to check the timings used and report back to the Panel.
- A Member asked what measures would be put in place to mitigate any detrimental impact resulting from the closure of Hollow Hill Lane. It was reported that with some changes to the traffic signal times the

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traffic flow could be accommodated. It was anticipated that traffic would divert and be redistributed onto the wider strategic network.

- It was noted that to keep Hollow Hill Lane open on its existing alignment would involve the construction of a bridge. A Member sought clarification regarding the proposals for a bridge. In response, the Service Lead, Major Infrastructure Projects reported that consultants had been commissioned to carry out a detailed feasibility study. It was not anticipated that Network Rail would provide any costs for the construction of a new bridge. It was accepted that funding for a bridge would have to be stimulated by commercial and housing growth.
- It was queried if the impact to surrounding areas, such as Iver Heath and Uxbridge Road had been considered. It was explained that the impact on surrounding areas was a matter for the relevant neighbouring local authorities to consider.
- A Member expressed frustration that Langley Road had been closed for six months and traffic flow data had only been gathered for one week during the closure. The validity of the data was queried, given the limited time period over which the sample data had been collected.
- It was noted that some of the data used to model the scenarios was five years old; concern was raised regarding the validity of the data, due to it being out of date. In response, it was explained that the data gathered was used as a 'baseline'. Modellers were able to incorporate subsequent developments that had been granted planning consent to re-evaluate projected scenarios and the impact on the road network. The 2028 scenario model assumed that the smart motorway scheme had been fully implemented.
- It was requested that the traffic survey data gathered by Network Rail be shared with the Panel to allow Members sufficient time to consider the information. Concern was raised that it would be too late to scrutinise the information once planning consent had been granted. A Network Rail representative explained that the data was interlinked with other aspects of the project and the resource to extract this information was not available. In addition, it was reported that a full package of information would be published alongside the submission of the DCO. Network Rail would continue to liaise with Council officers regarding mitigation options, ahead of submitting the DCO.

**Resolved** – That the presentation and report be noted.

*(The Chair announced that the Panel would adjourn for a ten minute break (at 8.10 pm). The Panel reconvened at 8.20 pm when the same Members were present)*

### 47. Airbnb Licensing

The Planning Manager introduced a report that outlined the issue of Airbnb licensing and the remedial action that could be taken.

Members were informed that Airbnb was an online market place for arranging and offering lodging and homestays. The company did not own any of the

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real estate listings, nor did it host events, rather it acted as a broker, receiving a commission fee from each booking made. The broker arrangement provided by Airbnb enabled property owners to let out rooms or whole properties to people seeking short term lets.

In relation to planning enforcement, it was explained that officers were keeping a 'watching brief' on the issue and taking a 'reactive' stance by responding to complaints received from neighbours.

The Chair highlighted that many residents were unaware that planning permission was required for this type of activity. He raised concerns that Airbnb activity was having a detrimental impact on neighbouring residents' amenities, housing land supply, and the availability of family sized accommodation in Slough. He highlighted that planning permission could be automatically granted if an Airbnb arrangement was unchallenged. He proposed that the matter be referred to Cabinet, and that the Cabinet be requested to allocate sufficient resources to allow planning enforcement to be considered for all Airbnb properties that require planning permission for change of use.

The Panel supported the proposal and agreed that given the current housing need and the shortage of family accommodation in Slough, action was needed to effectively control this aspect of the local economy and provide good housing for residents.

**Resolved** – That a report be referred to Cabinet requesting that sufficient resources be allocated to allow planning enforcement to be considered for all Airbnb properties that require planning permission for change of use.

### 48. Five Year Plan - Outcome 4 Update

The Service Lead, Housing Services presented a progress report regarding Outcome 4 of the Council's Five Year Plan 2019-2024 – 'Our residents will live in good quality homes'.

Members were provided with an update on each of the key actions being undertaken, as detailed in Appendix A of the report.

In relation to key action 1 (Implement New Housing Strategy) - it was reported that a new Housing Strategy was in the process of being implemented. Public consultation on the Strategy would be undertaken throughout February and March 2020, before the final version was made available in April 2020. In the interim, the Service Lead, Housing Services agreed to circulate a draft version of the Strategy to the Panel.

The Chair invited comments and questions from the Panel.

During consideration of the report Members raised the following points:

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- Referring to the findings of the satisfaction survey, set out in Appendix B of the report – a Member asked why leaseholders were significantly less satisfied than Council tenants. It was explained that leaseholders paid a service charge and were liable for the cost of repairs and maintenance of their properties; this was sometimes the cause of dissatisfaction. It was reported that the diverging level of satisfaction indicated in the Slough survey, reflected national trends.
- It was noted that the Housing Development and Contracts Service was working up plans to develop over 600 housing units over the next four years. A Member suggested that HRA borrowing could be used to fund the delivery of affordable housing in Slough.
- A Member queried how consultation with 'hard to reach' people, such as the homeless and those living in temporary accommodation was undertaken. It was explained that engagement events had been held throughout July and August 2019, and people living in temporary accommodation had been invited along to discuss their options. It was difficult to engage with rough sleepers in a forum setting; however the voluntary sector and a team of outreach workers spoke to rough sleepers about the options available to them.
- A Member asked if the Council's Housing Department was suitably staffed and asked if recruiting additional officers would assist in preventing homelessness. In response, the Service Lead, Housing Services explained that since the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act in 2018, the number of homeless approaches to the Council had tripled. The Housing Team had recruited two new members of staff and it was felt there was sufficient capacity within the team to manage the current caseload. However, there were processing issues, in particular outdated IT systems and software that needed to be addressed to improve the efficiency of the department. For example, the current IT software used involved the double entry of data; the implementation of one system would remove this duplication.
- A Member asked what the most common reason for homelessness was. It was explained that in many cases, a short term tenancy agreement ended and was not renewed by the landlord. The private rented market in Slough was becoming increasingly competitive, in part due to London borough councils offering landlords 'incentive payments' to house homeless people.
- It was queried how housing was allocated and if people living in temporary accommodation were given priority on the waiting list. It was explained that eligibility for housing was determined by a number of factors. For example, a person who presented as homeless would be given a higher priority than someone living in temporary housing.
- Concern was raised regarding the number of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) and the loss of residential family homes in Slough. A Member asked if there were measures that could be taken to stop landlords converting houses into HMOs. The Panel was advised that if a landlord met the qualifying conditions, the Council was unable to refuse a licence.

**Resolved –**

- (a) That the Service Lead, Housing Services be requested to circulate the draft version of the Housing Strategy to the Panel.
- (b) That the progress of the Outcome 4 Action Plan be noted.

**49. Food Poverty Task and Finish Group Update**

The Policy Insight Analyst presented a report that sought approval of the proposed Terms of Reference for the Food Poverty Task and Finish Group.

**Resolved –** That the Terms of Reference for the Food Poverty Task and Finish Group, as set out in Appendix A of the report be agreed.

**50. Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel 2019/20 Work Programme**

The Policy Insight Analyst presented the Forward Work Programme and updated Members on relevant items.

The Panel was informed that a request had been received from Councillor Smith to scrutinise the impact of the proposed changes to the layout of the A4 and the junctions at Brands Hill, Colnbrook. Members agreed to schedule an extraordinary meeting on 17th March 2020 to consider this item.

In addition, a Member raised concerns regarding a number of highway issues in Slough, including yellow line painting, permit car parking, delay in works being carried out, and lack of disabled car parking bays. It was agreed that this issue would be considered at the 17<sup>th</sup> March meeting.

**27th February 2020**

It was explained that the Home Improvement Agency report would not be available for the February meeting and should be removed from the list of expected items.

**17th March 2020 – extraordinary meeting**

The Panel agreed to consider the following items:

- Homeless Prevention Strategy
- Rough Sleeper Action Plan
- Impact of the proposed changes to the layout of the A4 and junctions at Brands Hill, Colnbrook.
- Highways Issue in Slough (addressing the concerns as detailed above)

**Resolved –**

- (a) That an extraordinary meeting be scheduled to be held on 17th March 2020, to consider the items listed above.

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- (b) That subject to the updates set out above, the Forward Work Programme 2019/20 be approved, as set out in Appendix A of the report.

### 51. **Members' Attendance Record 2019/20**

**Resolved** - That the details of the Members' Attendance Record be noted.

### 52. **Date of Next Meeting - 27th February 2020**

**Resolved** - That the date of the next meeting was confirmed as 27th February 2020.

Chair

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