

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Thursday, 28th February, 2008.

Present:- Councillors Swindlehurst (Chair), Anderson, Arnold, Bal, Coad (Vice-Chair), Dhillon, Shine and Small.

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Munkley (part of the meeting).

Also present:- Sara Thornton and Pete Davies (Thames Valley Police), Janet Novak (Government Office for the South East) and Chris Hobden (QA Research).

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor P Choudhry.

PART I

77. Declarations of Interest

None were declared.

78. Minutes

The minutes of the meetings of the Committee held on 17th January and 7th February, 2008 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

79. Presentation by the Chief Constable, Thames Valley Police

Sara Thornton, Chief Constable of the Thames Valley Police, made a comprehensive presentation to the Committee outlining the Force's three year strategy 2008/11 and referring in particular to the Slough policing area and the priorities for Slough that had been identified through the Neighbourhood Action Groups (NAGs). She commented that there had been an overall 13.7% fall in recorded crime in Slough since 2003/04 and commented on the emerging themes for Slough which were being drawn up in consultation with partners including the local authority through the Local Area Agreement process.

On completion of her presentation, the following issues were raised by Members:-

- A Member asked how the Force dealt with a public perception that the Police often seemed more interested in dealing with motoring offences than catching criminals. The Chief Constable responded that it had to be borne in mind that there had been some 120 road traffic deaths in the Thames Valley area in the past year and issues such as speeding were therefore extremely important. However, the Police dealt with issues on a priority basis and, through the NAGs, had identified those issues that were of the greatest concern to local people. Whilst anti-social behaviour in general came out top, parking, traffic and speeding issues were a high

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priority for local people. She did however comment that parking offences would never be a top priority for the Police.

- A Member asked what action the Police were taking to tackle the very real child abuse problem of female genital mutilation in the area. Ms Thornton responded that the Police took this work extremely seriously and that she had herself attended a meeting earlier that day on the topic. It had been agreed to hold a conference later in this year to further highlight the issue and she referred also to the substantial work currently being undertaken by the Foreign Office. A multi-agency response was needed so that more knowledge was available about the problem and awareness raised. Pete Davies added that the issue was one being tackled by the Slough Local Safeguarding Children Board upon which he represented the Slough Police. A Detective Chief Inspector led on this issue for the Thames Valley Force and a high priority would continue to be given.
- The Chief Constable was asked whether any action was being taken by the Police to combat the very real problem of truancy in Slough. She responded that the Police did truancy sweeps in consultation with the LEA's Education Welfare Officers and Pete Davies added that good working relationships had been established with the key schools in Slough where truancy was a problem. Truancy sweeps would be undertaken as considered appropriate and he also referred to the Police's support of the "Pitstop" programme which assisted those young people not interested in formal schooling to become involved in a more practical interest. He did confirm that the Police Officers linked to schools undertook more work in the neighbourhoods as well as within the schools themselves.
- A Member asked whether ASBOs had been successful given that many young people now considered them as a "medal". He also asked whether the reduction in crime figures was due in large part to the number of unreported crimes where people did not consider it worthwhile informing the Police about an incident. References was also made to the issue of binge drinking and whether the extended licensing hours had contributed to an increase in binge drinking locally.

The Committee was advised that while some young people did obviously see ASBOs as being a badge of honour, it was believed that the sensible use of ASBOs and Dispersal Orders had helped many communities. The Chief Constable encouraged people to always report crimes as, without reporting, the Police were unable to tackle issues. On the question of extended licensing hours, she commented that figures showed that drink was involved in some 38% of homicides overall and that whilst longer licensing hours did not necessary make this situation worse, it meant that the problem went on for a longer into the night than previously.

- A Member asked whether improvements could be made to the support given to the victims of crime as he did not feel that this was satisfactory at present. The Chief Constable replied that she accepted that support to victims needed to improve and referred to the work being undertaken to

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keep victims and witnesses updated on the progress with Court cases. However, one problem was the large backlog at many Courts so people were often waiting for a very long time before a particular case got to Court.

- In respect of the automatic number plate recognition system, a Member asked whether the Police were getting illegal vehicles off the roads more quickly now. The Chief Constable commented that whilst the system was extremely helpful she accepted that the Police needed to get better at taking action against vehicles that were recognised as being unlicensed, etc. and the Police were currently working on this.
- A Member referred to the problem of certain landlords allowing criminal activity to take place in their properties and what action the Police were taking against them. Pete Davies responded that whilst it was the responsibility of the Police to enforce the law, landlords also had a responsibility for ensuring that their properties were not used for such activities and he referred in particular to the problem of rented houses being used as cannabis factories. He confirmed that where landlords had knowingly allowed their properties to be used in this manner, then Police would always take action against them.
- A Member asked about the issue of drug related crimes and whether rehabilitation programmes were available for drugs users involved in a high level of crime. The Chief Constable responded that the Police had a drugs strategy and this was a very important element of the work that it undertook. They worked with a number of drugs agencies in respect of putting individuals into treatment. However, it was the case that there was a very low success rate where treatment was involved.
- A Member referred to the NAGs which he felt had been a good innovation but felt that the Police needed to get their message to a wider audience as, generally speaking, not many people attended the NAG meetings and it tended to be the same individuals who attended other local meetings such as residents' associations. He suggested that the Police should be trying to do more to get the local Police and PCSOs talking to a wider range of people in their localities so that the message was got more widely across. The Chief Constable commented that the PCSOs were a recent innovation and initiatives were in hand to improve communication with local communities and to encourage them to remain in their area for an extended time so that they became well known to local people. A Member added that, in his ward, more people attended the local tenants' and residents' association meetings than the NAG and he suggested that it may be more appropriate in certain circumstances to use existing forums rather than introducing a new meeting which may be very poorly attended. The Chief Constable commented that she agreed that it was important to be as flexible as possible where appropriate in the local context.
- A Member referred to an alleged attempted abduction of a child in Slough recently and asked whether there was a standard protocol in place for

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warning the schools in the area and the LEA of such incidents. The Chief Constable commented that there was sometimes a confidentiality issue as certain cases could be kidnaps rather than attempted abductions. Accordingly, in certain circumstances the Council would not be formally notified of such an incident. However, she accepted that this was an area that needed to be looked at urgently and she undertook along with the Local Area Commander to look into the issue and report back to the Committee on what steps the Police intended to take to ensure that there was a protocol in place in respect of such incidents.

- A Member commented that, in her ward, the Police Officers and PCSOs were now far more visible than in the past and this was welcomed. She also asked whether households having burglar alarms reduced the number of burglaries in the area. Police representatives commented that burglary figures had indeed improved and the NAGs and higher profile policing had helped in this case. Burglar alarms were certainly a deterrent and Pete Davies referred to the sponsorship by British Gas of a number of burglar alarms in the northern part of Slough as part of a joint initiative.
- A Member referred to the need for the Police to give better advice to planning authorities on designing out crime in new developments and asked whether there was likely to be any improvement in Police co-operation in this area. The Chief Constable was pleased to advise the Committee that the Police Authority was now about to employ additional Crime Prevention Design Assistants so local authorities should get a much better response in future to designs forwarded for comment.
- A Member expressed ongoing concern at the Police's call centre and the feeling amongst residents that the Police did not respond well to calls. The Chief Constable accepted that there were still problems and work was being undertaken to ensure the Police were better at keeping appointments made, etc. She did however accept that this was an area that still needed further work.

On completion of the questioning, the Chair thanked the Chief Constable and the Local Area Commander for dealing with Members' questions.

Resolved - That the position be noted.

80. Draft Local Area Agreement

The Chief Executive and Janet Novak, Locality Manager with the Government Office for the South East, made presentations to the Committee outlining the Local Area Agreement (LAA) process and how the draft LAA now presented to the Committee had been pulled together through a series of meetings and workshops including stakeholders and Members. Four main themes had been identified namely Health and Wellbeing; Safer Communities; The Environment; and Economy and Skills, together with four cross-cutting themes. These were Housing, Transport, Community Cohesion and "Closing the Gap". For each of the themes, long term measurable outcomes had been

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identified along with outcomes that could be delivered over the life of the LAA and would contribute to the achievement of the long term outcomes. Of the 198 national indicators that had to be reported on, some 35 were being identified as shared priorities on a shared basis between the authority and GOSE and a latest draft outcome framework was tabled which indicated the current progress in respect of those indicators that had been agreed, those that were still under discussion and those which had been excluded.

Janet Novak commented that the evidence that was being provided by the authority to support its local indicators was excellent and was being used as an example of good practice elsewhere.

Members raised the following issues in the subsequent discussion:-

- A Member asked whether the issue of underperforming white working class boys in schools had been addressed as part of the exercise. The Chief Executive responded that this issue and indeed other underperforming groups were being specifically targeted as part of the action plan.
- The Member commented that as the LAA was for a three year period, if circumstances changed, would it be possible to change the agreement within that timescale to take this into account? Ms Novak responded that it was unlikely that any of the fundamentals of the LAA would need to be changed within a three period but that if this was the case, they were certainly willing to look at the matter.
- A Member expressed concern that whilst an indicator in respect of drug related (Class A) offending rates had been included, substance misuse by young people had not. Similarly, she expressed concern that proposed indicator 15 (serious violent crime) had also been excluded. The Chief Executive responded that only 35 local targets were allowed and it was therefore necessary to consider in consultation with partners which were likely to be the best indicators for Slough. She commented that monitoring would still be taking place in respect of the other areas.
- Reference was made to the fact that there did not appear to be many targets specifically aimed at older people and this was of concern given the increasing number of older people in the population. The Chief Executive commented that many of the targets related to older people as part of the general population and the needs of the elderly would be addressed through the action plan. In addition, it should also be borne in mind that adult social care services were operating very well within the Slough area.
- A Member asked whether the target aimed at improving the provision of affordable homes was targeted at private or social housing and he was advised that this covered both areas and ways in which the Council could influence this would be through the planning process and elsewhere as appropriate to ensure that the right type of housing was delivered. The

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inclusion of these targets was to highlight those areas that needed more work, such as in the provision of affordable homes.

- With regard to the issue of fuel poverty, the Committee was advised that ways of tackling this issue would be through encouraging the take up of benefits and, in the longer term, in tackling the skills shortage so that Slough people were better qualified and improved their earnings potential.
- A Member commented that whilst the targets and statistics were useful, the important issue was for the authority to communicate to its communities what it was trying to achieve in simple language so that it was clear what the LAA was all about. It was also essential that the Council deliver on its targets.
- A Member was concerned that there was an ongoing skills issue amongst young people in the town and they were unable to secure the better jobs with people coming in from outside to take them. It was suggested that, in many cases, young people were gaining the qualifications but they often moved away from Slough to secure employment elsewhere. However, this was a complicated issue and the Chief Executive undertook to seek further information for the Member who had raised the issue and write to him.

On completion of the comments and questioning, Members agreed to support the draft LAA as now submitted as it was far more appropriate to the needs of Slough than had been the previous document.

Resolved - That the draft Local Area Agreement be noted and welcomed.

81. Land at Upton Court Park - Offer Received

Chris Hobden from QA Research made a presentation to the Committee outlining the results of a consultation exercise undertaken to ascertain the views of a sample of Slough residents as to whether or not to sell the strip of land at Castleview to enable access to the proposed new housing development. He outlined the methodology used and the main findings of the consultation.

The Committee also considered the report from Officers outlining the current position in respect of this proposed land sale which updated on the legal position and on current negotiations with the developers. The Officer stressed that whilst detailed negotiations had not yet taken place, it was important that the Council took an early decision on whether or not to sell the site given that the developers could demolish a number of properties that they had purchased to gain alternative access to the site, thereby removing any value that the strip of land in question currently enjoyed.

A Member requested further information about the possible cost to the authority should the Council prove unsuccessful in any proposed legal proceedings to overturn the Thames Water Utilities Ltd v Oxford City Council

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(1997) case in respect of the removal of the existing covenant. Officers undertook to advise the Member of the likely cost.

A majority of Members were in favour of the recommendations to the Cabinet, namely that the principle of the sale of this land should be approved and that Officers continue negotiations to obtain the best terms available. However, the view was expressed that should the sale proceed, then it was important that people in the vicinity of the Castleview site saw some tangible benefit from the income derived from the sale. In this regard, it was noted that this housing development would generate a large number of additional traffic movements in the area and would have an inevitable consequence on traffic congestion and it was therefore appropriate for some of the capital receipt to be utilised in improving traffic flows in the area. In addition, it was felt that environmental benefits could be introduced in the area together with perhaps youth facilities or a medical centre. The remainder of the capital receipt would then be utilised for the benefit of Slough residents in general. Particular reference was made to the possibility of upgrading the current bus lanes and overcoming some of the bottlenecks on the London Road.

Following further debate, recommendations (a) and (d) as set out in the report were agreed. Recommendations (b) and (c) (referring to the proposed legal proceedings and the principle of selling the land in question) were put to the vote and carried by 5 votes to 2 votes with 1 abstention.

Resolved –

- (a) That the Cabinet be advised that the Committee supports the recommendations as set out in the report being submitted to it.
- (b) That, in addition, the Committee be recommended that a proportion of the capital receipt for the sale of the land be allocated to the needs of the immediate Castleview area in the terms set out above and that the remainder of the receipt be utilised to the general benefit of the Borough's residents including transport and environmental improvements.

82. Proposed Appropriation of Land at Upton Court Park

The Chair had exercised his discretion to enable this item to be added to the agenda as it was closely associated with the previous item. Members noted the report.

Resolved - That the report be noted.

83. Britwell and Northborough Regeneration Update

The Committee considered a report advising it of the plan to progress the Britwell and Northborough regeneration project through to the detailed planning stage including an investigation into the various delivery methods available to reduce the financial liability of the Council. In response to a

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question, Officers noted that it was hoped that the project would be finalised by the end of 2012.

Resolved - That the report be noted.

84. Performance Monitoring 2007/08

The Committee considered a report highlighting the Council's overall performance and, in particular, revenue monitoring and updates on financial assistance, risk management and debt recovery.

Resolved - That the report be noted.

85. Interim Accommodation Arrangements for the New Slough Islamic School

The Chair advised the Committee that he had been requested to add this item to the agenda as it was to be considered by the Cabinet on 10th March. Members commented that, given the time and the importance of the item, it would not be possible to consider it at this meeting.

Resolved - That this item be deferred until the next meeting of the Committee.

86. Forward Agenda Plan

The Committee noted its agenda plan for future meetings. It was agreed that the further report on property disposals be brought to the 10th April, 2008 meeting if possible.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 10.53 pm)