

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Thursday, 16th June, 2011.

Present:- Councillors Dar, Minhas, Munawar, Plenty, Sohal, Strutton, and A S Wright

Non Voting Co-Opted Members:- Sandy Malik

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Swindlehurst

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Carter

PART 1

1. Election of Chair

The nomination of Councillor Minhas was moved and seconded. There being no other nominations, it was –

Resolved – That Councillor Minhas be appointed Chair of the Neighbourhood and Community Services Scrutiny Panel for the 2011/12 municipal year.

(Councillor Minhas in the Chair)

2. Election of Vice-Chair

The nomination of Councillor A S Wright was moved and seconded. There being no other nominations, it was –

Resolved – That Councillor Wright be appointed Vice Chair of the Neighbourhood and Community Services Scrutiny Panel for the 2011/12 municipal year.

3. Declarations of Interest

None were received.

4. Minutes of the Neighbourhoods and Renewal Scrutiny Panel held on 23rd March 2011

The minutes of the last meeting held on 23rd March 2011 were approved as a correct record.

5. Minutes of the Community, Leisure and Environment meeting held on 24th March 2011

The minutes of the last meeting held on 24th March 2011 were approved as a correct record.

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel - 16.06.11

6. Member Questions

One written question was submitted regarding the provision of grit bins by Housing Services.

A response was read out by the Scrutiny Officer and noted by the panel.

7. Ten Pin and Tennis Progress

Andrew Stevens Assistant Director Learning and Cultural Engagement introduced the paper on the Ten Pin and Tennis Progress. The Panel noted the progress that had been made in advancing both projects, the trends in revenue and loss over the period of November 2010 and April 2011 and the improvement plans in place to address any underperformance.

A number of detailed questions were raised regarding various elements of the respective projects including plans in place to improve marketing of the services and raise awareness. Further questions were raised regarding the pricing structure used by Slough Community Leisure (SCL), Partnership arrangements with local schools, specific work Officers were doing to address diversity and what SCL were doing in terms of learning from competitors.

The panel were advised that a specialist firm had been employed to manage marketing for the ten Pin Centre and that there would be a move towards targeted marketing using digital modes of communication. Officers confirmed that pricing was generally competitive and less than that charged by competitors. The pricing structure for particular services such as hiring of the private room had been inappropriate and would be looked at again. There was also a focus on reducing costs and officers were exploring a range of issues from utilising staff more effectively through to securing better arrangements with vending machine suppliers. Broadening the offer was also an option and officers were looking at the feasibility of offering children's parties. Partnership arrangements with schools had been explored and work was ongoing in this area to build relationships with both schools from Slough but also Windsor and Maidenhead. The June Tennis event was also being delivered in collaboration with local schools. There had been efforts to market the venue to families and through the catering strategy to ensure that as many of the local community could use the facilities. Discussions were ongoing with Age Concern to try and broaden the appeal of the venue to more segments of the local populace. SCL confirmed that continuous assessments of the market were made including actions of competitors. The Leisure Trust would endeavour to look for ways they could improve the provision on offer.

Resolved:-

- (a) that a further update be brought to the Panel in six months time

8. Empty Homes: Housing Solutions - A Strategy for Slough

Manju Dhar, Private Sector Housing Manager introduced a paper on the empty homes strategy for Slough. The Panel were referred to the Housing Solution Strategy prepared for Slough Borough Council on behalf of HQN Associates. The Officer set out the rationale for the policy including the need to alleviate the current pressures on housing services driven by the long waiting lists, the need to improve the street

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel - 16.06.11

scene and ensuring Slough meets the new Coalition Governments priorities around securing value for money.

Members asked a series of questions including

- The reasons behind long term vacancies
- Actions taken by the council to date including use of compulsory purchase orders
- Work undertaken with landlords and incentives offered to bring empty homes back into use
- The reasons behind the relative ineffectiveness of previous policies
- Whether the policy was integrated with the approach dealing with homelessness and squatting.
- What impact the new policy was likely to have
- And the potential impact of the benefit cap

The Officer confirmed that the substantive reason for long term vacancies was probate. Other reasons included death in the family and a fear of renting. The Council was working hard to address some of the concerns. The guaranteed rent scheme had been pushed and offered a degree of security for those individuals reluctant to offer homes to the rental sector. Stronger action had been used in the past in the form of compulsory purchase orders however these can only be used as a last resort and after a succession of other routes have been pursued. The Service was working closely with landlords and consultations had been held with the Landlords Forum. Officers were looking at the responses and assessing feasibility of the recommendations made. The Panel noted that collaborative work was ongoing with other sections of the council to ensure that a more coordinated approach was developed to deal with the twin issues of homelessness and squatting. Responding to the question about the effectiveness of past strategies, Officers confirmed that key reasons included a lack of resources, competing priorities and no dedicated resource. Addressing this issue was much more of a focus for the service and initial estimates were that the service could bring up to 20 additional homes back into use per year. Finally the panel noted the ongoing work to support tenants to sustain tenancies. This would continue through the introduction of the benefit cap whilst extra work would be done with landlords in the setting of appropriate rent levels.

Resolved

- (a) That the policy be noted and approved
- (b) That Officers update the policy to include the council's approach to dealing with semi-derelict houses.

9. A Proposal to Implement Additional Homes in Multiple Occupation for Chalvey Ward

Manju Dhar, Private Sector Housing Manager introduced a paper on the issue of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) in Chalvey and the proposed strategy of the council to address this. The Panel heard the extent and disproportionate nature of the problem in the Chalvey Ward, some of corollary issues associated with HMOs including anti-social behaviour, overcrowding and health and safety issues and how the policy would free up resources.

In the subsequent debate the Panel then raised a number of detailed questions including the potential issues around displacement of the problem, how HMOs would

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel - 16.06.11

be defined, how standards in licensed HMOs would be monitored, incentives and sanctions of (non) compliance and what work the council was doing to deal with the problems associated with HMOs including anti-social behaviour.

The Officer confirmed that displacement issues had been considered but the conclusion reached was that the policy would not cause significant issues. Also, given the extent of the problem in Chalvey, if this was better managed, it would free up resources to deal with potential issues in other Wards. The Officer updated the panel on the definition being used for HMOs which was three or more persons (unrelated) that were sharing communal facilities (kitchen, bathroom). Members expressed concern that this definition would have to be properly and clearly set out in the policy to ensure clarity. Responding to the question on monitoring standards, the Officers confirmed that a process of spot checks would be introduced. A key focus would be on monitoring complaints received from neighbours and determining key areas of focus. An important issue was resources and since the removal of the Migration Impact Fund, the council had invested its own resources however, given the size of the challenge, this was not necessarily enough. The Officer confirmed that some resources would be generated through the fees charged for licensing but this would only cover costs and not generate additional income. The service was working with the Landlords Forum to assist landlords in completing applications for licensing. However where landlords avoided this, sanctions were being put in place including fines, recovery of court costs and making landlords liable for returning rents to tenants for the duration of which the property was unlicensed. Finally the Officer confirmed that the Council was working hard in collaboration with the Police to develop a more effective and coordinated approach to deal with the issues of anti-social behaviour caused by HMOs.

Resolved :-

- (a) That Officers amend the policy and include more clarity and greater focus on the definition being used to classify a house as a HMO
- (b) That subject to the improvement above, the Strategy be noted and approved

10. Food Standards Agency - Imported Food Control Unit

Ginny De Haan, Head of Food, Safety and Business Support presented a paper on the Food Standards Agency's audit of the Council's Inland Imported Food Control Arrangements. The Panel heard the rationale behind the audit and why Slough was chosen as an inspection site. The Officer then detailed the findings of the audit and the subsequent arrangements instituted by the authority to address some of the findings. Key items to note included: The conclusion from the FSA that Slough adopted a proactive approach in the provision of advice to local businesses. The comprehensive monitoring arrangements in place in Slough and, The effective documentation mechanisms, training and audit arrangements in place

The FSA Audit had made seven recommendations for improvement and a plan had now been developed which would address the issues being raised.

Members raised a series of questions including clarity on the status of Khat, whether this was a new area of work for the council and what relationships Slough had with neighbouring authorities.

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel - 16.06.11

The Officer confirmed that some work had been undertaken regarding khat including raising concerns with the Food Standards Agency. However, with khat being exempt from the prohibited foods list there was limited work that the council could do. However given the concerns, the council was working closer with the Primary care Trust to ensure that concerns were being addressed. The Officer confirmed that such FSA inspections were not new and that this area of work had always been part of the councils approach to food safety. Finally the officer confirmed that given the importance of Heathrow as a transit point, the council had developed effective relationships with each of the authorities surrounding the airport. Sharing learning and coordinating action was therefore established practice.

Resolved:-

- (a) That the findings of the FSA be noted
- (b) The action plan be endorsed.

11. Consideration of reports marked to be noted/for information

No reports were received.

12. Forward Work Programme

Members asked for the September meeting to be themed on community safety and anti-social behaviour. Particular reports requested included

- Community engagement and work with neighbourhood watch
- Police responses to dealing with prostitution
- Neighbourhood working (NAGs)

Members asked for the report on Traffic Light Synchronisation to be moved to October 24th Meeting. A paper was also requested on the councils approach to community centres with particular focus on the future of Haymill

Members asked for an update report on the Ten Pin and Tennis Centre for 5th December meeting

13. Date of Next Meeting

Thursday 15th September 2011.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 9.15 pm)