

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel – Extraordinary Meeting held on Wednesday, 18th November, 2020.

Present:- Councillors Hulme (Chair), Kelly (Vice-Chair), Ajaib, Begum, Matloob, Minhas, S Parmar and Sabah

Co-opted Members: Manvinder Matharu and Trevor Pollard (Residents Panel Board)

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Ali, Gahir and Nazir

Apologies for Absence:- None

PART 1

34. Declarations of Interest

None were declared.

35. Member Questions

None had been received.

36. Repairs Maintenance and Investment (RMI) Contract Update

The RMI Contract Manager introduced a report that updated Members on progress of the performance of Osborne's delivery of the repairs, maintenance and investment (RMI) contract since the report to the Panel on 3rd September 2020.

The Panel noted the current position was as follows:

- Outstanding repairs backlog – the number of uncompleted responsive repairs had reduced from 4,243 recorded in September to 2,610 as at 18th November 2020. Data reconciliation had been carried out and a number of duplicate entries to the original backlog had been identified.
- The Residents' Survey – the results were currently being compiled and would be available on 24th November.
- Independent Audit Agent (IAA) report – a summary of the IAA report had previously been circulated to the Panel.
- Osborne's forward plan and social return on investment – the commitment to support people across Slough remained a priority for Osbornes. The Government was introducing a new public procurement model that took greater account of the additional social value created by contractors and this would be implemented from 1st January 2021. Osborne's had identified a measurement tool which would used to provide live, transparent and accurate date of social, economic and environmental impacts across Slough after this time.

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- Plans for the joint Residents / Officer Estate Inspections – Covid-19 had impacted on the way in which the estate inspections service operated and the report set out the current approach being taken.

The overall position was that whilst performance improvements had been made in the past six weeks and the backlog of repairs had reduced, it was recognised that further improvements were required. These included a further reductions in outstanding repairs, the turnaround time for void properties, responding to residents complaints and data collection and monitoring.

Osborne's newly appointed Managing Director, Vicky Fordham-Lewis, was present at the meeting and joined Officers in answering Members questions on a range of issues. The Panel had a detailed discussion which is summarised as follows:

- Future controls – the risk management section of the report stated that the future control on reducing the backlog and management of open repairs was “further dialogue with Osborne over resource management and delivery.” Members commented that ongoing dialogue was insufficient and asked that future reports include more substantive control measures available to the Council to address any persistent contract under performance.
- Covid-19 – it was recognised that the impact of Covid-19 had been significant, particularly the first ‘lockdown’ in the spring of 2020. However, it was also recognised that there were performance issues identified prior to this and the new Osborne's management team was working to address these issues.
- Performance Management – Members discussed how performance data was verified to ensure repairs and works had been completed. The RMI Contract Manager explained the Osborne's had changed their IT system and work on the methodology for calculating performance needed to be more clearly set out. The data relating to the backlog of repairs was improved and some duplicates were being removed. The current backlog of circa 2,500 repairs was considered too high, with a level of 800-1,000 more typical for housing stock of Slough's size. Work to refine the KDIs was expected to be completed by the end of the year. Members highlighted that residents should be involved in that process.
- Performance improvement planning – the Panel asked when a contract improvement plan would be available for it to review. The RMI Contract Manager responded that Osborne's had several detailed plans in place including a Service Improvement Plan and Work In Progress (WIP) Reduction Plan. Members expressed frustration that these plans had not been made available in summary form for the Panel so they could be assured that sufficiently strong plans were in place to improve performance.

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- Osborne staffing – Osbornes had recently strengthened their management team and this was contributing to the more recent improvements in performance. The MD of Osbornes reported that additional staff had been taken on in operational roles. Further information could be provided on the proportion of their workforce who were Slough residents.
- Independent Audit – it was reported that the Internal Audit Agents report was close to being finalised. The Executive Director of Customer & Community stated that the internal audit by RSM was in draft form and would inform any potential review of the contract. Confidence was expressed that a step change in the level of performance was being made but it would take time for these trends to feed through given the scale of the backlog and performance issues.
- Estate inspections – the Panel requested further detail on the number of estate inspections that had been carried out and the timeframe for future inspections.
- Complaint processes – despite the recent performance improvements it was reported that complaints remained at a high level. The RMI Contract Manager confirmed to Members that it had been a priority to resolve complaints and improve communications with residents. Members particularly expressed concern that repairs often took multiple visits to resolve and highlighted the importance of improving the quality of work to reduce this problem. A new complaints handler had been brought in a more proactive approach was being taken to resolve complaints. Several members shared examples of poor service that residents had raised with them as casework. A particular case raised by a member of the Residents Board would be investigated by Osbornes outside of the meeting. It was noted that problems raised as Members casework were not included in the complaints figures provided and asked how this could be improved. The MD of Osbornes stated that this could be considered in the review of KDIs that was taking place.
- Residents Survey – although the results were not yet available for the Panel, Members would be invited to a presentation on the results within the next week and they would be reviewed at a future meeting of the Panel.
- Financial implications – whilst the total annual spend was up to £14m, Members noted that this was not a fixed sum as the contract was based on outputs. The Council only paid for services that were delivered to its satisfaction and the process to verify this was explained.

The Chair summarised the views expressed that residents should expect to receive a good service, and despite some recent improvements performance had fallen well below the standards the Panel would find acceptable.

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Members were frustrated the audit report was not finalised and that the Panel had not received a summary of the service improvement plans in place which would explain the path to dealing with the backlog of repairs and bringing the service up to the required standard. It was therefore agreed that an extraordinary meeting be convened near the end of January 2021 at which the following information would be provided:

- Osborne's Service Improvement Plan and WIP Reduction Plan;
- Progress against key performance indicators;
- An update on the report of the Independent Audit Agent (IAA);
- The results of the Resident's Satisfaction Survey; and
- Other information requested by the Panel during the course of the discussion noted above.

Members agreed that as the contract was now in year 3 there should be sufficient information to evaluate whether the contract was delivering its objectives and providing value for money. Members agreed to make a reference to Cabinet that the internal audit of the entire contract be carried out and that Members and residents be engaged in this process. A further meeting of the Panel was agreed to be held to review the audit report and the Executive Director advised that was likely to be in April 2021 as this would enable a full year's data to be provided and reviewed.

At the conclusion of the discussion, the Chair thanked Council Officers and representatives of Osbornes for their attendance at the meeting.

Resolved –

- (a) That an extraordinary meeting of the Panel be convened at the end of the January 2021 to consider:
 - An update on the report of the Independent Audit Agent (IAA);
 - progress against key performance indicators;
 - Osborne's Service Improvement Plan and WIP Reduction Plan;
 - and the results of the Resident's Satisfaction Survey;
 - HR data on number of local people employed by Osborne;
 - Detail on the social return on investment from the contract;
 - Data/information on the number of estate inspections that had been carried out and timescale for future inspections.
- (b) A recommendation be made to Cabinet that internal audit conduct a comprehensive and wide ranging review of the contract with Osbornes to evaluate whether the objectives and performance measures were being met. Councillors and residents should be engaged in that review. Members requested that it be completed by the end of the financial year in March 2021 and that a report on the findings be presented to the Panel in April 2021.

37. HRA Tenanted Stock Landlord Compliance Quarterly Report (Quarter 2)

The Panel received a report on the HRA Tenanted Stock Landlord Compliance for the second quarter of the year. The report author was not present to introduce the report or answer detailed questions.

The report updated on water hygiene, asbestos, fire risk assessments, gas safety, electrical and emergency light testing and lift and stair lift services. Members requested the following information in the next report to the Panel:

- The report stated that 5,476 actions from fire risk assessments were outstanding which were overdue. The requested further information on the nature of these actions, the risks and timeline for them to resolved.
- It was stated that the Council, Osbornes met weekly and were in regular contact with the Royal Berkshire Fire & Rescue Service to discuss fire safety compliance. The Chair asked whether these meetings were minuted and if they could be shared with the Panel.

A number of specific questions were asked and Members sought assurance that overall compliance was in line with all legislative requirements. Officers provided this assurance and responded to the specific points raised about asbestos, legionella, cladding and stair lifts.

The Panel noted the report but considered it to be unsatisfactory that not all of the questions could be answered due to the absence of a presenting officer.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

38. Work Programme Report 2020-21

The Panel's work programme for the remainder of the municipal year was reviewed. It had been agreed earlier in the meeting to convene an extraordinary meeting in late January 2021 on the RMI contract improvement plans. The internal audit report on the RMI contract and full year's performance data would best be scrutinised by the Panel in April and this may require some adjustments to the work programme, including the possibility of a further extraordinary meeting in March to deal with the rest of the business in the work programme.

Nominations were sought for Members to join the Local Plan Task & Finish Group and these were received from Councillors Ajaib, Hulme, Kelly and Minhas.

The Hub Strategy Update was an item to be scheduled. The Panel noted that the Overview & Scrutiny Committee were due to review this and it was therefore agreed that it be removed from the Panel's work programme.

With these amendments noted, the work programme was agreed.

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Resolved –

- (a) That the work programme be agreed.
- (b) That Councillors Ajaib, Hulme, Kelly and Minhas be members of the Local Plan Task & Finish Group.

39. Date of Next Meeting - 6th January 2021

The next meeting of the Panel was confirmed as 6th January 2021.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.25 pm)