

Neighbourhoods and Renewal Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Wednesday, 23rd March, 2011.

Present:- Councillors Sohal (Chair), Abe (Arrived at 6.45 pm, Left at 7.45 pm), Dodds, Plimmer, Walsh and A S Wright (Left at 7.45 pm)

Co-opted Members present:- Barbara Goldstein and Glynys Higgins

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors M S Mann

PART 1

39. Declarations of Interest

None were received.

40. Minutes of the Meeting held on 10th February 2011

The Minutes of the last meeting held on 10th February were approved as a correct record.

41. Housing Benefit and Wider Welfare Reforms

The Panel considered a report which outlined the agreed and proposed changes to Housing Benefit. The report provided information on the impact of these changes, in particular the effect on housing demand. The Head of Benefits advised that the removal of the allowance for five bed properties would affect 47 Slough households. The change from using average rent to using the 30th percentile rent for benefit purposes would have a significant impact on Slough due to the wide span of rents in the Borough. The Housing Needs Manager advised that housing demand had increased significantly over the past couple of years. Due to the pressure on housing in London there was a risk that Slough could lose control of local housing supply as local authorities could fulfil their housing duties by using private rental accommodation. The Council had looked at mitigating actions including an improved deposit guarantee scheme, offering monetary advice, securing a preferred supplier for housing the homeless and trying to reduce the number of empty properties. The Panel raised a number of queries including:-

- A Co-opted Member asked if homeless people would be placed in Bed and Breakfast accommodation. The Panel was advised that the Council hoped that the housing supply could be increased. A number of options were being explored including the possible introduction of council tax for empty properties.
- In response to a question regarding underoccupancy of houses. The tenant incentive scheme had worked for those in 2 and 3 bed properties but had not been successful in the larger properties and these would be specifically targeted in future to find out what measures would be needed for the residents to consider downsizing.
- Members expressed concern about the impact that the changes would have on families in the Borough. A Member proposed that the Panel write to the

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secretary of state to draw their attention to the significant impact that the government's policy would have in places like Slough not just on housing but other Council services.

- The Panel was concerned about the use by London Borough's of satellite towns for housing and requested further information on the likely impact of this when more solid indications of the possible numbers were available.
- Further concerns were raised by the Panel regarding the Council's ability to ensure that housing benefit was paid directly to the landlord rather than to the tenant. Officers advised that recent changes to the housing benefit regulations may permit this. The Panel requested that the Cabinet endorse any changes to the current policy.
- A Member asked about the position of housing associations in Slough and was advised that all Slough housing associations would only rent properties through the Council but London boroughs may use privately rented properties.

Resolved: -

- (a) The Panel requested that officers take a report to a future Cabinet meeting to seek endorsement of changes to the Council's policy regarding payment of Housing Benefit to landlords as permitted under the changes in legislation and guidance from the DWP.
- (b) That an update report be brought to the Neighbourhoods and Communities Scrutiny Panel in approximately 6 months time.
- (c) That a letter be sent to the Secretaries of State for Communities and Local Government and for Work and Pensions expressing the Panel's Concern about the apparent lack of consideration of the long term impact of the housing benefit policies on the vulnerable people in Slough and to ask what mitigating measures will be in place to help this authority cope with the following issues:
 - 1) Increasing financial pressures caused by increased homelessness
 - 2) Increasing pressure on Slough Services – schools, health, transport caused by people being forced out of London
 - 3) Specific housing risks, including increased use of HMOs and forced homelessness.

42. Highway Engineering Programme of Works for 2011/12

The panel considered a report which outlined the proposed programme of works for 2011/12 to be carried out by the Council's Highways Engineering service. The Assistant Director, Transport and Planning advised that this was an annual report to highlight the planned works for carriageways, footways, streetlighting and public rights of way. It was noted that works were ranked by technical needs first and consultations with Councillors and residents had taken place. In the subsequent discussion Members raised a number of queries including:-

- A Member asked about ward walkabouts and whether these were carried out as they were completed throughout the year or were put on hold until next

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year. It was noted that there was a separate budget to cover these and they were therefore not included in the programme of works.

- In response to a question it was confirmed that the roads on the reserve list were not currently funded. If any funding was made available from other means then this could be used to take the first roads of the reserve list which means the Highways department would not have to go back out to look at all roads again.
- It was noted that the recent funding for pothole repairs announced by the government was a similar amount as received last year but that this could only be used for potholes or small patches not total resurfacing.
- Members raised concerns regarding the condition of unadopted roads. However it was noted that the roads would need a considerable amount of work to improve and the Council would not adopt roads unless they were up to the standard of a Public Highway as they would be a considerable financial burden on the Council. In some instances appropriate parties had been approached to bring the highways up to an adoptable standard.

Members raised a number of issues regarding particular areas of work and in all instances it was agreed that the queries would be passed to the Head of Highways for response.

Resolved: - That the report be noted.

43. Introduction of Dog Control Orders

The Panel considered a report which proposed the implementation of a range of Dog Control Orders to enable effective enforcement in relation to dogs including the issuing of Fixed Penalty Notices and prosecution of those who fail to comply with the conditions of the orders. The Head of Neighbourhood Enforcement advised that the interests of dog owners needed to be balanced with those of the general population. The aim of the changes was to protect public health, make people feel safer and improve the environment. A statutory consultation would need to be carried out before the Dog Control Orders could be implemented.

The Panel was advised that there was a great deal of work being carried out at present to highlight the responsibilities of dog owners but it was extremely difficult to issue penalty notices as the perpetrators had to be caught in the act. At present only five fines for dog fouling had been issued. Community Safety Officers had received training on dealing with irresponsible dog owners and worked in teams in teams to target certain areas where dog fouling was a known problem.

The Panel raised some concerns regarding the proposed maximum number of dogs a single person could walk. The Panel felt that six would be fine depending upon the breed, size and temperament of the dogs but would be too many if they were larger or more aggressive dogs. The Head of Neighbourhood enforcement agreed to look into whether the regulations allowed for any flexibility when restricting the number of dogs a person could handle.

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A Member commented that the proposed increase in the fine for dog fouling was significant and asked whether this was in line with neighbouring authorities. It was confirmed that this was a national issue and some authorities were campaigning to have the maximum fine increased to £100. Dog fouling was a public health risk which justified the large fine.

Resolved: -

1. That the following recommendations to Cabinet be endorsed:
 - (a). The carrying out of statutory public consultation to introduce Dog Control Orders in order to tackle the following prescribed offences under Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005:
 - a) Failure to remove dog faeces (Borough wide Order);
 - b) Failure to keep a dog on a lead in specified locations;
 - c) Failure to put and keep a dog on a lead when directed by an Authorised Officer (Borough wide Order);
 - d) Permitting a dog to enter land from which dogs are excluded;
 - e) Limit the number of dogs under control of any person in a designated area (Borough wide Order).
 - (b) Adding the following as paragraph 85a, Part 3 to the Scheme of Officer Delegations for Assistant Director of Public Protection:

“Authority to amend and/or extend existing Dog Control Orders in consultation with the relevant Commissioner”.
 - (c) Increasing the current level of fine for dog fouling of £50 to £80 forthwith.
2. It be investigated whether the wording regarding point (e) above could be amended to take into consideration the particular/breed size of dogs involved and whether they were effectively managed before presenting to Cabinet.

44. Housing Futures - Provision of Housing Services Update Report

The Panel considered a report which detailed the progress in developing the new Housing Service by combining the former People 1st Housing Management teams with their former SBC strategic housing counterparts. The Assistant Director, Housing advised that this was the final report to Scrutiny as part of the Housing Futures project and it was exactly a year since Cabinet took the decision to bring the housing service back in house. The original consultation had received over 2000 responses and a number had commented upon the areas they felt needed improving and a number of workshops had been held in the autumn to pick up on an issues. In response to the points raised the service had been reconfigured to ensure that access to staff was more straightforward. The Panel was advised that the recruitment procedures were nearly completed with all but three posts filled.

A Co-opted Member raised a query regarding tenant engagement and the Assistant Director Housing advised that everything was on track to complete the training and interviewing of volunteers for the Customer Senate. There was no

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plan to begin before the new financial year and therefore nothing was expected to slip.

At the previous meeting Members requested that the employment issues highlighted in the previous report be considered by the Employment and Appeals Committee – as this had yet to take place the Panel reaffirmed the proposal.

Resolved –

- (a) The Panel thanked the Assistant Director, Housing and the Housing Team for their work to ensure the successful transition of the Housing.
- (b) The Scrutiny Panel reaffirmed the recommendation from the last meeting of the Panel that the employment provisions contained within the report be considered by the Employment and Appeals Committee:- in particular the selection process, how jobs had been reorganised and the process for transfer of staff)

45. Members Attendance Record

Resolved – That the Members' Attendance Record be noted.

46. Forward Work Programme

Resolved – That the Forward work programme be noted.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.55 pm)